

How Big Is the Islamic State Threat in Israel?

by [Ido Levy \(/experts/ido-levy\)](#)

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Brief Analysis

On March 27, two Israeli Arab men recorded themselves pledging allegiance to the leader of the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group before committing a terrorist attack in the Israeli city of Hadera, killing two and injuring several others.

This followed a [ramming and stabbing attack \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/4-killed-several-wounded-in-stabbing-attack-at-beersheba-mall-terrorist-shot-dead/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/4-killed-several-wounded-in-stabbing-attack-at-beersheba-mall-terrorist-shot-dead/) five days earlier in Beersheba that killed four and wounded two people. IS officially claimed both attacks.

These attacks have alarmed Israeli officials. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett [labeled \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/bennett-second-attack-by-isis-supporters-requires-israel-to-adapt-to-new-threat-1.10702811\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/bennett-second-attack-by-isis-supporters-requires-israel-to-adapt-to-new-threat-1.10702811) them a “new threat,” stating, “I urge citizens to continue to be vigilant. Together, we will also be able to defeat this enemy.” Internal Security Minister Omer Barlev [warned \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/minister-arab-israeli-terrorists-in-hadera-shooting-affiliated-to-islamic-state/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/minister-arab-israeli-terrorists-in-hadera-shooting-affiliated-to-islamic-state/). “It’s a very serious attack... We are witnessing an alarming awakening.” But how big really is the IS threat in Israel?

Having just written a [book \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/soldiers-end-times-assessing-military-effectiveness-islamic-state\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/soldiers-end-times-assessing-military-effectiveness-islamic-state) about the Islamic State’s way of war, I aim to put this threat in its proper context and examine its implications for Israel. The threat of IS is not an existential one, in contrast to more locally focused terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah. Nevertheless, the past several weeks have emphasized that there is a real danger for local lone wolf attacks, and Israeli security forces must be prepared to deal with these threats when they occur.

The Significance of Israel to the Islamic State and other Global Jihadist Groups

As groups associated with global jihadist ideologies, IS, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates have orchestrated virtually no operations in Israel. Even so, destroying Israel remains an important ideological objective. Some of jihadism's most important ideologues—including Abu Qatada al-Filastini, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, and Abdallah Azzam—were Palestinians whose commitment to jihad was deeply influenced by their goal to liberate Palestine from Israeli rule and turn it into an Islamic state. Azzam, for example, was the primary driver of the globalization of the anti-Soviet jihad in 1980s Afghanistan, but remained devoted to the Palestinian struggle throughout his lifetime. His decision to focus his energies on other theaters stemmed from the strength of Israeli security and his disappointment with what he perceived as other Palestinians' lax religiosity.

Contemporary Jihadist propaganda regularly references a conspiratorial Jewish-Christian alliance against Islam in which “Zionists” are singled out for special condemnation. Jihadists also view the liberation of al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem as a prime objective; al-Qaeda always devoted the last page of its English-language “[Inspire \(https://jihadology.net/2010/06/30/al-qaidah-in-the-arabian-peninsula-releases-it-first-english-language-magazine-inspire/\)](https://jihadology.net/2010/06/30/al-qaidah-in-the-arabian-peninsula-releases-it-first-english-language-magazine-inspire/)” magazine (which ran 2010-2017) to reaffirming its commitment to liberating al-Aqsa.

IS has produced plenty of examples of anti-Israel/antisemitic propaganda. In the first issue of its “[Dabiq \(https://jihadology.net/2014/07/05/al-%25E1%25B8%25A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-1/\)](https://jihadology.net/2014/07/05/al-%25E1%25B8%25A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-1/)” magazine (published July 2014) the group quoted its then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi saying that its enemies were “being mobilized by the jews [sic].” The group's Sinai branch Wilayat Sinai has especially trumpeted this motif. In May 2016, Wilayat Sinai released a 14-minute [video \(https://jihadology.net/2016/05/06/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-sinai-the-gateway-to-jerusalem-wilayat-%25E1%25B8%25A5im%25E1%25B9%25A3/\)](https://jihadology.net/2016/05/06/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-sinai-the-gateway-to-jerusalem-wilayat-%25E1%25B8%25A5im%25E1%25B9%25A3/) titled “Sinai: The Gateway to Jerusalem” in which the group presented itself as the vanguard for the conquest of Jerusalem. On January 27, 2020, IS spokesman Abu Hamza al-Quraishi [released an audiotape \(https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/isiss-spokesman-calls-muslims-around-globe-spearhead-struggle-thwart-president-trumps-plan-calls-isis-operatives-sinai-syria-attack-israeli-communities/\)](https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/isiss-spokesman-calls-muslims-around-globe-spearhead-struggle-thwart-president-trumps-plan-calls-isis-operatives-sinai-syria-attack-israeli-communities/) explicitly calling on IS fighters in Syria and Sinai, as well as its supporters around the world, to attack Israeli communities as a “new phase” of its operations in response to President Donald Trump's unveiling of his administration's Middle East peace plan. Moreover, dozens of Israeli citizens have tried to join or act on behalf of IS, with a [total of 87 IS-linked prisoners \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-isis-adherents-kill-israelis-twice-in-a-week-and-the-arab-community-wonders-why-1.10706295\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-isis-adherents-kill-israelis-twice-in-a-week-and-the-arab-community-wonders-why-1.10706295) in Israeli jails, including 19 currently.

However, actual attacks on Israel linked to IS have been few and far between. In 2014 and 2015, Israeli authorities [arrested \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-raids-west-bank-isis-cell-1.5356044\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-raids-west-bank-isis-cell-1.5356044) [multiple \(https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/cleared-for-publication-islamic-state-cell-members-arrested-in-hebron-386620\)](https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/cleared-for-publication-islamic-state-cell-members-arrested-in-hebron-386620) individuals suspected of plotting attacks and forming cells linked to IS. In January 2016, an Arab Israeli man inspired by IS [perpetrated a shooting \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/five-hurt-two-critically-in-shooting-in-tel-aviv/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/five-hurt-two-critically-in-shooting-in-tel-aviv/) on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street, killing two and wounding five. That June, two IS-inspired Palestinians [opened fire in the city's Sarona Market \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36483660\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36483660), killing four and injuring six.

Some targeting has also occurred across the border with Egypt. In February and again in November 2020, [Wilayat Sinai fighters sabotaged \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/11/isis-attack-egypt-pipeline-israel.html\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/11/isis-attack-egypt-pipeline-israel.html) an Egypt-Israel gas pipeline near the northern Sinai city of el-Arish, though no casualties were reported. The February attack came one week after the aforementioned call from IS spokesman al-Quraishi to target Israel, and the group [said it hit the pipeline \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/islamic-state-claims-purported-](https://www.timesofisrael.com/islamic-state-claims-purported-)

[attack-on-egypt-israel-gas-pipeline-in-sinai/](#) due to its “linking the Jews and the apostate Egyptian government.” Hence, Israel still looms large in the IS imagination, but primarily for those outside of Israel itself. Notably, Wilayat Sinai’s **principle target** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egypts-counterinsurgency-success-sinai>) is the Egyptian government and its main goal to carve out a IS province in Sinai. Attempts to recruit cells inside the country have failed, and the group has only been able to inspire a smattering of “lone wolf” terrorists within Israel.

The Current Spate of Attacks

The two recent attacks follow the pattern of lone wolves motivated by IS ideology. Yet several of the attacks’ features suggest that it might be time to reassess the IS threat to Israel:

- A potential renewed IS interest in Israel. The recent attacks ran parallel to an uptick in Wilayat Sinai-claimed activities. Wilayat Sinai claimed twelve attacks in the last month, more than its total claims over the five months prior, per IS’s al-Naba weekly newsletter. Al-Naba’s **latest edition** (<https://jihadology.net/2022/04/01/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-332/>) featured the attacks in Beersheba and Hadera themselves, devoting its lead editorial to praising them and urging Palestinians to abandon secular “nationalism” in favor of embracing a “pure” Islamic struggle. Last month’s **change in IS leadership** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-new-islamic-state-leader-is-brother-slain-caliph-baghdadi-sources-2022-03-11/>) might help account for this shift in focus.
- The popularity of attacking Israel. Despite ideological enmity toward IS, major Palestinian and Iran-backed extremist factions—both religious and secular—**issued statements of praise** (<https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/two-deadly-isis-inspired-terrorist-attacks-carried-out-in-southern-and-central-israel/>) for the attacks. Indeed, the shared enemy of Israel has fueled previous **Hamas-Wilayat Sinai cooperation** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-and-islamic-state-growing-cooperation-sinai>). The same shared focus could facilitate future IS endeavors.
- The danger of radicalization. The Beersheba attacker and one of the Hadera gunmen were previously imprisoned for trying to join IS, but any kind of rehabilitation they underwent before being released was clearly unsuccessful. This highlights the problems with Israel’s rehabilitation approach, which works **mostly through prisons** (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2013.747071>). According to one Israeli security official, only **about half of IS detainees** (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-s-rehab-program-for-isis-prisoners-didn-t-stop-the-be-er-sheva-assailant-1.10695456>) did not return to terrorism. More work with communities to improve prevention is needed, as is increased employment and educational support and positive involvement of families and religious figures in rehabilitation.
- The potential for copycats. Israeli defense officials believe videos posted on social media from the two IS-inspired attacks **have driven** (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-200-israeli-citizens-identify-with-the-islamic-state-defense-officials-say-1.10717895?lts=1649102500494>) a wave of copycat attacks by other individuals and groups, including the March 29 **attack in Bnei Brak** (<https://www.state.gov/terrorist-attack-in-bnei-brak/>). IS is a notoriously media-savvy organization that may leverage its media skills to amplify the impact of future attacks in inspiring further copycat violence.
- Societal conditions in Israel. In early 2020, IS inaugurated its “**Sawt al-Hind** (<https://jihadology.net/2020/02/24/new-issue-of-the-magazine-%25E1%25B9%25A3awt-al-al-hind-1/>)” magazine to win support in India amid **worsening anti-Muslim discrimination** (<https://www.cfr.org/background/india-muslims-marginalized-population-bjp-modi>). IS might now see a

similar opportunity in Israel with increasing crime in Israeli Arab communities, continuing marginalization of Bedouin communities, and [tensions around Ramadan \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/managing-new-israeli-palestinian-tensions-during-ramadan\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/managing-new-israeli-palestinian-tensions-during-ramadan).

Policy Implications

Overall, the recent attacks are a chilling reminder that IS can pose a real terrorist threat to Israel, albeit not an existential one. The IS threat has gone unaddressed in Israel or dismissed as a negligible concern. And while the Israeli response to the immediate security threat has been strong, the fact that the attacks caught the defense establishment by surprise should be seen as a failure. The same shortcomings in properly discerning and addressing the threat are also prevalent in Israel's inadequate management of IS detainees.

The main takeaway for Israeli policy is that IS really does want to attack Israel. And though opportunities may remain few and far between, the Israeli defense establishment should assume that it will take the opportunity to do so when it can. Indeed, IS is especially good at catching its adversaries off-guard—this was the case when it swept into Iraq in 2014 and embarked on campaigns in Libya, Nigeria, the Philippines, Mozambique, and other places.

Strong preparation coupled with Israel's already robust counterterrorism capabilities could go a long way in preventing similar attacks in the future. Maintaining pressure on Wilayat Sinai will be important, as Israel has effectively coordinated [with Egypt \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egypts-counterinsurgency-success-sinai\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egypts-counterinsurgency-success-sinai).

The IS-inspired incidents also highlight Israel's persistently inadequate information operations. If footage of the recent attacks really did precipitate a series of copycat attacks, then this is all the more evidence that Israel must get better at properly responding to ensure terrorist propaganda does not spread. A [proposed law \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-200-israeli-citizens-identify-with-the-islamic-state-defense-officials-say-1.10717895?lts=1649102500494\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-200-israeli-citizens-identify-with-the-islamic-state-defense-officials-say-1.10717895?lts=1649102500494) to ban Israelis from disseminating videos of terrorist attacks would only be a partial solution; some people will still try to circulate such content.

Finally, Israel should get more comfortable pursuing “soft” counterterrorism, such as building better relations between security services and local communities. Improved trust would facilitate preventing radicalization and enable reintegration efforts after terrorist offenders are released from custody. The current hands-off post-release approach is clearly not sufficient. Establishing law enforcement liaisons with language and cultural skills to effectively coordinate with community leaders is one important tool. Another would be to implement robust employment assistance and education programs for rehabilitated individuals, together with follow-up mechanisms with liaison officers to help guide a former detainee back into regular life. The more involved families and religious figures are in these processes, the better, since family and religion are so important in Israeli, and Arab, society. The complex and deep-seated nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, crime in Arab communities, and other major issues affecting this problem make effective rehabilitation especially difficult, but it is ultimately an effort Israel needs to make.





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