

# ISIS and Israel Allies Against a Palestinian State

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*An image speaks a thousand words – and that is presumably what Israel’s supporters hoped for with their latest ad in the New York Times.*

Two photographs are presented side by side. One, titled ISIS, is the now-iconic image of a kneeling James Foley, guarded by a black-hooded executioner, awaiting his terrible fate. The other, titled Hamas, is a scene from Gaza, where a similarly masked killer stands over two victims, who cower in fear. A headline stating “This is the face of radical Islam” tries, like the images, to equate the two organisations.

We have heard this line repeatedly from Israel’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who tweeted “Hamas is ISIS” after the video of Foley’s beheading aired. Last week, in a speech addressed to the family of Steven Sotloff, ISIS’s latest victim, he called Hamas and ISIS “tentacles of a violent Islamist terrorism.” Netanyahu’s depiction of Hamas and ISIS, or Islamic State, as “branches of the same poisonous tree” is a travesty of the truth.

The two have entirely different – in fact, opposed – political projects. ISIS wants to return to a supposed era of pure Islamic rule, the caliphate, when all Muslims were subject to God’s laws (sharia). Given that Muslims are now to be found in every corner of the globe, the implication is that ISIS ultimately seeks world domination.

Hamas’s goals are decidedly more modest. It was born and continues as a national liberation movement, seeking to create a Palestinian state. Its members may disagree on that state’s territorial limits but even the most ambitious expect no more than the historic borders of a Palestine that existed a few decades ago.

ISIS aims to sweep away Palestine and every other Arab state in the region. That is the key to interpreting the very different, if equally brutal, events depicted in the two images.

ISIS killed Foley, dressed in Guantanamo-style orange jumpsuit, purely as spectacle – a graphic message to the world of its menacing agenda. Hamas’ cruelty was directed at those in Gaza who collaborate with Israel, undermining any hope of Palestinian liberation from Israel’s occupation. The extra-judicial execution of collaborators may be ugly but it has a long tradition among resistance movements fighting asymmetrical wars. Militants among the Marxist revolutionaries of Latin America and the Catholic nationalists in Ireland, as well as the Allied resistance in Nazi Europe and the Jewish underground against the British in Palestine, had nary a Muslim in their ranks but they brutally punished those who betrayed them. ISIS’s reported 20,000 foot soldiers have quickly taken over swaths of Iraq and Syria in a murderous and uncompromising campaign against anyone who rejects not only Islam but their specific interpretation of it.

Hamas – split between political and militant factions – has shown itself both pragmatic and

accountable to the Palestinian public. It won the last national election, in 2006, and after its recent fight against Israel in Gaza is by far the most popular Palestinian movement. Despite being in control of Gaza for eight years, it has not implemented sharia law nor targeted the enclave's Christians. Instead it has recently formed a unity government with its secular political rivals in Fatah, and has been more than willing to negotiate with Israel. According to reports, Hamas leader Khaled Meshal has joined Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority, in demanding the most diminutive Palestinian state possible, inside the 1967 borders.

Netanyahu's fundamentalist right wing are the ones refusing to negotiate, with either Hamas or Abbas. In casting a popular resistance movement like Hamas as ISIS, Netanyahu has tarred all Palestinians as bloodthirsty Islamic extremists. And here we reach Israel's real goal in equating the two groups. Netanyahu's comparison has a recent parallel. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks on the US, Ariel Sharon made a similar equivalence between al-Qaeda and the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Israel's intelligence officials even called the destruction of the Twin Towers a "Hanukkah miracle", a view echoed by Netanyahu years later when he described the attack as beneficial, adding that it had "swung American public opinion in our favour". All of them understood that 9/11 had reframed the debate about the Oslo-inspired debate about the Palestinians needing statehood to one about an evil axis of Middle East terror.

Sharon revelled in calling Arafat the head of an "infrastructure of terror", justifying Israel's crushing the uprising of the second intifada. Similarly, Netanyahu's efforts are designed to discredit all - not just the Islamic variety of - Palestinian resistance to Israel's occupation. He hopes to be the silent partner to Barack Obama's new coalition against ISIS.

Aaron David Miller, an adviser to several US administrations on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, warned in *Foreign Policy* last week that the rise of ISIS would pose a serious setback to Palestinian hopes of statehood - a point underscored by the far greater concerns about ISIS than the Palestinians' plight expressed by Arab League delegates at this week's meeting in Cairo. How Netanyahu hopes to follow Sharon in exploiting this opportunity was on show last week, when Israeli intelligence revealed a supposed Hamas plot to launch a coup against the PA.

The interrogation of Hamas officials, however, showed only that they had prepared for the possibility of the PA's rule ending in the West Bank, either through its collapse under Israeli pressure or through a disillusioned Abbas handing over the keys to Israel. But talk of Hamas coups has melded with other, even wilder stories, such as the claims last week from foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman that ISIS cells had formed in the West Bank and inside Israel. Defence minister Moshe Yaalon underscored this narrative by hurriedly classifying ISIS as a "proscribed" organisation.

All this fear-mongering is designed both to further undermine the Palestinian unity government between Hamas and Fatah, and to sanction Israel's behaviour by painting a picture, as after 9/11, of an Israel on the front line of a war against global terror. "Israel's demands for a continued Israeli presence [in the West Bank] and a lengthy withdrawal period will only harden further," wrote Miller.

In reality, Israel should share common cause with Palestinian leaders, from Fatah and Hamas, against ISIS. But, as ever, Netanyahu will forgo his country's long-term interests for a short-term gain in his relentless war to keep the Palestinians stateless.

**Jonathan Cook** won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is [www.jonathan-cook.net](http://www.jonathan-cook.net). A version of this article first appeared in the National, Abu Dhabi.

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