Is al-Qaeda Closing In?

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Over the past year and especially in recent months, senior members of the Israeli defense establishment have charged that there has been a significant escalation of the threat posed by al-Qaeda towards Israel. For example, according to the head of IDF Intelligence in comments made at the Knesset's Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee in January 2007, between dozens and hundreds of trained al-Qaeda members with explosives expertise were sent to the region by the order of Ayman Zawahiri, Bin Laden's deputy, as part of the organization's deployment in the states bordering Israel, namely, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria.[1] In March this year, there were reports of a new organization called Fatah al-Islam, numbering several dozen members from Arab states and aligned with al-Qaeda, which had already been involved in violent confrontations with the Lebanese army and was preparing for terrorist activity.[2]

In the months after the disengagement from Gaza there were reports of a threatening presence of al-Qaeda activists in the occupied territories, particularly in the Gaza region,[3] which apparently indicated seeds of a consolidation between global and local fundamentalism forces. These observations followed previous warnings voiced by a number of defense officials[4] and by defense commentators with background in intelligence[5] who claimed that there were growing signs that al-Qaeda was tightening its grip around Israel. Some were even cited as saying that al-Qaeda was expected to attack Israel during 2006.[6] All these warnings suggest that there is an immediate and growing threat to Israel's security from al-Qaeda, and this danger necessitates new preparations to thwart the organization.

This essay argues that the threat posed by al-Qaeda to Israel is not new,[7] and that the current situation is the continuation of a gradual process begun by the organization in 2000 of expanding operations against Israelis and Jews. At this stage the sporadic events in Israel's neighboring states do not represent any qualitative shift in the situation that demands excessive alarm among Israeli residents. Necessary, rather, is intelligence and preventive awareness that is already a prerequisite of the Israeli intelligence and defense

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systems pitted against a dangerous enemy that is constantly looking to carry out terrorist attacks and kill large numbers of Israelis and Jews.

Al-Qaeda vs. Israel: From Ideological Grudge to Active Aggression

In order to examine the charge of an overall increase in the al-Qaeda threat against Israeli and Jewish targets, what follows is a brief review of the connection between the ideological basis of the organization's activities and the practical implementation of operations since the organization was created in the late 1980s and until recent times, which ostensibly embody the heightened threat.

The philosophy of al-Qaeda and its affiliates as expressed in the organization's declarations was and remains fundamentally anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli, and in essence is not any different from any extremist Islamic element that preceded it. In its eyes, Jews are part of a worldwide plot whereby they collaborate with the Christians (who are called "Crusaders"). Over time, the "Judeo-Christian plot" was joined by other enemies, including Muslim heretics. These include principally the Shiites and "traitors" from among the Sunni Muslims, and all of them together comprise an enemy that must be battled until the bitter end.[8] According to this approach, Israel is the political embodiment of the plot, and it was intentionally placed in the region like a bone in the throat of the Muslim world. As such, it must be combated and destroyed, and the Jews must be driven from the region. This is to be achieved through painful terror operations that, al-Qaeda contends, will weaken the Jewish state's patrons and will prove to millions of Muslims and their potential supporters that Israel is ultimately a weak and temporary state, a shadow of its image of invincible military might.[9]

In practical terms, until the beginning of 2000, the venomous rhetoric aimed at Israel and the Jews was translated into little or no terrorist activity. Only a very small number of attacks were planned, mainly by terror groups and networks supported by al-Qaeda in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, and the vast majority of attacks were prevented.[10] In 2000, a new pattern began to emerge that reflected both an organizational decision and a fundamental improvement in al-Qaeda's operational readiness.

Bin Laden, who settled in Afghanistan in 1996, intensified his organization's efforts to carry out terrorist activities through operatives under his direct command. At the same time he set up an extensive military-terrorist and indoctrination training facility that succeeded in recruiting cadres of qualified activists to the global terror market who were eager to act in the name of the fundamentalist Islamic ideology of global jihad. These activists, some instructed by al-Qaeda and others inspired by it, focused their operations against elements defined by al-Qaeda leaders as their sworn enemies. Israel and the Jews were not yet marked as a prime target for terror attacks of global jihad groups and its terror networks, principally because of the large number of enemies spread out over a very wide geographical region. In fact, the number of parties defined as enemies of global jihad grew steadily due to the escalation and expansion of the confrontation between them and the rest of the world. Meanwhile the means and quality personnel available to al-Qaeda and its affiliates were not unlimited. Nonetheless, with time and as the involvement of al-Qaeda and its affiliates spread and their confidence grew, efforts to strike against Israel and targets identified with it also increased.[11] This was mainly a result of the understanding by al-Qaeda leaders that delivering a substantial blow against Israel would also likely gain the support of those who generally objected to the indiscriminate terror activities carried out by the organization against Arab and Western targets.

Heightened activity against Israel and the Jews began in 2000 when attempts were made to attack Israeli targets in Australia during the Olympic Games (June), and a terror attack was attempted against a Jewish target in France (December 2000). Both were prevented. That same year a senior member of al-Qaeda sent Richard Colvin Reid, a British citizen and son of a Jamaican immigrant, to Israel to collect information on Israeli targets as part of a feasibility study on terror attacks in Israel in general and on Israeli airports in particular. Reid was subsequently involved, by means of an explosives-laden shoe, in an attempted suicide attack in 2001 on an American Airlines plane. There were attempts to send Palestinians (Nabil Ukal and Saad Hindawi) at the end of their training in Afghanistan to establish a terror network in the West Bank and Gaza (the first half of 2000).[12] The possibility was also examined of sending a Saudi suicide pilot to bomb Eilat, and terror attacks were attempted on Israeli targets in Jordan by units sent by

Zarkawi. These were prevented by the Jordanian security forces before the war erupted in Iraq.

The clearest evidence that al-Qaeda under Bin Laden was looking to unleash its full force against Israel was the attack on Israeli tourists in Mombassa (Kenya) in November 2002. The terror cell sent to Kenya by the al-Qaeda command – which was helped by a local infrastructure – fired missiles at an Arkia passenger plane that was taking off but missed their mark. At the same time, a vehicle driven by a suicide operative attacked a hotel where Israelis were staying and killed fifteen people, including three Israelis. Only due to a technical operational failure that prevented the downing of the plane and the subsequent deaths of hundreds of passengers was the attack in Mombassa (which was intended to be Israel's 9/11) not engraved in the minds of the Israeli public or the world as proof that Israel is an al-Qaeda priority. It is clear that had the masterminds succeeded in their original plan, there would be no question of whether al-Qaeda presents a danger to Israeli and Jewish targets.

Post-War Iraq as a Means of Escalating Terror Operations

As the post-war campaign developed in Iraq, al-Qaeda and its affiliates focused their efforts on pursuing and wearing down their enemies there, to gain victory or create an image of victory in Iraq, the global jihad's current principal arena of combat. At the same time, they maintained their efforts to carry out terror attacks against all their enemies and, at an accelerated pace, against Israel and the Jews. These efforts were carried out according to the operational capacity at their disposal, which, again, is not unlimited.

From 2003 al-Qaeda and its affiliates carried out a number of terror attacks against Israel and Jewish targets, most through suicide bombers. Two British citizens of Pakistani origin who worked for Hamas took part in a suicide attack on the Mike's Place club in Tel Aviv (April 2003). These suicide bombers came from the same terror cell that carried out the attack on the London Underground on July 7, 2005. The specific link of the two suicide bombers with the London attackers and with the al-Qaeda command is not entirely clear. The other terror attacks carried out by global jihad elements against Israel and/or Jews concentrated on the Middle East and Europe. The most prominent

among them were an attack on a synagogue, restaurant, and banquet hall in Morocco (May 2003) and an attack on a synagogue in Istanbul (November 2003).

In Egypt, Israeli tourists were attacked in Sinai (at Nuweiba and Ras al-Sultan in October 2004), and at hotels in Sharm el-Sheikh (July 2005). In Jordan, simultaneous suicide attacks at three hotels killed over fifty people (November 2005). According to Zarkawi, who claimed responsibility, the attacks were aimed at Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans who frequented the hotels in question, where they purportedly plotted against the Muslims.[13] There were also a number of sporadic rocket attacks against Israel from Jordan and Lebanon. The first operation was carried out by a small group sent by Zarkawi from Iraq to Jordan, and the second was carried out by a cell that may have received assistance from Ousbat el-Ansar – a loosely structured organization that mainly operates in the area around Sidon and is identified with the global jihad and the al-Qaeda organization.

In the past year there were reports in Israel of attempts by elements aligned with the global jihad to exploit the chaos created in Gaza following the Israeli withdrawal, in order to consolidate a local infrastructure there and recruit Palestinian members in West Bank towns for future terrorist activity.[14] This claim was also sounded by Palestinian spokespeople, particularly from among Fatah, who claim that operatives aligned with al-Qaeda were responsible for the attack on the American School in Gaza (April 2007) and the kidnapping of BBC reporter Alan Johnston.[15]

Is the Threat to Israel More Severe?

Israeli intelligence may possess advisory information not open to the public about actual intentions by al-Qaeda and its affiliates to escalate terrorist activity against Israel and Israeli targets that justifies their assessment of a new and heightened danger. Otherwise, it appears that the assessments of the security officials as quoted in the media emerge from a severe situation assessment based on the attacks of the last two years in Israel's neighboring countries and on the sporadic events aimed at Israel from their borders. In the last two years, Bin Laden's deputy, the most vociferous and prominent of al-Qaeda spokesmen, has connected Israel to global jihad priorities. In an address marking the fifth anniversary of 9/11, Zawahiri focused the global jihad's strategic priorities on two

preferred areas of activity – the Persian Gulf and Israel.[16] Yet Zawahiri also declared that Israel's turn will come only after the global jihad's previous tasks have been completed, including victory over the Americans in Iraq, maintaining the jihad in the countries around Iraq, and spreading terror against regimes in the Arab states around Israel.

It seems, therefore, that the main area of concern for the Israeli security authorities, as indicated in an article written by the senior military commentator of *Haaretz*, is that al-Qaeda will try to introduce new recruits into Israel who have authentic Western nationalities and no terrorist backgrounds, allaying suspicion about their connections with dramatic terrorist attacks.[17] It is well known that al-Qaeda's operations are marked by initiative and are designed to cause mass destruction and death. As al-Qaeda's capability and its determination to cause the mass murder of Israelis is a proven fact, it seems that this is the principal referred threat facing Israel, which while not new should naturally not be treated lightly.

The challenge posed by al-Qaeda and its affiliates to the Israeli intelligence and security services is part of a range of terrorism challenges facing Israel. One can divide the challenge of al-Qaeda and its affiliates and the potential counter measures into different arenas. On its borders Israel faces the threat of global jihad elements that are drawing closer to Israel's neighboring countries. Israel shares common interests with its peace partners – Egypt and Jordan – and they cooperate together to preempt threats by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. This threat is a constant source of concern for the local security services, which devote significant resources and efforts to combat it. Israel helps these countries and in turn is helped by them to neutralize the threat against it and its interests emanating from within their sovereign territory.

The situation is more complex with regard to dealing with global jihad elements in Lebanon. On the one hand, the Lebanese government has proven its difficulty in dealing with sub-state elements operating against Israel in and from its territory. The deployment of the Lebanese army along Israel's border with Lebanon following the confrontation with Hizbollah has mitigated this threat. In addition, Lebanon has no interest in being dragged into another confrontation with Israel as a result of a provocation by global jihad elements that are yet limited in power, which may help to

prevent action being taken against Israel from Lebanese territory. The Lebanese army's operations against Fatah al-Islam in Tripoli are an example of this.[18]

Preventing operations against Israel by global jihad elements in Syria is largely contingent on Syria's interest in stopping them, and at this stage it seems that this interest does exist. Global jihad elements in Iraq are apt to become a threat to Israel, particularly if areas in Iraq emerge that are not under the control of the central government and may become refuge areas and training arenas for directing terrorism against Israel.

The situation in the West Bank and particularly the anarchy in Gaza may encourage the infiltration of elements aligned with global jihad, known to take advantage of non-governed areas. At this stage, however, there is no evidence of the creation of an active and extensive infrastructure of global jihad elements. The dire forecasts of Gaza's becoming an al-Qaeda center for operations that enjoys close collaboration with Palestinian Islamic organizations have not materialized thus far. Moreover, the danger embedded in such cooperation, if it occurs, is part of the challenge these organizations pose to Israel in any case.

The global jihad threat against Israel proper thus necessitates constant and routine awareness concerning extreme scenarios or possible changes that may occur in the arenas close to Israel, but this does not represent a new situation, compared with what Israel has dealt with in recent years.

With regard to threats against Israel in the international arena, the tangible threat to Israeli and Jewish targets has existed and has been common knowledge for some time. Prevention of terror threats against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad is based on intelligence that Israel obtains through its own means and via international cooperation. This cooperation has been maintained for many years, and in recent years, particularly following 9/11, it has even been upgraded due to the shared sense of many countries around the world of the danger posed by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. There is keen awareness among security elements of the varied dangers that Israeli targets abroad face from the global jihad. In view of these threats, situation assessments and periodic examinations of the threat level against Israel and Jews are conducted in order to prepare in the most efficient manner possible for both routine and random dangers. Such activities, which are naturally confidential, are reflected in occasional alerts issued by the

counter terror command in the prime minister's office, and in announcements about dangerous areas for Israelis. It is clear that all these efforts do not guarantee complete prevention of individual terrorist attacks.

At this stage there is thus no apparent reason for Israel to announce a significant increase in the threat posed by al-Qaeda and the global jihad, beyond the regular and ongoing threat they pose to Israel. Nevertheless, in view of the possibility that coalition forces headed by the United States could leave Iraq, which would grant the global jihad a sense of victory and strength, all global jihad adversaries – including Israel – would be liable to encounter heightened terror activities of "Iraqi alumni," who would be dispatched around the world to intensify terrorist activity. If al-Qaeda declares Israel to be the next jihad arena and a main target of its operations, and if it manages to recruit its pool of affiliates to this end – which has not happened thus far – there is liable to be a major change in the threat level towards Israel. If this occurs, then there would be justification for determining that "al-Qaeda is closing in" and taking special precautions against the new threat.

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