

The Terrorism Threat against Israel from al-Qaeda and Global Jihad

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This essay analyzes the current risks to Israel's interests in Israel and abroad (including Jewish interests abroad) from al-Qaeda and its affiliates. To illustrate the risks, it is useful to review the ideology of these groups and show how it translates into practical expression through a survey of the groups' activities in different arenas around the world.

The worldview of al-Qaeda and its global jihad affiliates was and remains anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli to its core, and in this is no different from other extremist Muslim groups that preceded them. In their mind, Jews are part of a worldwide conspiracy where they teamed up with "crusaders" (a code word for Christians) in a "Judeo-Christian plot"; over the years, they have been joined by Muslim "heretics," headed by the Shiites as well as "traitors" from the Sunni community. This entire camp is an enemy of Islam that needs to be fought to the last drop of blood.¹ According to this view, the State of Israel is the political incarnation of the plot and was deliberately planted in the region as a bone stuck in the throat of the Muslim world. It is therefore a duty to fight it, destroy it, and rid the region of any Jews. The way to achieve this is by means of painful acts of terrorism that they believe will lead to the weakening of the patrons of the Jewish state, first and foremost the United States, and prove to the masses of Muslims and their potential supporters that in the final analysis, Israel is a weak and temporary political entity, quite the opposite of its image as the invincible nation in the region.²

For a long time, the venomous rhetoric against Israel and the Jews was voiced virtually without any practical expression. Only a small number of attacks against Jews in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East

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were planned, especially by terrorist groups and networks supported by al-Qaeda, and almost all of them were foiled.³ In late 1999 and early 2000, however, a new trend emerged, reflecting an organizational decision and notable improvement in al-Qaeda's operational capability, namely, an increase in its anti-Israel efforts. Even so, these targets were not a priority for al-Qaeda and its affiliates, but with the passage of time and as the involvement of al-Qaeda and its affiliates in terrorism around the world expanded and their self-confidence grew, efforts to attack Israel and targets identified with it also increased.⁴ This gradual change stemmed from the understanding by al-Qaeda's leadership that a significant blow against Israel and targets identified with it may earn them support among those who might otherwise have reservations about indiscriminate acts of terrorism carried out by the organization against Arab and Western targets and certainly against its growing attacks against Muslims.

Increased activity against Israel and Jews began with the attempt by a Jordanian terrorist network identified with global jihad to carry out terrorist attacks against Israeli and American tourists and pilgrims in Jordan and at the Jordan-Israel border crossing as part of the "millennium attacks," and continued with attempts to attack Israeli targets in Australia during the Sydney Olympics (June 2000). The same year, an al-Qaeda operative, Richard Colvin Reid, a British subject whose father was an immigrant from Jamaica, was sent to Israel to gather information about targets. This was part of an effort to explore the possibility of staging attacks in Israel in general and against Israeli air traffic in particular. Later, Reid became known as the "shoe bomber" when he attempted a suicide attack on an American Airlines flight in December 2001 by means of explosives hidden in his shoes. Also in the first half of 2000, attempts were made to dispatch Palestinians (Saad Hindawi and Nabil Oukal) who had concluded their training in Afghanistan to establish terrorist networks in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip.⁵ In addition, al-Qaeda considered sending a Saudi suicide pilot to bomb Eilat. All of these plans were either foiled or shelved.

The clearest evidence that al-Qaeda under Bin Laden hoped to render a crushing blow to Israel came in the form of the twin attacks in Mombasa against Israeli tourists vacationing in Kenya (November 2002). The terrorist cell dispatched to Kenya by al-Qaeda's command center, which made use of the local terrorist infrastructure, fired missiles at an

Arkia passenger plane during its takeoff but missed. At the same time, suicide bombers in an explosives-laden vehicle attacked a hotel popular with Israeli tourists, killing 15, including three Israelis – among them two brothers, aged 12 and 14. Al-Qaeda's apparatus for attacks abroad also carried out the suicide attack on the synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia (2002), killing 14 (though none was a member of the Jewish community there), as well as the suicide attacks on two synagogues in Istanbul (2003), which killed 27, of whom six were Jews.

In recent years, several attacks against Israeli targets abroad have been carried out not by al-Qaeda itself, but by its affiliates. In July 2004, the Uzbeki Islamic Jihad carried out a suicide attack against the Israeli embassy in Baku. Local guards were killed but there were no Israeli casualties. The organization, whose leaders had shared training camps with al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan, carried out the attack as part of its having adopted al-Qaeda objectives. In another attack, in February 2008, an al-Qaeda cell in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) opened fire on the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania. The attack ended with the wounding of five local employees and citizens, without any Israeli casualties. AQIM, which in September 2007 announced its merger with al-Qaeda, publicly assumed responsibility for the attack.⁶ Another attack on a target identified with Israel was carried out in Mumbai by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT, "The Army of the Pure") as part of a broader attack against local Indian targets and tourists. One of the targets attacked was the Chabad House, famous as a Jewish locale that regularly hosts Israelis. The deadly attack left more than 160 dead, including some 30 foreigners, six of whom were Israelis and Jews. To date al-Qaeda's direct involvement in the coordinated attacks has not been proven, but it is well known that LeT maintains contact with al-Qaeda and that in the past its people provided logistical support for the person who attacked the synagogue in Tunisia. In addition, the organization has in recent years expanded its activities and redefined its targets in accord with the objectives of global jihad.⁷

The trend of local al-Qaeda affiliate organizations to expand the target lists to include Israel and Jews as a result of organizations forging closer relationships and adopting a global jihadist doctrine, even though previously such targets were not specifically defined for attack, is evident also in the Arabian Peninsula and in Africa. For example, Sa'id Ali Jabir

al-Khathim al-Shihri, the deputy commander of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP, a union of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and al-Qaeda in Yemen), called for attacking targets in Israel and among its supporters around the world, and especially blocking Israel's access to the Red Sea.⁸ Likewise, the leader of the Somali al-Shabab announced on November 1, 2009 that his organization had established a special unit called the al-Quds Brigade, which would focus on attacking Israeli interests in Africa and also infiltrate Israeli territory and the Gaza Strip in order to help "free the Islamic holy places."⁹

On the other hand, in recent years Bin Laden and his deputy and al-Qaeda's most prominent spokesman, Ayman Zawahari, made do with ever more strident verbal attacks on Israel and Jews. These attacks are generally made in the context of diatribes about the "Jewish-crusader alliance" against Muslims, with emphasis on Israel's aggressive policy towards the Palestinians.¹⁰ Because in al-Qaeda's view Israel's existence depends entirely on the United States, the organization sees the weakening of the United States and its exit from the Middle East as moves that would of necessity lead to the disappearance of the Zionist entity from the world. This is another possible explanation for the relatively low rank Israel occupies in the priorities of terrorist acts carried out by the organization. At the same time, al-Qaeda understands full well that any terrorist act against Israel would earn much profitable, sought-after propaganda among the Arab and Muslim public. Such support is important to al-Qaeda, in particular as a result of the growing criticism it has incurred because of its indiscriminate attack on civilian targets, Western as well as Arab, and the growing number of Muslim victims in these actions.

Al-Qaeda Approaches Israel

In recent years it seems that al-Qaeda, assisted by regional confederates, is stepping up its efforts to strike Israel in its borders in order to harm the Israeli public. It is also trying to harm Israelis visiting Arab countries with which Israel has diplomatic relations.¹¹ Several attacks against Israeli tourists some years ago in Jordan and Egypt, especially in the Sinai Peninsula, were attributed to global jihadists.

In addition, rockets have been fired at Israel from Jordan and Lebanon, and Lebanon is still a threat arena for global jihadists involved

in rocket fire at Israel. In 2008, some rockets attributed to the al-Ansar Formation, identified with global jihad, were fired at Israel.¹² During the IDF operation in the Gaza Strip (December 27, 2008-January 17, 2009), a number of rockets were fired from southern Lebanon at the north of Israel; some were discovered before they were launched.¹³ This type of fire continued sporadically in 2009 and in 2010. At this stage, it is unclear if the attackers are global jihadists, but the risk of continuing rocket fire remains. Significantly, Bin Laden, who views Lebanon as a convenient springboard for al-Qaeda and its affiliates to attack Israel, has harshly denounced Hizbollah and Iran, as he suspects them of being partners in an Israeli-American plot to plan the Second Lebanon War. According to Bin Laden, this war was meant to prevent his organization and affiliates from approaching Israel via its border with Lebanon, as determined by the ceasefire agreement and by UN Security Council Resolution 1701.¹⁴

Gaza is another arena of activity by local elements identifying with global jihad. In the Strip, there are several groups such as the Army of Islam (based by and large on the Durmush clan), the Sword of Islam, and the Army of Believers—al-Qaeda in Palestine. These groups – estimated at several dozen operatives at the most – engage in sporadic rocket launches and abductions of foreign nationals, burning down schools, harassing internet cafés, and activity directed at maintaining morality.

Al-Qaeda's hope that Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007 would allow its supporters convenient access to engage in anti-Israel activity has not been realized. Because of Hamas's desire to maintain its monopoly on force operation within and from the Gaza Strip, it prevented groups identifying with global jihad in Gaza from operating autonomously against Israel without permission, out of concern that this might embroil it in a confrontation with Israel at a time and place inconvenient from its perspective. While Hamas has allowed al-Qaeda operatives to enter the Gaza Strip¹⁵ and has even allowed groups aligned with it to launch an occasional rocket against Israel, when any of these groups has tried to challenge Hamas's authority, Hamas has not hesitated to use force to suppress them. This is what happened to the Durmush clan (January 2007);¹⁶ this was also the case in a violent incident in Rafah in August 2009 when as the result of a fiery, anti-Hamas sermon given by the leader of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the imam of the mosque in Rafah, Hamas security forces used violence against organization

members who had barricaded themselves in the mosque.¹⁷ Twenty-four people were killed and more than 130 injured in this incident.

Despite the confrontations between Hamas and various global jihadist groups in the Gaza Strip, members of the Jaljalat (as the global jihadists in the Gaza Strip are known) continue trying to harm Israel. In June 2009, suicide operatives belonging to Jund Ansar Allah (Army of Allah Supporters) attacked, riding booby-trapped horses; they were hoping to abduct Israeli soldiers. The attempt was foiled without casualties to the Israeli side.¹⁸ Individuals identified with global jihad in Judea and Samaria, as well as Israeli Arabs of Bedouin extraction, were named in 2008 as having tried to band together in order to commit terrorist attacks, but their plans were foiled.¹⁹

The difficulty encountered by al-Qaeda in its attempt to act against Israel from its borders stems in part from the fact that Israel's neighbors, first and foremost Jordan and Egypt, who are also fighting the increased threat coming from global jihadists against their regimes and in their sovereign territories, are acting decisively to stop their activity and defend their citizens and tourists. Syria and Lebanon are acting resolutely against global jihadists' intention to operate against Israel in or from their areas, as a result of concerns about becoming embroiled in a confrontation with Israel.

In conclusion, Israel and Jews will continue to serve as targets of al-Qaeda and global jihad. It is clear that their efforts to attack will not stop, and thus foiling activity is the primary defense against them. This necessitates increasing the capabilities of the intelligence services and the IDF to foil activity on Israel's borders and within its sovereign territory and increasing cooperation with the intelligence and security services of Israel's allies. The joint global interest to defeat the extremist, militant Islamic elements of global jihad, representing a threat to Israel's enemies as well, has so far helped to curb or dull the harm done to Israel. However, as demonstrated by the attack against the Israeli airplane in Mombasa, these efforts are not always sufficient and at times only luck has prevented a more painful blow. Therefore, Israel is required to maintain constant vigilance in the face of these dangers and lend active assistance to the international campaign against al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The success of this campaign will to a large extent determine the level of the future threat to Israel's interests at home and abroad.

Notes

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