

# Terror on the Horizon?

## Renewed Activism by Anti-Peace Radicals

Dec 24, 1996



### Brief Analysis

**A**s efforts continue to broker a long-sought Israeli-Palestinian deal on Hebron redeployment by year's end, Middle East radicals and rejectionists from secular groups like the Damascus-based Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) to Islamic militant organizations like Hamas and Islamic Jihad appear to be energizing their activity and preparing for a re-emergence on the regional scene.

The PFLP and Iraq: A few weeks before the PFLP's December 11 killing of an Israeli mother and her son near Ramallah on the West Bank, a PFLP delegation paid a highly unusual visit to Baghdad to meet with Iraqi officials. Three reasons not mutually exclusive may explain this unusual PFLP-Iraq connection. First, the PFLP may have decided to step up its terrorist activities and is seeking to broaden its base of financial and tactical support. Second, Iraq may be seeking to reactivate its role in Middle Eastern terrorism with a focus on the Arab-Israeli peace process. Indeed, shortly before the PFLP delegation arrived in Baghdad, an Iraqi newspaper ominously called on all like-minded opponents of U.S. Middle East policy to "launch a jihad... and hit at anything that is American or anything that represents the Americans." A third theory, based on the idea that George Habash's PFLP would not visit Baghdad without the prior approval of the Syrian Government, holds that the visit suggests Damascus is actively considering a *modus vivendi* with its Baghdad rival, at least as far as tactical coordination against the peace process is concerned. That idea is supported by reports in the Arab press of meetings in late October between Syrian and Iraqi officials on their joint border and other signs of tentative collaboration between the two Ba'thist regimes.

In addition to this PFLP visit to Baghdad, the PFLP has raised the pitch of its anti-peace process rhetoric and held rallies to demonstrate its growing popular support. In the past few weeks, the PFLP sponsored two rallies in the West Bank and a third in a Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus. During its rally in Damascus, Habash warned that the PFLP, Nayef Hawatmeh's Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine as well as Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement) and Islamic Jihad planned to join forces in order to increase their "operations and military struggle against Israel." At one of its West Bank rallies, some 250 PFLP protesters chanted "down with the olive branch, long live the gun."

Hamas and the Islamic Jihad: In recent interviews with Arab newspapers, Hamas and Islamic Jihad officials indicate that after more than six months of relative inactivity, they are under pressure to step up their terrorist initiatives. In particular, Iran, a principal financial sponsor of Hamas, reportedly has expressed its impatience with Hamas' lack of active militancy. One report in the Spanish newspaper, *El Mundo*, quotes an Iranian official as informing Hamas that it must "stir itself from its laziness and justify the money it is getting."

Hamas may be doing just that. On December 16, a Hamas delegation visited Baghdad where it was received by Iraqi Vice President Taha Yasin Ramadan and other senior officials, according to a Jordanian newspaper. Prior to traveling to Baghdad, Yemen's official radio reported that Hamas delegations visited Damascus and Sanaa. In Yemen, the Hamas delegation was received by President Salih. (Yemen also recently hosted a conference entitled, "For the Sake of Bolstering Pan-Arab Popular Solidarity Against the Policy of Capitulation to the Zionist Enemy," with

600 attendees including representatives from Iran, Iraq, Libya, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas.)

In recent weeks, Hamas also has increased its verbal attacks against the Oslo Process and vowed to resume its "armed struggle" against Israel. Calling Jews "sons of monkeys and pigs," Hamas issued a statement on December 19 calling for, "[t]he armed struggle" and "striking the Zionist targets and escalating the intifada [as] the true response to the Nazi policies of the government of terrorist Netanyahu." It also claimed that Hamas is rebuilding "its military cells" in order to "strike a very painful blow to the Zionist entity." Hamas and the Islamic Jihad have also begun to display some popular support within the West Bank and Gaza. Supporters of the Islamic movement scored a victory over the PLO when they won the largest number of seats in a student election at Nablus' an-Najah University. Thousands also turned out on December 13 for a Hamas rally in Gaza where supporters held posters showing a bombed out Israeli bus atop the caption: "We worship God by killing Jews."

Hezbollah, Iran and Syria: Outside the territories, the state-sponsors of Hamas and Islamic Jihad were active as well. Earlier this month, Iran's Foreign Minister Velayati visited Damascus where, Iran's official radio reported, he found agreement with his Syrian hosts on "the need for all out support for the Islamic resistance against the conspiracies of the Zionist regime." Ten days after Velayati's visit, reports surfaced that Iran was sending at least three 747 jumbo cargo jets per month via Damascus airport, with supplies primarily weapons for trans-shipment to Hezbollah. Underscoring Syria's role in supporting Hezbollah's rearmament since April's Grapes of Wrath operation by Israel, Hezbollah's spiritual leader, Sheikh Fadlallah said on December 13: "Syrian President Hafez al-Assad assumed a firm and responsible stand on the side of the [Islamic] resistance; if it were not for [al-Assad's support], Israel's agents would have ... destroy[ed] the resistance."

In related reports, Syria is said to be considering a return to its policy of trying to put pressure on Jordan by stepping up its support for Jordanian opposition groups. Last summer, when King Hussein confronted al-Assad with evidence of Syrian support for anti-Jordanian terrorism, the Damascus leader professed surprise and since then the level of tension between the two countries had lowered. Recently, however, Damascus played host to a delegation of twenty-seven members of Jordan's political opposition. The purpose of the visit, according to Jordanian reports, was to "activate popular action" as well as to discuss "the need to strengthen the Jordanian-Syrian relationship at this time in particular, which is witnessing a decline in relations between Jordan and Israel." An additional development is a Jordanian report that Amman recently intercepted at least one and possibly five attempts to smuggle an undisclosed amount of "firearms and military equipment" into Jordan from a neighboring "Arab state" which, for at least one of the attempts, was identified as Syria. Earlier border interceptions of military material coming from the Bekaa Valley and smuggled through Syria and Jordan into Saudi Arabia are being investigated in connection with last June's al-Khobar bombing.

Conclusion: None of the visits, meetings, rallies and transports of weaponry listed above is unprecedented; individually, each of them can be viewed as "standard operating procedure" for terrorist groups and state-sponsors that remain committed to a violent alternative to the Arab-Israeli peace process. However, after a period of relative calm in anti-peace terrorism, this pattern of activity suggests that regional radicals are re-grouping to take advantage of the diplomatic deadlock and the deepening sense of negativism that has taken hold in many quarters of the Middle East. Indeed, as the moderates slow down or freeze the pace of normalization with Israel, this can only embolden the radicals to energize their own efforts. At a moment when the mutual trust between Arabs and Israelis is already at a low ebb, terrorist groups may be sensing vulnerability and preparing to capitalize on it.

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