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Pro-Qaeda group declares "Islamic emirate" in Gaza Hamis battle with radicals kills 13, injures 100



Al-Maqdessi (R) announced the start of theocratic rule in the Palestinian territories

GAZA (Al Arabiya, Agencies)

At least thirteen Palestinians were killed and more than 100 others injured in the Gaza Strip on Friday in an exchange of fire between radical Islamists and Hamas police, medical sources said.

The clash took place when Hamas police confronted the Islamist dissidents, who had gathered at a mosque in the southern city of Rafah near the border with Egypt.

Gaza Ambulance and Emergency Chief Dr Muaweya Hasanein told Al Arabiya that those killed in the clashes include two from Hamas and rest from the Islamist radicals.

"Eight of the injured people have very critical wounds in their heads as they were exposed to direct shooting inside the mosque," he said.

Islamist radicals from a Palestinian group called Jund Ansar Allah defied the Hamas rulers of Gaza earlier by declaring an "Islamic emirate" in the territory and staging a defiant display of arms.

Though the "Warriors of God" rallied only a few hundred men for their event at a Gaza mosque, it was the latest challenge to Hamas's nationalist brand of Palestinian Islam by groups espousing a pan-Arab militia aligned with al-Qaeda.

Theocratic rule

Speaking before weekly prayers, Abdul Latif Moussa -- known to followers by the al-Qaeda-style nom de guerre Abu al-Nour al-Maqdessi -- announced the start of theocratic rule in the Palestinian territories, starting at Rafah.

"We declare the birth of the Islamic Emirate," declared Maqdessi, a heavily-bearded, middle-aged cleric in a red robe who was guarded by four black-clad, masked men with assault rifles. One wore what appeared to be an explosive suicide belt.

An audience of several hundred men filled the mosque with cheers and shouts. Al-Qaeda uses the historical term "emirate" to mean clerical rule across the Islamic world.

Ismail Haniyeh, who heads Gaza's Hamas government, denied in his Friday sermon that there were any non-Palestinian gunmen in the territory, as alleged by Israel which charges that veterans of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken up residence.

"Such groups do not exist on the soil of the Gaza Strip ... there are no fighters in Gaza except Gazan fighters," he said.

Such "Zionist propaganda" from Israel was simply an attempt to turn the world against Hamas, he said.

Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri called Maqdessi's speech "wrong thinking" and in a clear reference to al-Qaeda added that his group "has no affiliation with foreign groups."

Hamas's Interior Ministry was blunter, calling Maqdessi "mad."

Hamis .. a moderate movement

His group announced its existence in Gaza two months ago, after three of its members were killed in a border raid on an Israeli base in which gunmen rode on horseback.

Outside the mosque on Friday, nearly 100 masked fighters of the group in Pakistani-style dress, wearing their hair long, carried automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

Men of the Hamas armed wing and security forces took positions nearby.

The group accuses Hamas of oppressing them, including making arrests and confiscating weapons.

Hamas is an Islamist group described by its leaders as a moderate movement and by independent analysts as giving priority to Palestinian nationalist goals over international religious aims typical of al-Qaeda's network. Observers detect strains within Hamas ranks between pragmatic and more radical factions.

Hamas refuses to renounce violence against Israel but has condemned al-Qaeda bombings in other countries. It has made little public attempt to impose fundamentalist law or strict dress codes, but it is encountering more frequent challenges from groups who want more traditionalist Islam in Gaza.

Human rights groups last month criticized an order by a Hamas-appointed judge that women lawyers cover their hair, and a campaign by its religious affairs ministry to encourage the public to follow Islamic instructions.

Bloodshed

Maqdessi warned Hamas against implementing a decision to take over the mosque where he leads prayers for his followers: "If they approach the mosque they should know their days will be cut short," the grey-whiskered cleric said.

Maqdessi said his group would not initiate attacks against Hamas but "whoever sheds our blood, his blood will be shed."

He urged "everyone who has a weapon" to join the group and carry out decisions to be issued by the armed wing in coming weekly sermons. The group believes democracy is prohibited by Islam because it follows earthly law instead of God's word.

"Who are you afraid of? America? Britain? France? The European Union? You should fear only God," Maqdessi said in a warning to Hamas leaders seeking dialogue with the West.

Israel unilaterally ended its occupation of the Gaza Strip in 2005 and withdrew its forces. Islamist radicals began to surface in Gaza following the takeover of the Israeli-blockaded enclave by Hamas in 2007, when it routed the forces of the secular Fatah movement of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.