

# Global Jihad: Approaching Israel's Borders?

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Throughout the many years of its existence, al-Qaeda has considered Israel and the Jews, along with the United States, the main enemy of Islam, and a member of what it calls “the Jewish-Crusader alliance.” However, despite the virulent, militant rhetoric that the organization and its affiliates have directed at Israel and Jews, which they perceive as one and the same, in practice they have carried out relatively few terrorist attacks against Israel and Jews. Osama Bin Laden chose to direct the operational strategy of his organization and that of its global jihad affiliates primarily against the United States – deemed the stronger party in the said alliance – with the goal of forcing it to withdraw from the Middle East. In this way, he believed, America’s sponsorship and political, military, and economic support for its allies in the Middle East would cease, which in turn would bring about not only the end of the dictatorial Arab regimes that deviated from the path of Islam, but also the end of Israel, the main US protectorate in the Middle East.

However, the relatively low number of operations against Israel and Jews relative to other fronts is not necessarily indicative of the organization’s planning and posture. In fact, while al-Qaeda and its affiliates have intensified their operations against the United States and its allies in the West in the past decade, they have also engaged in a not-insignificant number of plans and attempts – primarily unsuccessful – to attack Israeli and Jewish targets, particularly abroad. The impact on Israelis and Jews abroad was limited because intelligence and security officials around the world were successful in thwarting al-Qaeda efforts, and because the power of the organization and its affiliates was limited by

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a lack of resources resulting from the large number of tasks and obstacles they confronted.

As such, plans by al-Qaeda and its global jihad affiliates to launch terror attacks against Israel along its borders were stopped by Egypt and Jordan, states with peace treaties with Israel. These governments considered al-Qaeda and its affiliates dangerous enemies that must be rebuffed. They dealt harshly with them, which in turn provided protection to Israeli targets within those countries, and at the same time they also blocked the organization from attacking Israel from their joint borders. Israel's enemies acted similarly: Syria prevented al-Qaeda from operating in its territory and channeled its activities towards Iraq; Lebanon and Hizbollah prevented global jihad activists from operating along Israel's northern border; and Hamas, the sovereign in Gaza, largely restrained most of the operations of Salafist jihadi organizations in the Gaza Strip, other than allowing periodic, sporadic mortar fire and Qassam rockets at southern Israel or channeling their activity towards the Sinai. This unnatural "defense belt" provided by Israel's enemies resulted primarily from their fear that terrorist activity against Israel would spark a harsh Israeli military response, which would be likely to escalate into an undesirable all-out military battle.

The turmoil in the Arab world in the past two years, including in several states bordering Israel, has created a different political-security environment for Israel, which is less stable and more dangerous than what Israel experienced in the preceding three decades. The purpose of this article is to draw a picture of the emerging threat on Israel's borders from al-Qaeda and its affiliates, examine whether the threat has fundamentally changed, and consider how Israel should prepare in face of this threat.

### **The Threat from the South: Sinai and Gaza**

The overthrow of the Mubarak regime in Egypt was a strategic target for al-Qaeda and a longstanding personal goal for a large number of its senior officials of Egyptian origin, especially the organization's current leader, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. The governmental vacuum created in Egypt between Mubarak's ouster and the establishment of the new government headed by President Mohamed Morsi allowed global jihad elements to take advantage of the new situation. The escape and release of their operatives from prison, where they were serving long terms for

past activity, allowed these organizations to fortify their ranks with loyal members with operational experience. Furthermore, the governmental vacuum in Sinai helped supporters of global jihad organize in an attempt to establish an autonomous entity under Islamic law, while exploiting the Egyptian government's lack of effective control over the region.

While as long ago as 2004-6 there were several terror attacks in Sinai against tourist targets in Taba, Ras al-Shitan, Nuweiba, and Sharm el-Sheikh carried out by operatives identified with the global jihad, the aggressive counter-terror activity by Egyptian security officials during the Mubarak regime suppressed the wave of terrorism for a number of years. However, in the past year, following the fall of the Mubarak regime, a number of groups have appeared that identify with al-Qaeda and global jihad, and have stepped up their operations in Sinai with the goal of enforcing their control in the region and challenging the Egyptian government.

One of these groups is Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, an organization whose ideology and rhetoric, and even its targets, are identified with those of al-Qaeda. Thus, for example, in taking responsibility for a number of attacks against the gas pipeline from Egypt to Israel, the group claimed that the attacks were designed to prevent the plundering of the natural resources that God gave to the Muslims, which have been sold at a loss to the enemies of Islam, and in particular, Israel. Indeed, videos in which the organization takes responsibility for attacks include segments with al-Zawahiri praising the repeated attacks on the gas pipeline and calling upon the new Egyptian government to annul the peace treaty with Israel and apply Islamic law in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> The organization promised to carry out such actions in the future as well.<sup>2</sup> In taking responsibility for Grad rockets fired at Eilat in August 2012, the organization promised that it would strike at the heart of Israeli cities and continue to fight the enemies of God to the bitter end.<sup>3</sup> It also took responsibility for the two deadliest attacks carried out on the Egyptian-Israeli border: the attack on August 18, 2011, on Highway 40 leading to Eilat, in which eight Israelis were killed, and the attack on August 5, 2012 on the Israeli-Egyptian border, in which sixteen Egyptian border guards were killed, and only the action of IDF soldiers, aided by a helicopter, led to the killing of the terrorist squad and prevented more casualties in Israel.

A second group, Ansar al-Jihad (which is apparently identical to the Salafist Front in the Sinai Peninsula), declared its establishment on

December 20, 2011, and swore allegiance to Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri, the new leader of al-Qaeda, while promising to continue in the path of fallen al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden. In the organization's founding declaration, its members announced the targets of their operations, stating that they "swear by Allah the Great who raised the sky without pillars, that America nor those who live in America will ever enjoy security as long as we don't live it in reality in Palestine and before all the disbelieving armies get out of the Land of Muhammad."<sup>4</sup> Many organization activists are former Egyptian prisoners who belonged to Egyptian Islamic Jihad (al-Zawahiri's group in Egypt) and joined the new organization after their release from prison with the intention of promoting the vision they shared with al-Qaeda of establishing an Islamic caliphate in Egypt.

Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in Sinai<sup>5</sup> is the oldest organization in Sinai, and it also identifies with al-Qaeda's world view. The organization was established by a Bedouin dentist from the al-Swarka tribe who lived in the el-Arish area in northern Sinai. He was killed in 2006 in an exchange of fire with Egyptian forces, following Egypt's charge that the organization was involved in terror attacks against tourists between 2004 and 2006. A declaration published recently on his behalf declared that "Egypt and Mount Sinai have entered a new stage in which, with Allah's help, they will be the center of a confrontation with the enemies of God: the Jews and their partners."

The Mujahidin Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem is one of the Gazan Palestinian organizations that have been most active in Sinai recently. It serves as an umbrella organization for a number of Palestinian Salafist organizations, most prominently al-Tawhid wal-Jihad,<sup>6</sup> along with a less known Gazan Salafist organization called Ansar al-Sunna.<sup>7</sup> The Mujahidin Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem took responsibility for the attack carried out in the Beer Milka area on June 18, which killed Said Fashfasha, an Israeli Arab employed in building the security fence on the border with Egypt.<sup>8</sup> The attack was carried out by a terrorist cell that had crossed the border from Egypt, buried an explosive device, and ambushed Israeli vehicles passing along the route. In a video released about a month after the event, the organization called the attack "a gift to our brethren in al-Qaeda and Sheikh Zawahiri" and a response to the killing of Bin Laden. During most of the video, the al-Qaeda flag was shown in the background, and one of the terrorists, who were of

Egyptian and Saudi origin, can be seen directly addressing al-Zawahiri and saying that the organization is continuing its commitment to and faith in the “path of jihad.” The video also notes that the organization does not recognize the international border, rather, the “border of Allah.” In a previously released video, the organization declared that it shares al-Qaeda’s goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate.<sup>9</sup> It also took responsibility for rockets fired from Gaza at southern Israeli cities in the second week of September 2012, claiming that this was to avenge the death of six activists killed in Israeli aerial attacks in response to previous fire by the organization.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to these organizations, there are older Salafist groups in Gaza that operate directly against Israel. They too use the Sinai area for their operations in order to circumvent Israel’s counter-terror operations, and to avoid involving Hamas and thereby invite an Israeli response in Gaza. Especially noteworthy among these organizations is Jaish al-Islam (the Army of Islam).<sup>11</sup> Established in 2006 by Mumtaz Dughmush after splitting off from the Popular Resistance Committees, the group is very active in rocket and other attacks against Israel, including involvement in the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit. The organization’s operations have also extended beyond Sinai, and it has sent activists to fight in Syria; this was revealed publicly when one of its members was killed in the fighting. Another prominent organization is the Popular Resistance Committees, whose members are active on both sides of the border and are in close touch with global jihad elements in Sinai. The group has been directly linked to a number of terror attacks carried out on the Egyptian border, such as the August 18, 2011 attack and the August 2012 attack on the Egyptian border guards (which is also attributed to the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis group and may thus indicate a close connection between the two groups). Evidence of these operations can be found in the demand by the Egyptians themselves that Hamas hand over senior officials of the organization suspected of involvement in the death of Egyptian soldiers.

### **The Threat from the North: Syria and Lebanon**

In the years following the invasion of Iraq by the United States-led coalition, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad chose to assist al-Qaeda and its affiliates to reach Iraq in order to fight the coalition forces. Syria was the main location in which many hundreds of volunteers affiliated with the global jihad were instructed, trained, and sent to Iraq to participate in

the jihad declared by al-Qaeda against the foreign forces and their local allies. Although the Assad regime bore all the characteristics of an infidel regime as defined by al-Qaeda, which too was to be fought and replaced by a government under Islamic law, the organization cooperated with it and even enjoyed its aid and support. In this way, al-Qaeda postponed the inevitable confrontation with the Syrian Alawite regime until a more convenient time.

However, as the violent clashes between the Syrian regime and the rebel groups increased, al-Qaeda's policy towards the future of Syria changed. Al-Zawahiri, who has never hidden his belief in Syria's central role in his vision of the establishment of the Islamic caliphate in the Levant, expressed this view on a number of occasions. In a 2006 letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who fought in Iraq, Zawahiri likened the battle to impose Islam in the Arab Levant to a bird whose wings are Egypt and Syria, and whose heart is Palestine;<sup>12</sup> in July 2011, for the first time in his role as leader of al-Qaeda, Zawahiri spoke out in a video against the Syrian regime calling on the rebels to fight Assad because he cooperated with the Americans, served as "Israel's border guard," and "abandoned" the Golan Heights.<sup>13</sup> Zawahiri stated that the struggle to bring down Assad is part of the wider regional campaign against the United States and Israel.<sup>14</sup> In another video, released following the escalation of the conflict in Syria and titled "Onward, O Lions of al-Sham,"<sup>15</sup> Zawahiri declared Syria to be a main theater of jihad. He called upon Muslims throughout the world to go to Syria to aid the local mujahidin in the campaign to oust "the murderer of murderers" who slaughtered Muslims, until the regime was overthrown. He also called for the establishment of a state that would protect the other Muslim countries, strive to liberate the Golan Heights, and persist in jihad until the flag of victory flew over the hills of occupied Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup> Finally, on the eleventh anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States, Zawahiri released another video in which he reiterated his organization's support for "jihad in Syria to establish a Muslim state" as a "basic step towards Jerusalem." According to the video, the United States continues to give the secular Baathist regime a chance out of fear that the government that would be established in Syria would be a threat to Israel.<sup>17</sup>

In February 2012, in response to Zawahiri's rallying cry, activists acting under the organizational name of Jabhat al-Nusra, associated with al-Qaeda in Iraq, arrived in Syria, and they are now considered

among the strongest organization in the battle. These activists carry out operations based on the capabilities and military experience they gained during their years of fighting in Iraq, and it appears that they are responsible for most of the especially daring and deadly attacks in Syria in recent months, particularly suicide bombings. In addition, there are also sporadic and less organized operations carried out by global jihad elements from Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Jordan, and Gaza who went to Syria independently without belonging to any group and joined the Free Syrian Army. According to various estimates, the number of fighters among the global jihad activists ranges from several hundred to several thousand.<sup>18</sup> The presence of global jihad activists in Syria has aroused fear among many in the country, including fighters from the Syrian opposition, that they will lose Western support and legitimacy for their struggle. Time will tell whether the current joint fighting will lead to cooperation in the future, or whether there will be tension and conflict between the parties if the regime falls.<sup>19</sup>

Global jihad activists have a presence in Lebanon too, but in recent years operations against Israel have been limited and have focused mainly on sporadic rocket fire at the northern border. However, over the past months, the events in Syria have caused outbreaks of violence between Salafist jihadi elements and the Shiites. The tension between the sides is manifested in shooting incidents and kidnappings. It appears that Hizbollah and blatant Iranian support for suppressing the Syrian opposition is fanning the rivalry between global jihad elements and the Shiite Hizbollah, which is considered the strongest element in Lebanon. The leader of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades in Lebanon, which went to fight in Syria, recently threatened to attack Hizbollah if it continued its operations in Syria.<sup>20</sup> This was a noteworthy manifestation of a trend that is liable to develop between the two camps in Lebanon if the fighting in Syria continues, and especially if the Assad regime falls. In the meantime, the Salafist jihadi groups in Lebanon are likely to devote part of their operations to heating up the border with Israel, both as a challenge to Israel and a challenge to Hizbollah's hegemony over political and military life in Lebanon.

### **A Potential Threat from the East: Salafist Elements in Jordan**

In spite of the isolated attacks in Jordan against Israeli targets, since the signing of the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty the kingdom has served as

an important player in neutralizing terrorist activity by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, especially Zarqawi, against Israeli targets in the country, and attacks from the Jordanian border aimed at Israel.

Since the ouster of Saddam Hussein, the Hashemite regime in Jordan has been forced to contend with the consequences of the campaign in Iraq, and in the past year and a half, with the shockwaves from the turmoil in Arab countries as well. Today, Jordan is beset by internal unrest in the kingdom. This is manifested in protests where the al-Qaeda flags are flown, leaflets are distributed detailing the Salafist jihadi demands of the government, calls are made to establish an Islamic caliphate and apply *sharia* as the law of the kingdom, and support is expressed for Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (one of the ideological fathers of global jihad and Zarqawi's spiritual leader). In the past, the regime had suppressed such demonstrations quickly and with an iron fist, and anyone who dared to express such sentiments publicly was immediately imprisoned. Because of the Arab spring, the increased power of opposition elements, and the boldness of the Islamic parties, the king is wary of taking hasty repressive measures and has been forced to implement political changes in his government and refrain from severe economic measures in order not to cause further tension. Thus far, King Abdullah has succeeded in maneuvering the opposition and preventing deterioration in the internal security situation. However, it is possible that if the Syrian regime falls, he will be forced to confront the consequences of this development within the kingdom as well, including violent activity by Salafist jihad opposition elements that are liable to try to direct their operations against Israel. At this point, security officials in Jordan will presumably continue to block attempts to attack Israel, but the challenge is expected to be greater than what they have dealt with successfully until now.

## Conclusion

The strengthening of global jihad elements and Salafist jihadi terrorist organizations in Syria and Sinai, and perhaps Lebanon and Jordan in the future as well, confronts Israel with a serious threat of increased terrorism from the joint borders. This is not an existential threat, but it can present a complex political and security challenge for the country's leaders. This challenge does not stem from the exceptional military-terrorist capability of the adversaries. It is due rather to the large number of fronts and in particular, to the especially dramatic and brutal nature of



the operations of global jihad elements, which ignore the considerations that generally restrained organizations operating under the auspices of supporting states. This lack of restraint has the potential for friction and escalation in relations between Israel and its neighbors. The goal of these organizations, beyond harming Israel, is for relations to deteriorate and friction to escalate to the point of armed conflict between the sides. As a result, Israel must prepare for terrorist activity that is likely to include attacks by terror squads that aim to carry out mass killing through various means, such as missiles at civilian planes (mainly from the Sinai), rockets at hotels in Eilat or in the north of Israel, and infiltration of civilian towns.

In the eastern sector, there is no need for special acute preparations at this stage. However, the already unstable situation in the Hashemite kingdom makes it necessary to prepare for a future change in its stability, and of course, requires closer monitoring of events and closer security cooperation. This is not the situation in the southern and northern sectors. At this point, Egyptian President Morsi and Egyptian security forces are making efforts to restrain the global jihad elements in the Sinai. This can be seen in Operations Eagle and Sinai, which were a response to the August 2012 attack on the border guards, and included tanks and helicopters, as well as an attempt at dialogue with representatives of the Bedouins and the Salafist organizations. However, in spite of these efforts to stop the wave of terror in Sinai, the September 21, 2012 attack on a UN base 15 kilometers from the border with Israel by armed global jihad elements shows how weak government control is and how difficult it is to enforce Egyptian sovereignty there. It appears that treating the root problem of terrorism in Sinai requires that significant financial resources be invested in the long neglected Bedouin infrastructure and population. At the same time, an effective intelligence infrastructure must be built, and ongoing operational activity by trained special forces is needed to stop the momentum of the global jihad organizations operating in Sinai. Until such activity is carried out, it appears that Israel will be forced to contend with further attempted attacks and even escalation, in spite of the Egyptian activity.

Therefore, Israel must adopt a firm and decisive policy for stopping the activities of terrorist elements in Sinai and Gaza. It must make clear to Hamas and to Egypt that it will not tolerate continued terrorist activity from Sinai, and that it will act directly against those who plan it based on knowledge of their locations and their plans before the attacks are

carried out. It is essential that Israel make clear to Hamas that not only is it responsible for preventing terrorism from Gaza; Israel will also consider it responsible for all terror activity carried out by organizations from the Gaza Strip against Israel, even if launched through Sinai, and such actions will lead to a response in Gaza. At the same time, Israel must cooperate with Egypt and encourage it to act effectively against Egyptian and Gazan Salafist terror organizations operating in Sinai. In addition, Israel and Egypt share an interest vis-à-vis Hamas: to preserve Egyptian sovereignty and prevent escalation in the south, which could be expected to occur if direct terrorism from Gaza and indirect terrorism from Gaza by way of Sinai continue.

In the northern sector, there is still a lack of clarity concerning the manner in which the violent conflict in Syria will end. Will the current regime survive? What will be the identity of the next government? How much control will it have over the country? In addition, the impact of the events in Syria on Lebanon is unclear, as is the nature of the resulting power struggles in Lebanon between the main Shiite powers and Salafist jihadi elements, whose signs are already evident. However, it appears that in spite of the ambiguity, the danger of operations by global jihad

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elements located today in Syria and focused on the struggle to bring down the Assad regime against Israel already exists, and some of them are liable to try to exploit the absence of effective Syrian security forces that will restrain their operations against Israel. This situation may grow significantly worse if the Syrian regime falls or if there is an ongoing governmental vacuum in Syria. In that case, global jihad elements are likely to attempt to realize Zawahiri's vision and operate steadily against Israel from its northern border, without interference from the "traitor who sold the Golan Heights."

A similar pattern may emerge in Lebanon, especially if the Assad regime falls. In that case, internal struggles are likely to develop in Lebanon between global jihad elements and Hizbollah, which will lose a major ally. Thus, the restraint Hizbollah has imposed on operations against Israel that are not its own or are not carried out with its permission and under its supervision is liable

to disappear, and global jihad elements are likely to operate against Israel more intensively than in the past. Such operations would be intended to hurt Israel in order to embroil Lebanon and Hizbollah and drag them into a conflict with Israel. Given this situation, Israel must prepare defensively in accordance with the danger brewing on the Syrian border, and possibly also in Lebanon. In Syria, a response to a targeted strike will be required against global jihad elements, along with a demand that the Syrian government exercise its sovereignty as long as it exists, while in Lebanon, a response should be addressed to the government and its components.

Today, it appears that what was once considered a dark and unlikely scenario of al-Qaeda and the global jihad turning into a direct threat to Israel on its borders is becoming a reality. The question whether this process will be accompanied by an official, public call by al-Qaeda leader Zawahiri to his followers to come and fight in Israel, and what the impact of such a move would be on the level of danger to Israel, depends to a large extent on the determination of Israel's neighbors to prevent Zawahiri's followers from operating against it.

## Notes

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- 4 Bill Roggio, "Ansar al Jihad in the Sinai Peninsula Announces Formation," *The Long War Journal*, December 22, 2011, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/12/ansar\\_al\\_jihad\\_in\\_th.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/12/ansar_al_jihad_in_th.php).

- 5 An organization by this name operates in Gaza, and the two groups have close ties.
- 6 Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in Gaza was established in 2008 by Hisham Saidani with the inspiration of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a senior al-Qaeda ideologue who influenced global jihad activists, especially Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was his student in Jordan. The organization was involved in the past in attacks on the IDF in the Gaza Strip and in April 2011, in the kidnapping of Vittorio Arrigoni, an Italian journalist who was executed against the backdrop of the organization's struggle with Hamas, which had arrested its leader Saidani about a month earlier. Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad cooperates with organizations in the Sinai on activities including weapons smuggling; on moving weapons and terrorist operatives through the extensive system of tunnels that connect Rafiah in Gaza with Rafiah in Egypt, and from there to the other parts of the Sinai; and recently, on terrorist attacks as well.
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