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Israel's Foes Embrace New Resistance Tactics

Hamas and Hezbollah Find Inspiration In Flotilla, Support Protest Movements

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By CHARLES LEVINSON

JERUSALEM—Hamas and Hezbollah, groups that have long battled Israel with violent tactics, have begun to embrace civil disobedience, protest marches, lawsuits and boycotts—tactics they once dismissed.

For decades, Palestinian statehood aspirations seemed to lurch between negotiations and armed resistance against Israel. But a small cadre of Palestinian activists has long argued that nonviolence, in the tradition of the American civil rights movement, would be far more effective.

Officials from Hamas, the militant group that controls the Gaza Strip, point to the recent Israeli raid on a Gaza-bound flotilla, in which Israeli troops killed nine activists, as evidence there is more to gain by getting Israel to draw international condemnation through its own use of force, rather than by attacking the country.



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Israeli troops approach a model of a ship representing the Gaza aid flotilla during a demonstration by activists in the West Bank in early June.

"When we use violence, we help Israel win international support," said Aziz Dweik, a leading Hamas lawmaker in the West Bank. "The Gaza flotilla has done more for Gaza than 10,000 rockets."

Hamas and Hezbollah, the Islamist movement in Lebanon that has been fighting Israel since the early 1980s, haven't renounced violence and both groups continue to amass arms. Hamas still abides by a charter that calls for Israel's destruction; Palestinian youths still hurl rocks at Israeli soldiers across the West Bank separation barrier. And the flotilla incident didn't fall into

conventional standards of peaceful protest: While most activists passively resisted Israeli soldiers, some on the boat where protesters were killed attacked commandos as they boarded, according to video footage released by Israel and soldiers' accounts.

The incident triggered international condemnation and plunged Israel into one of its worst diplomatic crises in years. In response, Israel said it would take some steps to ease its blockade on the Gaza Strip.

After the incident, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah called on supporters to participate in the next flotilla bound for Gaza. Ghaleb Abu Zeinab, a member of the Hezbollah politburo in Beirut, said it was the first time Mr. Nasrallah had forcefully and publicly embraced such tactics against Israel.

"We saw that this kind of resistance has driven the Israelis into a big plight," he said. Organizers in Lebanon say they have two ships ready to sail, but no departure date has been set.

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A senior Israeli foreign ministry official said Israel recognizes "changes in the tactical thinking of Hamas and other resistance movements." The official said the groups are no less committed to Israel's destruction, but have simply concluded they are more likely to defeat Israel by encouraging its international isolation instead of through military force.

"People who are provoking violence are using peaceful protest as a cover," said Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev.

The Palestinian protest movement picked up steam in the past year, spearheaded by activists in the West Bank and a coalition of pro-Palestinian international human-rights groups.

The absence of peace talks for much of the past two years has pushed the Palestinian Authority leadership to embrace the movement as well. Dominated by members of Hamas's more moderate rival Fatah, they long advocated a negotiated settlement with Israel and dismissed popular protest campaigns.

But in January, Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad launched a campaign to boycott products produced in Israeli settlements and to plant trees in areas declared off limits by Israel. In April, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas outlawed settlement products in Palestinian Authority-controlled areas.

Hamas's turnaround has been more striking, said Mustapha Barghouti, a prominent Palestinian advocate for nonviolent resistance. "When we used to call for protests, and marches, and boycotts and anything called nonviolence, Hamas used these sexist insults against us. They described it as women's struggle," Mr. Barghouti said. That changed in 2008, he said, after the first aid ship successfully ran the Israeli blockade of Gaza.

"Hamas has started to appreciate just how effective this can be," Mr. Barghouti said.

Hamas has started organizing its own peaceful marches into the Israeli-controlled buffer zone along the Gaza border and supported lawsuits against Israeli officials in European courts. Hamas says it has ramped up support for a committee dedicated to sponsoring similar protests in Gaza.

Mr. Dweik, the Hamas lawmaker, recently began turning up at weekly protests against Israel's West Bank barrier.

Salah Bardawil, a Hamas lawmaker in Gaza City, says Hamas has come to appreciate the importance of international support for its legitimacy as a representative of the Palestinian people and its fight against Israeli occupation, and has adapted its tactics. Hamas hasn't claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in years and now denounces the tactic as counterproductive. Since an Israeli military incursion into the territory in December 2008-January 2009, it has also halted rocket attacks into Israel.

"Hamas used to believe [international support] was just empty words," said Mr. Bardawil. "Today it is very interested in international delegations ... and in bringing Israeli officials to justice through legal proceedings."

Write to Charles Levinson at charles.levinson@wsj.com

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