

The Islamic State's Quiet War on Israel

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Articles & Testimony

Although Israeli authorities have silently and capably dealt with an uptick in IS plots since October 7, the threat continues to grow.

In late December 2023, Israeli security forces arrested two young men in East Jerusalem's Ras al-Amud neighborhood. In their possession, investigators said, were chemicals for making explosives, a notebook of bomb-making instructions, and the flag of the Islamic State (IS). The pair, aged 19 and 20, had spent their days watching IS sermons and beheading videos. Their plan was to pack a truck with gas canisters and detonate it near the Knesset, Israel's parliament.

The plot drew a few headlines before disappearing from view, overshadowed by the war in Gaza. That has been the pattern for nearly three years. Since Hamas's attack on Oct. 7, 2023, analysts and policymakers have mainly focused on Hamas, Hezbollah, and the rest of Iran's "axis of resistance." But IS has been more active against Israel during this period than ever before.

A database I have compiled of publicly reported IS-related (guided online from abroad and inspired by propaganda) arrests by Israeli security forces since 2014 shows that Israel has disrupted more IS plots since Oct. 7 than in the preceding nine-and-a-half years combined. Between 2014 and 2023, Israeli forces carried out 50 IS-related arrest operations. Since Oct. 7, 2023, they have carried out 46.

The cases have also grown more complex. Before the war, most arrests involved would-be foreign fighters trying to reach Syria or people spreading propaganda online. Since Oct. 7, 28 of the 46 operations involved attack plots, compared with 18 in the entire prewar period. Few people have noticed this uptick in activity because almost none of these plots succeeded, which reflects Israeli intelligence successes more than IS restraint. Nor are these plots simply the work of isolated sympathizers. A significant share can be traced back to IS networks abroad, especially in Syria.

The Plots That Failed

Near Hebron, a four-man cell whose leader was in contact with IS operatives abroad built roughly 100 explosive devices for use against Israeli soldiers. In the Arab Israeli town of Taibeh, five men discussed how much explosive material it would take to bring down Tel Aviv's Azrieli Towers and planned a car bombing at the mall beneath them. Others, in Acre, Beersheba, and East Jerusalem, built pipe bombs and improvised explosive devices or bought handguns to attack soldiers, police, a bus station, and a nightclub.

So far these plots have not translated into sustained violence. Before Oct. 7, Israeli arrests followed five deadly IS-inspired attacks, including a 2022 shooting in Hadera. Since then, there has only been one deadly attack: the April 2024 murder of a 14-year-old Israeli, Benjamin Achimeir, by an IS-inspired Palestinian near the West Bank village of Duma. A month after Oct. 7, Israeli troops also killed an IS-affiliated operative in Abu Dis, outside Jerusalem, who they said had formed a cell, bought weapons, and fired on soldiers after his release from an Israeli prison.

The profile of the plotters also matters. Roughly two-thirds of the cases since Oct. 7 involved Arab citizens of Israel, not Palestinians from the West Bank or East Jerusalem. At least nine involved minors, one as young as 14. The suspects were not limited to marginal youths: They included a hospital doctor in Beersheba who pledged allegiance to IS's new caliph after Oct. 7 and a 30-year-old former Israeli soldier preparing to join the group abroad. In December 2025, Israeli security officials warned of "an increase in the level of threat from the Islamic State organization and its supporters in Israeli territory" since the war began.

The Outlines of a Strategy

IS's leadership has given this attack plotting activity a rationale and a target list. Its first clear statement on the war, an October 2023 editorial in its weekly al-Naba newsletter, called for attacks on Jewish communities, synagogues, and embassies worldwide and urged young men in Gaza to prepare explosive belts. In January 2024, IS spokesman Abu Hudhayfa al-Ansari told Palestinians to abandon Hamas, which the group considers apostate and an Iranian proxy, and to fight "the Jews because they are Jews." He also called on supporters to kill Jews and Christians "in the streets and alleyways" of the West. As recently as April 2026, al-Naba urged attacks on synagogues during Passover, holding up the December 2025 Bondi Beach attack in Sydney as a model.

IS's stated strategy is to strike Israel's "protectors" first: Arab governments, Gulf states that host U.S. bases, and Jewish communities abroad. A September 2025 al-Naba editorial laid out the logic: Crossing into Israel is very difficult, it argued, because neighboring Arab states, including Syria, "protect" its borders. That makes volunteers already inside Israel the group's most practical option there. The arrest record reflects that division of labor. Senior leaders set the frame and the targets, facilitators abroad supply manuals, contacts, and travel routes, and local recruits try to do the rest.

The October 2025 Gaza ceasefire gave IS another argument. The al-Naba newsletter cast the deal as a commitment "to ensure the protection of the Jewish statelet and to never again attack it," and told Palestinians that jihad, not the "path of national liberation," was their only salvation. IS presented itself as a small, uncompromising vanguard that would lead the "coming religious wars." With Hamas bound by a truce, IS has sought to present itself as the group still committed to fighting Israel.

The Syrian Connection

Many of these cases involved teenagers radicalized online, but that does not capture the full picture. In over a third of the cases, suspects were in direct contact with IS operatives abroad or trying to reach IS theaters abroad. Some received direct assistance. In 2025, three residents of the northern Arab town of Arara reached an IS contact in Syria through TikTok. He sent them manuals and videos showing how to build a bomb and a detonator. They built

and tested two pipe bombs, then filmed fake news reports claiming attacks in Tel Aviv. In East Jerusalem, two men planning to attack a police station were recruited by a man who had been trained abroad by IS members. A cell in the Sur Baher neighborhood was in touch with IS operatives in the West Bank and Syria and planned to travel to Syria for bomb-making training. Others tried to join IS in Syria or Somalia, typically traveling through Turkey or Jordan.

Israel has also begun pursuing these networks beyond its borders. In December 2025, Israeli troops went after the network directly in Syria. In a nighttime raid on the village of al-Rafid, near the Golan Heights, soldiers from the IDF's Golan Brigade and interrogators from its Unit 504 detained a suspect the military said was "operated by IS," seized weapons, and brought him to Israel for questioning. The IDF framed the operation as protecting residents of the Golan, a sign that Israel now sees IS activity across the border as a threat to its own territory.

In August 2025, the Israel Defense Forces also killed Muhammad Abd al-Aziz Abu Zubaida in Gaza, calling him the head of IS's "Palestine District" and claiming he was responsible for the group's operations against Israel in the West Bank, Gaza, and Sinai. The IDF also said he had helped smuggle weapons and money from the West Bank into Gaza and that IS had taken part in the fighting against Israeli troops.

Gaza remains the murkiest arena. Hamas bans IS inside the Strip, so IS loyalists hide from both Israel and Hamas. Even IS supporters now find themselves debating whether IS has a formal structure in the Strip or only sympathizers. In the war's first days, prominent pro-IS voices told Gaza loyalists to stay out of Hamas's fight and instead stockpile weapons, form cells, and pledge allegiance to IS once a wider war came.

What Washington Should Do

The United States and Israel should treat IS as a distinct threat in the Israeli-Palestinian arena rather than folding it into assessments of Hamas and the Iranian axis. That effort should start in Syria. As Washington deepens its engagement with the government of Ahmed al-Sharaa, it should press Damascus to act against the IS facilitators guiding cells inside Israel, coordinate that effort with Israel's own operations there, and expand intelligence-sharing on the routes through Turkey and Jordan that would-be recruits use to reach the group.

Gaza's postwar order also matters. Any stabilization or security framework for Gaza should include vetting and monitoring for jihadi activity so that a weakened Hamas does not leave space for IS.

Finally, Israel should recognize that most of the people its services are arresting are young Arab citizens of Israel. Partnerships with municipalities, schools, and religious leaders on early warning and intervention, paired with restraint from collective measures that would feed IS's narrative, could shrink the pool before plots reach the stage of explosives and handguns. The platforms where many of these young people found bomb-making instructions and IS contacts, including TikTok and Telegram, also need far more Arabic-language moderation. By stopping these plots, Israel's security services have kept IS's campaign largely invisible. That success should not be mistaken for the absence of a threat.

Aaron Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and creator of its interactive [Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home>). This article was originally published on the MBN website (<https://alhurra.com/en/49689>). ❖

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