

Hamas's harsh rhetoric against the Jews

By Steven Erlanger
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GAZA: In the Katib Wilayat mosque one recent Friday, the imam was discussing the wiliness of the Jew.

"Jews are a people who cannot be trusted," Imam Yousif al-Zahar of Hamas told the faithful. "They have been traitors to all agreements. Go back to history. Their fate is their vanishing. Look what they are doing to us."

At Al Omari mosque, the imam cursed the Jews and the "Crusaders," or Christians, and the Danes, for reprinting cartoons of Muhammad. He referred to Jews as "the brothers of apes and pigs."

The Hamas television station, Al Aksa, is harsher. It praises suicide bombing and holy war until Palestine is free of Jewish control. Its videos praise fighters and rocket-launching teams; its broadcasts insult the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas for talking to Israel and the United States; its children's programs praise "martyrdom," teach the perfidy of the Jews and the need to end Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, meaning any part of the state of Israel.

Such incitement against Israel and Jews was supposed to be banned under the 1993 Oslo accords and the 2003 "road map" to peace. While the Palestinian Authority under Fatah has made significant, if imperfect, efforts to end incitement, Hamas, no party to those agreements, feels no such restraint.

Since Hamas routed Fatah and took over Gaza last June, sermons and media preaching violence and hatred have become more pervasive, extreme and sophisticated, on the model of Hezbollah in Lebanon and its Al Manar television. Designed to indoctrinate the young to its brand of radical Islam, the programs of Al Aksa television and radio, including key Friday sermons, are an indication of how far from reconciliation Israelis and many Palestinians are.

Hamas's grip on Gaza matters, but what may matter more in the long run is its control over propaganda and education there. No matter what Israeli and Palestinian negotiators agree, there is concern here that the attitudes being instilled will make a sustainable peace extremely difficult.

"If you take a sample on Friday, you're bound to hear incitement against the Jews in the prayers and the imam's sermon," said Mkhaimer Abusada, a political scientist at Al Azhar University here. "He uses verses from the Koran to say how the Jews were the enemies of the prophet and didn't keep their promises to the prophet 1,400 years ago."

Abusada is a Muslim and political independent. "You have young people and everyone has to listen to the imam whether you believe him or not. By saying the same thing over and over, you find a lot of people believing it, especially when he cites the Koran or hadith," the sayings of the prophet.

Radwan Abu Ayyash, deputy minister of culture in Ramallah, ran the Palestinian Broadcasting Company until 2005. Hamas "uses religious language to motivate simple people for political as well as religious goals," he said. "People don't distinguish between the two." He said he finds a lot of what Al Aksa broadcasts "disgusting and unprofessional."

Every Palestinian thinks the situation in Gaza is ugly, he said. "But what is not fine is to build up children with a culture of hatred, of closed minds, a culture of sickness. I don't think they always know what they are creating. People use one weapon, language, without realizing that they also use it against themselves."

Itamar Marcus of Palestinian Media Watch, an Israeli group, said Hamas takes its view of Jews from what it considers the roots of Islam, then tries to make the present match the past.

For example, in a column in the weekly Al Risalah, Sheik Yunus al-Astal, a Hamas legislator and imam, discussed a Koranic verse suggesting that "suffering by fire is the Jews' destiny in this world and the next."

"The reason for the punishment of burning is that it is fitting retribution for what they have done," Astal wrote on March 13. "But the urgent question is, is it possible that they will have the punishment of burning in this world, before the great punishment" of hell? Many religious leaders believe so, he said, adding: "Therefore we are sure that the Holocaust is still to come upon the Jews."

Some Hamas videos, like one in March 2007, promote the participation of children in "resistance," showing them training in uniform, holding rifles. Recent shows displayed Abbas kissing Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel under the slogan: "Palestine doesn't return with kisses, it returns with martyrs."

Another children's program, "Tomorrow's Pioneers," has become infamous for its puppet characters - a kind of Mickey Mouse, a bee and a rabbit - who speak, like Assud the rabbit, of conquering the Jews to the young hostess, Saraa Barhoum, 11.

"We will liberate Al Aksa mosque from the Zionists' filth," Assud said recently. "We will liberate Jaffa and Acre," cities now in Israel proper. "We will liberate the whole homeland."

The mouse, Farfour, was murdered by an Israeli interrogator and replaced by Nahoul, the bee, who died "a martyr's death" from lack of health care because of Gaza's closed borders. He has been supplanted by Assud, the rabbit who vows "to get rid of the Jews, Allah willing."

Still, there are numerous Palestinians in Gaza - in the hothouse atmosphere of an overcrowded, isolated territory where martyr posters and anger at Israel are widespread among Fatah, too - who are deeply upset about the hold Hamas has on their mosques and on what their children watch.

While the Palestinian Authority of Fatah also causes some concern - its textbooks, for example, rarely recognize the state of Israel - Yigal Carmon, who runs Middle East Media Research Institute, said that Hamas and its media use "the kind of anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish language you don't really hear any more from the Palestinian Authority, which hasn't talked like that in a long time."

Abu Saleh, who asked that his full name not be used because of his critical views, is worried about his children. His eldest son, 13, likes to watch Al Aksa, especially the nationalist songs and military videos.

"I talk to them about Hamas, but to be honest it's scary and you have to watch it over time," he said. "When kids are 17 or 18, you don't know what happens. They get enraged and can attach themselves to radical groups."

Muhammad did a temporary hudna, or truce, with the Jews 1,400 years ago, so Hamas allows the idea. But no one in Hamas says they would make a peace treaty with Israel or permanently relinquish any part of Mandate Palestine.

"They talk of hudna, not of peace or reconciliation with Israel," Abusada said. "They believe over time they will be strong enough to liberate all historic Palestine."

Saraa, the host of "Tomorrow's Pioneers," is the niece of Fawzi Barhoum, a Hamas spokesman. Some of the language used against other Arabs upsets him, Barhoum said, but he insisted that Israel is illegitimate.

"No one can deny that all this was Palestinian land and Jews occupied the land," he said firmly. "Therefore the Hamas charter is based on what Israel has committed against our people and our understanding of Israel and its practices."

The Hamas charter is a deeply anti-Semitic document and cites the famous forgery, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, as truth. But "our battle is not with Jews as Jews," Barhoum said, "but those who came and occupied us and killed us." After all, he said, "the Jews who recognized the evil of the occupation stayed outside and refused to come to Palestine as occupiers. The Jews who came, came to occupy and to kill."

Mark Regev, Olmert's spokesman, called on "Arab leaders who are moderate and believe in peace to speak out more strongly against extremist elements."

He called the "incitement to hatred and violence standard Hamas operating procedure," adding: "In Hamas education and broadcasting they turn the suicide bomber who murders the innocent into a positive role model, and they portray Jews in the most negative terms, that too often reminds us of language used in Europe in the first half of the 20th century."

The "serious question," he said, "is what ethos are they promoting?"

Hazim el-Sharawi, 30, the original host of the Farfour character on Hamas television, and known as "Uncle Hazim," has no doubts. It was his idea to have Farfour killed by an Israeli interrogator, he said. "We wanted to send a message through this character that would fit the reality of Palestinian life."

Israel is the source, he insisted. "A child sees his neighbors killed, or blown up on the beach, and how do I explain this to a child that already knows? The occupation is the reason, it creates the reality. I just organize the information for him."

The point is simple, he said: "We want to connect the child to Palestine, to his country, so you know that your original city is Jaffa, your capital is Jerusalem, and that the Jews took your land and closed your borders and are killing your friends and family."