Why Hamas is selling its assault on Israel as a holy war

by Michele Chabin and Yonat Shimron
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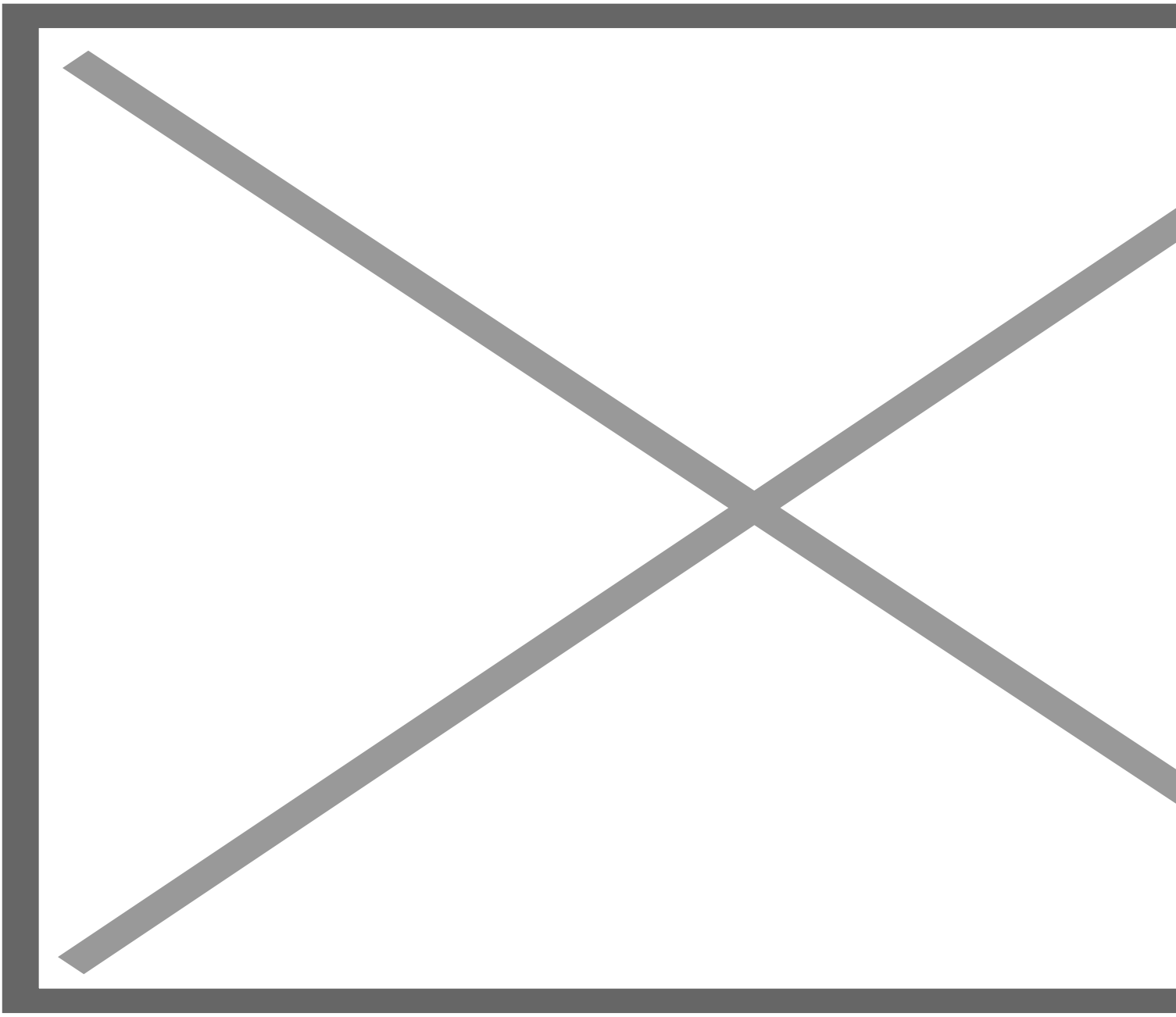

Palestinian worshippers pray outside Jerusalem's Old City while Israeli forces stand guard on October 13. (AP Photo/Mahmoud Illean)

When Hamas, the Islamic Palestinian terrorist group, stormed into southern Israel on October 7, took over military bases, massacred more than 1,300 Israelis—most of them civilians—and kidnapped 150, it dubbed its military operation the “Al-Aqsa Deluge.”

The reference to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, which includes the Dome of the Rock, as well as the smaller Al-Aqsa Mosque, was clearly intended as a rallying cry to unite Muslims by convincing them that their faith is under assault.

Expressions like “Free Al-Aqsa” are intended to galvanize Muslims against non-Muslims, said Shuki Friedman, vice president of the Jewish People Policy Institute and an expert on Islamic law at the Peres Academic Center. They help to unify the world’s nearly 2 billion Sunni and Shiite Muslims, who have been at odds, and sometimes war, for centuries.

Al-Aqsa, built on top of the remains of the first and second Jewish Temples, is also Judaism’s holiest site, known as the Temple Mount. In the past few years, an increasing number of Jews have visited the compound, including, recently, far-right Jewish politicians and activists who advocate for Israeli control over the site, which is currently administered by a Jordanian authority called the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf.

In the past year, Israel’s nationalist minister of security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, has carried out three high-profile visits to the plaza, initially over the objections of Israel’s security agency. In July, Ben-Gvir accompanied a crowd of 1,000 Jews to the site, guarded by police.

“This place is important to us and we have to return to it and prove our sovereignty,” Ben-Gvir said in remarks many considered intentionally inflammatory. Within minutes Hamas and others accused Israel of planning to destroy or overtake Al-Aqsa.

This skirmishing over the place where, according to Islamic tradition, the Prophet Muhammad completed his “night journey” from Mecca to Jerusalem, and later ascended to heaven, gave Hamas an opening to justify its terror attack in the name of Islam.

As *Times of Israel* columnist Haviv Rettig Gur explained in an October 8 commentary, Hamas used Al-Aqsa to make its war on Israel about much more than territory or the expansion of Israeli settlements.

When Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh called on Muslims and others around the world “‘to stand in this just battle in defense of Al-Aqsa and the Prophet’s mission,’ he meant just that,” Gur wrote, “that the fight was over holy things, over Islam’s redemptive promise.”

To Hamas, “Israel is more than a mere occupier or oppressor,” Gur continued. “It is a rebellion against God and the divinely ordained trajectory of history.”

In calling for a fight to “overthrow the Israeli occupation” the day Hamas launched its assault, Mohammed Deif, the head of its military wing, gave the attack and unfolding war an explicitly religious cast. “This is the time to expel those occupying our land and gather in the mosques and pray we will be victorious,” Deif said.

Deif and many other Muslim leaders claim Israel is planning to replace Al-Aqsa with a third Jewish temple. The 35-acre compound contains multiple mosques, administrative buildings and large open spaces where Muslims pray, families picnic, and children play soccer.

But it’s not clear that Hamas’ strategy will sway Muslims outside the Middle East, especially those who have spent much of the last two decades disavowing terrorism in the name of Islam.

“Invoking any religion, including Islam, to justify taking innocent lives has no place in any society,” said Mohamed Magid, the executive religious director of All Dulles Area Muslim Society Center in Sterling, Virginia, who sits on the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, in a statement. “Claims that

violent terrorists represent the whole of Islam — or the Palestinian people seeking their fundamental human rights — are ill-founded."

Founded in 1987, Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, is an offshoot of the century-old Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Muslim movement that began among Egyptian intellectuals. Hamas has two wings, one military, the other political and administrative. Its 1988 charter calls for the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic society in historic Palestine.

In 2005, after Israel withdrew its troops and uprooted its settlements in Gaza, Hamas won an election against Fatah, the party that leads the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. But in 2007 it seized control of the 140-square-mile strip that is home to 2.5 million people. Since the early 2000s, it has shot thousands of rockets and mortars into Israel and killed and kidnapped Israeli civilians, resulting in three military confrontations, in 2008, 2012, and 2014.

Since 2007, both Israel and Egypt have imposed blockades that severely limit the movement of people and goods into and out of Gaza.

The group's stated policy of destroying Israel, even as other Arab regimes have moved to recognize its right to exist, has made it popular among some Muslims, for whom Al-Aqsa is a symbol of Muslim strength.

"To many Palestinians, the protection of the Al-Aqsa compound is incredibly important," said Sarah Parkinson, a professor of political science and international studies at Johns Hopkins University.

Parkinson pointed out, however, that it would be a mistake to call Hamas's most recent incursion into Israel solely a holy war. "A holy war sort of erases the facts of the occupation and the blockade (of Gaza) and settler violence and so many of the complexities of why people are frustrated and angry," she said.

But the power of the mosque complex as a symbol is undeniable. Gerald Steinberg, a political scientist at Bar Ilan University, said that Muslims have long used Al-Aqsa as a pretext to arouse hatred against Jews.

"The first Palestinian massacre of Jews was in 1929 in Hebron. It began because Muslims said Jews were planning to take over the Temple Mount," Steinberg said. "This has been a recurrent theme. It's taught to children at home and in school, and is preached in the mosques. It reverberates around the world." —Religion News Service