

al-shabaka commentary

UNDERSTANDING ISIS'S PALESTINE PROPAGANDA

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March 31, 2016

Overview

How and why ISIS talks about Palestine are questions that should matter to Palestinians, especially since ISIS has been active in framing the new upheavals in Palestine of the past months in its propaganda and applauding stabbing attacks as part of its Salafi-jihadi creed.¹ In this commentary, Al-Shabaka Policy Analyst Samar Batrawi investigates the ways in which ISIS has addressed the question of Palestine in its online output in order to demonstrate how Palestinians can resist the apparent appropriation of their narrative as well as avoid the monopolization of this issue by non-Palestinian, potentially even anti-Palestinian, voices.

She begins by locating ISIS's Palestine narrative in its historical context, and discussing what is known about how Salafi-jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda have addressed the question in the past. She then discusses the selective narrative that ISIS offers of the Palestinian question, its core elements being Gaza, Jerusalem, the stabbing attacks, and its criticism of Hamas and Fatah. She concludes by briefly reflecting on why the apparent appropriation of the Palestinian question by ISIS taps into wider questions of knowledge and power and what this means for efforts to disentangle the two narratives, calling on Palestinians to forcefully protect their narrative against efforts to claim it.

What We (Think We) Know About Salafi-jihadism and Palestine

While it is difficult to establish with absolute certainty how ISIS thinks about Palestine, we can observe some recurring elements in its rhetorical approach to the question. This is rooted in the manner in which other Salafi-jihadi groups have interacted with the question of Palestine, and it seems to have little to do with how Palestinians perceive Salafi-jihadism. Rather, it seems to aim to appeal to the legitimacy that the question of Palestine enjoys amongst the target group that Salafi-jihadis want to reach. This issue remains relatively under-researched and most of the studies that have been conducted are concerned with al-Qaeda and Palestine. Thomas Hegghammer and Joas Wagemakers

¹ ISIS is the acronym for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Daesh is the Arabic acronym). Some commentators use ISIL: The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The group [itself began to use IS](#) in 2014. Salafi-jihadism refers to the ideology of groups who espouse a return to what they believe is the true Islam, who are known as salafis, as well as active struggle for their cause, denoted by the term jihad.

brought together these different studies in the introduction to a [special issue of *Welt des Islams*](#), from which we can draw a number of conclusions.

Firstly, Palestinians have not been significantly over-represented in al-Qaeda, either in the ranks of low level recruits or among its political ideologues. Secondly, on an ideological level, al-Qaeda has often referred to Palestine in its outreach. It listed Palestine as the third justification for jihad against the United States in its 1998 statement, which is often referred to as one of al-Qaeda's most important ideological statements. However, although al-Qaeda does occasionally use the word Palestine in its discourse, a closer look at the [1998 statement](#) shows us that it does not actually mention the word Palestine as such. The statement reads, "If the goals of the Americans in these [Middle Eastern] wars are religious and economic, then it is serving the interest of the Jewish state, and to distract attention from its occupation of Jerusalem [the Arabic term used is *bayt al-maqdis*] and its killing of Muslims there."² This choice of terminology implies that the focus on Palestine is primarily a religious one. A final point made by Hegghammer and Wagemakers is that al-Qaeda talked about Palestine relatively more frequently during times of political turmoil in the West Bank and Gaza. This also seems to be the case with ISIS and suggests that there is at least a certain degree of opportunism at play.

The opportunism is further highlighted by the fact that ISIS only talks about four elements of the Palestine question: Gaza, Jerusalem, the recent stabbing attacks, and internal Palestinian politics. In total, it has dedicated at least 29 online statements to these issues since May 2015, most of these being video messages.³ The issues discussed in the messages often overlap; Gaza was mentioned in 19 messages, Jerusalem in 18, and 15 messages discussed the stabbing attacks, the latter all published in October 2015. When it comes to internal politics, Hamas is mentioned in every message, while Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA) feature 15 times. Numbers, however, do not convey the way in which ISIS discusses these themes.

The ISIS Narrative and Palestine

Perhaps the most contrived aspect of ISIS framing of the question of Palestine is **Gaza**. The group has jumped on the bandwagon of the outrage surrounding the fate of the people living in the Strip without having to be an agent of positive change on the ground. Its rhetorical focus on Gaza is twofold: on the one hand, it criticizes Israeli practices including the siege and the several assaults on Gaza, such as Operation Protective Edge in 2014. On the other hand, its criticism of Hamas predominates, as for example in its extensive [condemnation of the Hamas-led crackdown on Salafis](#) in Gaza during the summer of 2015. The fate of the Palestinians of Gaza is never discussed independently for its own sake, but is always an instrument for criticizing Israel and, more frequently, delegitimizing Hamas as will be discussed further below.

As for **Jerusalem**, the terminology ISIS chooses is a good indicator of their understanding the city. The most commonly used term is *bayt al-maqdis*, Arabic for "the holy house", which may refer narrowly to the al-Aqsa mosque, the compound around it, or the city of Jerusalem in a broader sense. It is one of the oldest names for Jerusalem, and the *nisbas* – last names based on the birthplace of a person – that some Salafis have used are derived from *bayt al-maqdis*, the most famous example being [Abu](#)

² Author's translation.

³ Statements found through Jihadology.net that I have further codified in a personal database. Jihadology is a clearinghouse for primary source material from jihadi networks. I use Jihadology rather than the original sources on closed forums in order to ensure the accessibility of the sources to a wider readership, in case of interest in the actual texts. I have double-checked the statements quoted and hyperlinked in this piece.

[Muhammad al-Maqqisi](#). *Bayt al-maqqdis* is a name that features often in the Hadith, and is generally seen as carrying more religious connotations than the alternative Arabic name for Jerusalem, used more commonly by Palestinians, which is *al-Quds*.

Al-Quds is probably more apt in describing the relationship which Palestinians, Muslim and non-Muslim, have had with the city. This relationship is often [described reductively in the mainstream](#) media, when in reality Jerusalem has been at the center of Palestinian identity formation for far more complex reasons. Rashid Khalidi calls the city the “touchstone of identity for all inhabitants of Palestine in the modern era as in the past”, since it has always had religious importance for Muslims, Christians, and Jews. It was also a center of administration, education, and culture in late 19th and early 20th century Palestine, and a political and intellectual hub, where even before the British Mandate one could see the development of Palestinian identity along national lines.⁴

Jerusalem seems to be a big part of the political aspirations of ISIS, at least rhetorically, since it often speaks of liberating *bayt al-maqqdis* from non-Muslim governance. In fact, it [directly challenges](#) Palestinian conceptions of the Palestinian question and the role of Jerusalem in it, declaring: “Your struggle is not about land, but about right versus wrong. It’s about religion.” The idea is that Jerusalem will only truly be liberated when it is governed by Muslims and according to Islamic law. ISIS also uses a lot religious symbolism relating to Jerusalem, with the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock often depicted in videos and statements.

The wave of **stabbing attacks** are the most recent issue discussed by ISIS, during a remarkable October 2015 peak in statements related to the Palestine question. The attacks themselves have yet to be linked to any organized group, nor has any attack been claimed by ISIS. The Arabic term *intifadat al-afrad*, which has echoed among Palestinians and Arabs during past months, conveys the general perception of these attacks: an Intifada of individuals. Nevertheless, ISIS seized the opportunity to present its own narrative of the attacks in a series of video statements.

It applauded the stabbing attacks as a means toward achieving [the liberation of the al-Aqsa mosque](#), and as symptomatic of the failure of secular Arab elites and Palestinian politics, both allegedly complicit in the occupation of Jerusalem by the “Jewish people”. In line with this, ISIS [calls for violence against Jews](#), while asking “brothers in Palestine and specifically in *bayt al-maqqdis*” to [listen to the call of Islamic unity](#). The list of videos published in October 2015 continues along these lines, [depicting Abbas and Netanyahu](#) when criticizing “the collaboration of secular Arab leaders with the Jews”, and even [giving specific tips](#) to Palestinians about how to conduct attacks, calling for stabbings and for hit-and-runs, and advising attackers to focus on the chest and heart area when stabbing someone. ISIS’s message against the established Palestinian groups is particularly clear [in this video](#), where the voice-over says to Palestinians: “Do not wait for anything from Fatah and Hamas. Do not look at them for solutions. There is no peace in what they have to offer. Rely on God.”

In a [particularly violent video](#), the demonization of Jewish people is taken to a new level, blaming them for everything that is wrong with the Middle East. This video also gives advice on how to best kill Jewish people, “not for a piece of land or a homeland or a partisan affiliation, but in the name of God.” This is another dangerous and violent misrepresentation of the question of Palestine. Moreover, it does not correspond with, for example, [the note](#) left by a young Palestinian woman who was shot during an attempted stabbing attack in November 2015, in which she said she acted in defense of her homeland. Regardless of whether one condones stabbing attacks as a legitimate method of resistance or not, it is

⁴ Khalidi, R. (1997), *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 35.

important to understand them for the [expression of political grievances](#) that they are, rather than the religious fanaticism that ISIS attempts to attribute to them.

As suggested above, the manner in which ISIS formulates the question of Palestine goes beyond the de-legitimization of specific Palestinian groups; it is very much about delegitimizing the **nationalist narrative** of the question of Palestine. In fact, ISIS [blames the Jewish people](#) for reframing the Palestinian question as a national one rather than one of jihad. Within this paradigm, anybody who adheres to a national narrative is a collaborator with the enemy. “Know that the problem that you have with the Jews is not a national one or a question of land; it is a religious issue,” they [repeatedly declare](#). In [one particular video](#), they even say “negotiations between Israel and Abbas are merely negotiations between Jews and Jews.”

In most of the output available online, ISIS criticizes Palestinian and Arab leadership more often than it criticizes Israel. Fatah and Hamas are framed as secularist infidels and traitors to the Salafi-jihadi cause. ISIS has been especially vociferous in denouncing Hamas’s policies against Salafis in Gaza, for example in publishing an [extensive interview](#) with an ex-prisoner with whom the torture of Salafi prisoners by Hamas is discussed, and Hamas is accused of collaborating with Israel through the suppression of resistance against Israel.

In summary, ISIS selectively addresses some elements of the Palestine question, and frames these elements very differently to how Palestinians view them in their struggle for self-determination. Additionally, ISIS actively exacerbates existing problems within Palestine, such as the declining legitimacy of the PA and the fragmentation of national politics. It does so while never actually having to deliver anything substantive on the ground.

Disentangling the Narratives and Claiming Agency

Much like the once-flourishing al-Qaeda, ISIS has incorporated the question of Palestine in its rhetoric, fleshing out a distinctive place for some elements of the question in its Salafi-jihadi dogma. And despite the fact that the evidence for a direct or special relationship between the question of Palestine and Salafi-jihadism is meager at best, this has led some observers to draw links between the two movements. It seems that those who [equate ISIS with the Islamist Hamas](#), and essentialize Palestinians as extremists with a ["culture of death"](#), like Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, aim to disrupt any efforts to address legitimate Palestinian rights or challenge the Israeli occupation regime. This builds upon an older discourse that portrays Palestinians as angry, irrational, dogmatic Muslims, as noted above. That discourse is paired with a modernization paradigm which frames Israeli Jews as developed, cultured people opposed by primitive Palestinians, and has become entrenched in the wider radicalization and terrorism discourse.

This is not to say that the equation of the Palestinian cause with ISIS is generally accepted, but rather that there is an ongoing portrayal of the Palestinian cause as something inherently extremist that is allegedly based on primordial hatreds and that [yearns for death and self-destruction](#) even though the historically secular nature of the Palestinian question has been documented and argued throughout the years.⁵ This does not mean that Islam does not play a role at all in some narratives of Palestinian

⁵ See Rashid Khalidi (1997) *Palestinian Identity: the Construction of Modern National Consciousness*; Quandt, Jabber & Modely Lesch (1973) *The Politics of Palestinian Nationalism*; Loren D. Lybarger (2007) *Identity & Religion in Palestine*; and Edward Said (1992) *The Question of Palestine*.

identity and their political manifestations, but rather that even within groups such as Hamas, the predominant identity is a Palestinian rather than a Muslim one, and the political goal is Palestinian self-determination, not the establishment of a transnational Islamic state.⁶

Palestinians seem to have been hesitant to address how ISIS has endeavored to co-opt their grievances, rights and political aims in its propaganda, perhaps because addressing these questions may feel like legitimizing them. But it is becoming increasingly damaging to the Palestinian cause to ignore the ISIS cooptation of their narrative, not only because Palestinians appear to stand idly by while their experiences and lives are exploited in ISIS propaganda, but also because it has opened up the space for other voices to construct the Palestinian narrative on their behalf.

The reality is that according to [recent opinion polls](#), 88% of Palestinian denounce ISIS and 77% are supportive of the Western and Arab war against ISIS. ISIS exploits and exacerbates the fragmented and seemingly hopeless Palestinian political reality for nobody's benefit but its own. At the same time, Israel continues its incitement against Palestinians based on the idea that they represent a type of dogmatic extremism that is similar to ISIS.

Pushing back against ISIS appropriation of the Palestinian narrative is thus not only a case of moral duty, but also one of strategic value. Palestinian grievances are wholly human, tangible and current, and are grounded in universally recognized human rights. They emerge not from an imagined religious plight but from a political reality under which generations of Palestinians of all beliefs have suffered ethnic cleansing, colonization, the deprivation of natural resources, military assaults, occupation, besiegement, and exile among many other crimes. Meanwhile the party that has and is committing these crimes can elude responsibility for as long as it manages to dominate the narrative. This is why Palestinians must exercise their agency and actively protect their narrative both from appropriation by ISIS and from demonization by anti-Palestinian voices, using all the tools at their disposal.

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⁶ See for example Wael J. Haboub, "Demystifying the Rise of Hamas," *Journal of Developing Societies* 28, no. 1 (2012): 57–79; Asher Susser, "The Rise of Hamas in Palestine and the Crisis of Secularism in the Arab World" (Crown Center for Middle East Studies, 2010), 56; Meir Litvak, "The Islamization of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: The Case of Hamas," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 1 (1998): 172.