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Al Qaeda's Stance in the Gaza War

By Rohan Gunaratna

SYNOPSIS

Al Qaeda, the terrorist group that staged the 9/11 attacks in the United States of America more than two decades ago, has propagated that until the Jews perish, the Middle East will never have peace. To mobilise Muslims worldwide, Al Qaeda's leader Saif al-Adl presents the Hamas-led war in Gaza as a "battle of historical importance". With his experience spearheading the global expansion of Al Qaeda, will Saif spark another wave of global terrorism?

COMMENTARY

After the deaths of Al Qaeda leaders, Osama bin Laden (2 May 2011) and Aymen al Zawahiri (31 July 2022), Saif al Adl has emerged as the third "emir" or chief of the group. Saif is an Egyptian and now lives in Iran where he is advocating for Muslims to support the Hamas. Through its media wing, the as-Sahab Media Foundation, Saif refers to the Hamas attack on Israel (7 October 2023) as "an exquisite political and military painting by the mujahideen".

Translated from Arabic to English by SITE Intelligence Group, Saif said that "success is granted from Allah when intentions are pure", adding that the Palestinian militants' actions were "calculated under Allah's guidance" and they became the "giants of unbalanced wars". Saif added that the children of Gaza will be imbued with a sense of revenge for what had happened to them, their families, and their people.

A strategic thinker, Saif joined Al Qaeda in 1988, the year it was formed in Peshawar, Pakistan. He fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets and then against the Americans and rose through the ranks to head Al Qaeda's security and intelligence committee. He briefly served in Somalia to establish a base in East Africa, supported Abu Musab al Zarqawi in giving birth to the Islamic State, and organised the rapprochement between Al Qaeda and Ansarullah, a Shi'a entity in Yemen.

Since 7 October 2023, Saif has been actively guiding Al Qaeda, its affiliates, and other jihad entities to strike Jewish, Israeli, and Western targets. Protected by the Taliban, Afghanistan's ruling party and exploited by Iran's Al Quds, is Al Qaeda re-emerging as a global force?

Al Qaeda's Views of the Israel-Hamas War

More than any other Al Qaeda or Islamic State leader, Saif understood Gaza, the latest battlefield shaping the geopolitical, operational and digital domains of the world. Saif describes Gaza as having "no geographical depth" and unable to "stand a chance against an army backed by all colonial powers and armed with all kinds of weapons and jets".

Saif lauded the Palestinian militants for their "ingenuity" in digging tunnels to build "geographical depth", and "luring the enemy before coming out from the holes of the earth". He further praised the militants for manufacturing some of their weapons while being besieged on one side by the Egyptian Army, which is governed by "treacherous" leaders, and by Israel on the other.

Saif criticised Muslim countries for not striking Israel, describing their non-participation as the "pretences used by idlers not performing jihad, by which the door of shame opened on the Islamic and Arab governments". He condemned Arab leaders for hosting US bases and not helping Gaza, uttering words not accompanied by actions, as munitions at the US al Udeid Air Base in Qatar and the Incirlik base in Turkey and the warehouses in the UAE and Saudi Arabia are being used to bomb Gaza. He singled out Turkey for supplying Israel with food and clothing but shedding "crocodile tears" over Gaza.

As Saif himself has no religious credentials, he highlights the fatwa issued by the International Union of Muslim Scholars, the de facto headquarters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Qatar, making it a "duty for all Palestinians and neighbouring states to provide military support to Gaza". Saif pointed to the "big difference" between "the soldiers of Islam" in Gaza and "the Zionist soldiers of the devil" and wondered what one can "say about people that Allah doomed to be dispersed".

Al Qaeda Going Forward

Al Qaeda leader Saif al Adl warned his followers that countries in the West are "apostates to democracy", who will not make decisions at the United Nations Security Council "to stop the massacre [of the Palestinians] unless they were being committed against them". He added that the international Zionist movement "teamed up on Gaza as the [Arab] rulers let it down, and tomorrow, the turn comes on someone else".

Looking to the future, Saif said "We have to open a series of fronts on them to disperse them, weaken them, and defeat them". Although the Islamic State and Al Qaeda are rivals and Sunni and Shi'a groups clash, under Iran's patronage, they will fight the "Jewish-Crusader alliance."

Saif's article, "This is Gaza: The Days of the Armistice and Palestine, 75 Years Ago through Today", demonstrates the commitment by Al Qaeda to fight Israel, its allies

and friends. Having decried the United States, the United Kingdom, and France for supporting Israel at the United Nations, Saif added that even though the UK and France withdrew their public support, the US continued. He described the US as the land of “the savages, the cowboys, and a dynasty of criminals and blood merchants that sabotage the world with nuclear bombs and biological weapons”. This is the reason “we continue to fight them and their way of life”. The Al Qaeda leadership will continue to identify the West, especially the US and Europe, as their sworn enemies.

By the time the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) come to control and dominate Gaza, some 100,000 Palestinians are likely to have been killed. As long as Hamas does not release the hostages and surrender, the IDF will continue with its operations. Although Hamas has taken a severe beating, Saif said that the Gaza militants “are winning the moralistic war to which the mujahideen are committed, as the Jews backed down on the no-negotiations policy with which they started”. Saif added that the “phase of the battle confirmed the truth that the Israeli captives would not be freed unless the war stopped, the Palestinian captives liberated, and the attacks on the al-Aqsa Mosque (third holiest Mosque in Islam) ended”.

After 7 October 2023, Hamas constitutes an existential threat to Israel. Just like the Arab Spring destabilised Arab countries, Israel’s response is eroding the stability of the Middle Eastern governments. With the politicisation and radicalisation of Muslims worldwide, western countries hosting Muslim migrant and diaspora communities are likely to experience not only protests and demonstrations but violence and terrorist attacks on their soil.

Conclusion

After Hamas’ attack on 7 October, Al Qaeda demonstrated its agility by quickly capitalising on the Hamas onslaught, and Israel’s overwhelming response. Al Qaeda embarked on a campaign to influence and shape Muslim sentiments, targeting Israel, its allies and friends. Unlike before, the parameters of conduct by Al Qaeda’s leaders and members today are constrained by its principal hosts, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, now administered by the Taliban.

Today, Al Qaeda and its affiliates continue to play a major role in disseminating propaganda, recruiting and providing training to its core and affiliate groups. Under the Doha Accord, the Taliban pledged to prevent Al Qaeda from operating in areas under Taliban control. Based on the findings of the Al Qaeda Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, Al Qaeda has set up a dozen bases including training camps in Afghanistan for both its own and foreign fighter recruits.

Despite the constraints faced and opportunities available to Al Qaeda, the focus of its leadership has shifted to Israel’s war on Gaza. Like the Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemeni Ansarullah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other Iranian Shi’a and Sunni proxies, the Iran-based Al Qaeda leadership too will advance the interests of Iran. In the coming months and years, Al Qaeda and its affiliates and followers will galvanise Muslim sentiments to incite hatred and violence against Jewish, Israeli and Western targets.

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