Israel's Homegrown Islamic State Threat Grows Larger

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An ISIS terrorist. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

JNS.org – While the threat of border clashes with Islamic State terrorists fighting in the Syrian civil war has concerned Israeli leaders for some time now, the recruitment of Israeli Arabs to form their own terror cells or launch lone wolf attacks inside of Israel — akin to the Paris or San Bernardino attacks late in 2015 — has recently become a more serious threat for the Jewish state.

"This is a developing threat for Israel, the possibility that [Islamic State] will take advantage of the new recruits to study the Israeli arena and obtain information to be used for promoting terrorist activities in Israel," **Daniel Cohen**, an expert on cyber-security and a research fellow at Tel Aviv University's **Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)** think tank, told *JNS.org*.

The Israeli government's understanding of that "developing threat" threat also has significant policy implications for Israel. Member of Knesset Ayoob Kara (Likud), an Israeli Druze who serves as the country's deputy minister of regional cooperation, formerly acted as an intermediary for Arab citizens who had left Israel to fight in Syria or Iraq, offering the fighters reduced jail terms if they agreed to return home and cooperate with Israel's security services. But as the fear of Islamic State-inspired terror cells grows in Israel, that policy has changed.

"I used to work hard to dissuade people from joining ISIS, but now I say that there's no point," Kara said, *Reuters* reported.

Last month, Israel's Shin Bet security agency revealed that it had arrested five Israeli Arabs, who were residents of Nazareth, for attempting to set up a terror cell. According to the Shin Bet, the group had already started meeting, swore allegiance to

Islamic State, and even started training with live arms. Also in December, reports indicated that an Israeli Arab who had previously served in the Israel Defense Forces had joined Islamic State inside of Syria.

In October, an Israeli Arab man attempted to paraglide from Israel into Syria to join the fighting there. In July, six Israeli Arabs, including four school teachers, were arrested for supporting and spreading Islamic State ideology.

Despite efforts by the Shin Bet and the Israel Police to combat the Islamic State threat, Israeli security officials believe that several-dozen Israeli Arabs have traveled to Syria to join the fighting there.

"The profile of [Israeli Arabs fighting in Syria] is not homogeneous. Some got radicalized while studying abroad, others were inspired by social media messages," the INSS think tank's Cohen told *JNS.org*.

"Most of the departing Israeli Arabs to Syria joined the Islamic State and received military training, [and] absorbed the ideological indoctrination that accompanies the training. Generally speaking, they became more extreme in their views and perceptions, and [gain] upgraded combat skills," he added.

Israel — which is home to approximately 1.75 million Arabs, nearly 21 percent of the country's population — is increasingly concerned by the threat of Israeli Arab fighters returning home from the Syrian conflict, as well as the threat of homegrown Islamic State-inspired Arab terrorists.

"It (Islamic State's influence) is beginning to spread here as well," Israeli Intelligence Ministry Director-General Ram Ben-Barak told *Army Radio* in late December. "The ISIS scenario we worry about is ISIS cells arising in Israel to carry out terrorist attacks."

According to a recent study conducted by the University of Haifa's Professor Sammy Smooha, an expert on the Arab community in Israel, 17 percent of Israeli Arabs support Islamic State. The level of support increases to 28 percent among those who already felt sympathy with the Islamic Movement in Israel's Northern Branch, an entity that was recently outlawed by the Israeli government due to its incitement over the Temple Mount holy site.

"This is a very telling finding," Smooha told the *Jerusalem Post* in an interview about the study. "Why? Because all Arab political parties and the Islamic Movement's two factions are against Islamic State, so this means a segment of the Arab public does not agree with the consensus against Islamic State."

The factors of Israeli Arabs' sympathy towards Islamic State, the jihadist group's highly effective recruitment efforts, and social and economic gaps between Israel's Arab and Jewish communities combine to present a unique challenge to Israeli authorities.

In an attempt to improve the social and economic situation of Israeli Arabs, the Israeli government in December passed a NIS 15 billion ($3.84 billion) five-year plan to develop the Israeli Arab community and other minority populations.

The plan was spearheaded by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, and Social Equality Minister Gila Gamliel. It seeks to "advance a systematic and structural economic development plan for the minority sector," the Prime Minister's Office said.

"This is a significant addition designed to assist minority populations and reduce [societal] gaps," Netanyahu said.

At the same time, Israeli Arabs already have the lowest per-capita participation in Islamic State when compared to the Arab populations of European and Arab nations, noted Hillel Frisch, a professor in the departments of Political Studies and Middle Eastern Studies at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel.

"For example, Tunisia has presumably contributed 3,000 [Islamic State] fighters from a population of 10 million. Israeli Arabs number more than one-tenth of that [Tunisian population], but have contributed probably no more than 30 [Islamic State fighters]….Most Israeli Arabs understand both the material and political benefits of participating in the Israeli political system, and the small minority that go violent link up to local Palestinian terrorist organizations," Frisch told *JNS.org*.

Frisch also characterized Israeli Arabs' attitude on Islamic State as one of ambivalence.

"The [Israeli Arab] leadership has essentially ignored the [Islamic State] issue and focused on the bread-and-butter issues of equality and the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, characterized by bellicose anti-state rhetoric that is even inciting, but on day-to day legislative issues they cooperate with Israeli Zionist members of the Knesset," said Frisch.

Nevertheless, Islamic State has recently stepped up its rhetoric against Israel, signaling the terror group's potential increased prioritization of recruiting Israeli Arabs to either join Islamic State in Syria or launch attacks inside of Israel.

In October, an Islamic State fighter appeared in a Hebrew-language video, promising that "soon there will not be one Jew left in Jerusalem."

"We will enter Al-Aqsa mosque as conquerors, using our cars as bombs to strike the Jewish ramparts," the terrorist said in the video, adding, "Do what you will in the meantime until we reach you. Then we will charge you 10-fold for the crimes [that you have committed against the Palestinians]."

In December, Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who rarely appears in film or audio clips, recorded a 24-minute tape that included threats against Israel.

"The Jews think we forget about it and got distracted from it," the jihadist leader said. "No, oh Jews. We have not forgotten Palestine and never will."

Mirroring the terror group's efforts in other Western countries, Islamic State has tried to recruit Israeli Arabs using online and social media platforms.

"The tactic is the same like in other countries, by utilizing the Internet and social media for distributing a very effective narrative campaign that calls for immigration to the Islamic State territories. The next step is engaging a one-on-one communication by an Islamic State recruiter in an online private chat that provides anonymity," Cohen told *JNS.org*.

Yet during the current wave of Palestinian terror in Israel, Islamic State has developed another strategy to appeal to Israeli Arabs.

"A new trend that has started during the latest wave of terror in the streets of Israel [is that] Islamic State has flooded social media platforms with messages tailored to Palestinians and Israeli Arabs," Cohen said.

As such, Israel faces a new challenge in directly combating terrorists' online recruitment of its citizens. Cohen believes that the most effective way to combat this threat is working with the international community to create a legal framework and a global task force.

"Legal infrastructure should be created for this purpose, and agreements should be reached with the larger Internet," Cohen said.

"The technological ability to take practical measures exists, but without assembling an international task force, with a legal framework behind it that will take immediate effective action to remove malware (intrusive software such as viruses), it will be difficult to cope with this phenomenon," he added.

Beyond that, Cohen recommended that Israel consider direct monitoring and engagement with Islamic State recruiters online.

"This is a controversial topic right now, but creation of tools that will monitor and identify potential hazards, on the basis of an analysis of regularly collected big data, will definitely bring results and reduce the number of potential recruits to Islamic State," he said.

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