

Hamas's Not-So-Secret Weapon

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey-based Hamas member Salah al-Arouri is uniquely suited to overseeing the group's operations in the West Bank.

Soon after three Israel teenagers were kidnapped last month, Israeli officials leaked to the press the name of the Hamas operational commander who is believed to be behind a recent surge in kidnapping plots. It was a familiar one for those who follow Hamas closely: Salah al-Arouri, a longtime Hamas operative from the West Bank, who lives openly in Turkey. Now, with the boys' bodies found and the funerals over, Israeli security forces continue to hunt down the two Hebron-based Hamas operatives believed to have actually carried out the plot. Yet observers and experts are sure to eventually circle back to Arouri, who has been a key figure behind Hamas's efforts to rejuvenate the group's terrorist networks in the West Bank.

IN THE BEGINNING

In 2012, Amnesty International described Arouri as "widely held to be one of the founders of the armed wing of Hamas." In court documents, the U.S. Department of Justice has likewise described him as "a high-ranking Hamas military leader dating back to his role as a Hamas student cell leader at Hebron University in the early 1990s," where he was recruited.

Arouri's time at Hebron University is well documented. In 1985, he started studying sharia law there. By the following year, he was elected head of the Islamic Faction at the university. These Islamic Blocs (Kutla Islamiya), which are Hamas's on-campus youth wings, have long been a critical component of Hamas's social and political infrastructure on college campuses, and it was through Arouri's association with them that he met Muin Shabib, a Hamas operative who headed one at Bir Zeit University, right around the time of the founding of Hamas in 1988. Focused on organizing events and sermons for two years, Arouri and Shabib planned to recruit operatives for a Hamas cell, but these early plots were disrupted by Arouri's arrest by Israel in November 1990. Released from prison

in April 1991, Arouri picked up where he left off planning terrorist operations.

Arouri recounted a meeting shortly after his release from prison at which "Muayn told me that there was authorization for military activity and gave me a code word for an anonymous person that would come to him, which was 'Abu Hani sends you his regards and wants to make a license.'" When the unnamed man arrived in July or August 1991, Arouri continued, he made contact at the university. "He came to the University in Hebron and gave me the code word," Arouri recalled, and then assigned Arouri "to recruit a squad in Hebron and to obtain weapons."

Arouri would later admit to receiving "approximately \$96,000 to procure weapons from Abu Ahmed [Salah] in August 1992" and providing "\$45,000 to [Hamas operative] Musa Muhammed Salah Dudin to be used for weapons to conduct attacks." For his part, Dudin -- a Hebron University student and Hamas operative who was involved in the murder of an Israeli soldier, Yuval Tutange, in December of 1992 -- purchased several weapons and used them in several attacks on Israelis. In addition to passing money, Arouri also found himself sheltering wanted Hamas terrorists and smuggling them out of the West Bank, providing weapons to senior Hamas operatives like Imad Aqel, and more. Together with Salah, he played a central role in the resuscitation of Hamas's Qassam brigades in the West Bank. And then he was arrested by Israeli authorities in 1992.

By then -- with most of Hamas's military leadership deported out of the West Bank -- Arouri had become a central player in Hamas's efforts to rebuild its terrorist cell networks. According to court documents, he admitted to interrogators that he was responsible for recruiting a cell to carry out attacks, to providing operatives funds received from abroad, and for purchasing weapons. As a direct connection between the West Bank cells that he built and Hamas's U.S.-based financiers, moreover, Arouri played a critical intermediary role between otherwise compartmented elements of Hamas's external leadership and on-the-ground operatives.

JAIL BAIT

When Arouri was arrested the first time, he spent six months in prison, during which time he met other Hamas operatives and discussed notional military plans. Little did he realize when he was arrested for the second time that he would spend the next 15 years in prison. First held in administrative detention, Arouri was interrogated at length in early 1993 and described in detail what he had been doing in the previous years. Based on this information, he was charged, tried, and convicted to five years in jail for "his leadership role in the Hamas movement."

But before his scheduled release in 1997, Israeli judges approved two six-month renewals of his detention. New charges were then filed against Arouri for "conducting unlawful activities" from inside the prison and making "illegal contact" with individuals outside the prison. According to the U.S. Justice Department, in October 1999, Mohammed Salah sent a Hamas operative to scout Jerusalem locations for Hamas attacks, convey messages to various Hamas operatives, meet Arouri in prison, and provide funds to his family.

In prison, Arouri retained influence within the group's jailed leadership. In 2009, he was elected, along with several other Hamas militants, to head one of the councils of the prison branch of the Majlis al-Shura, Hamas's overarching political and decision-making body in Damascus. He was ultimately released in March 2007, just as Hamas entered a coalition government with Fatah. He got married, gave an interview indicating that he now shunned terror tactics, and seemed resolved to the fact that, as he put it, "Israel is a reality, but not a legitimate reality." But three months later he was arrested by Israeli officials once more. He was held until March 2010, when he was released and warned that if he did not leave the country within several days he would be rearrested. After Jordanian authorities denied his request to enter the country with his wife, Arouri left for Syria, where the external leadership of Hamas was then based. But with the outbreak of violence in Syria, and the breakdown of Hamas's relationships with Syria and Iran over its refusal to back the Assad regime in its crackdown on fellow Sunnis, Arouri moved to Turkey, where he now resides.

NEW IDEAS

Drawing on his past operational experience, an Israeli official told *The Times of Israel*, Arouri "has urged West Bank operatives incessantly to set up terror cells and perpetrate kidnappings." He "financially sponsored these cells, which were trained and directed to abduct Israelis," often sending funds via charities serving as front organizations. Odds are, though, that Israeli authorities won't soon release evidence to back up any off-the-record charges that Arouri was tied to the three teens' kidnapping and murder. In the words of former Israeli National Security Adviser Yaakov Amidror, "Anyone who knows something about Arouri will not tell you, because it's intelligence that should not be published and is needed for the future." Arouri's role overseeing Hamas West Bank operations overall, however -- whatever role he did or did not play in this particular plot -- is not in dispute.

Nevertheless, over the past couple of years, dozens of operatives dispatched by Arouri tried to enter the West Bank via Jordan with messages directing operatives to carry out kidnappings and funds to finance the operations. Some were identified and arrested, but others gained entry, carried out their assignments, and departed. Consider, for example, the case of Mahmoud Sawalah, arrested in February 2013, who admitted traveling to Jordan for the purpose of receiving funds that he would then deliver to Hamas in the West Bank. Sawalah met terrorist operatives representing several groups in Jordan, mostly Hamas, and admitted that he was also supposed to have received funds from Arouri as well. He and his brother, Ahmed, who was arrested two weeks earlier, attempted to smuggle around 10,000 euros and 900 dollars into the West Bank, hidden in cigarette cartons.

For Hamas, kidnapping plots are especially attractive as a means of targeting Israel while undermining the political standing of the Palestinian Authority, especially when popular support for more spectacular operations like suicide bombings is low. Kidnappings are seen as uniquely legitimate within Palestinian society, which considers the tactic a valid way to press for the release of Palestinian militants imprisoned in Israeli jails. As a Hamas spokesman said 20 years ago when Hamas kidnapped another American-Israeli dual national, Nachshon Wachsman, "The kidnapping is not an end; it is a means for the release of all our prisoners." And whereas Palestinian Authority efforts to secure prisoners' release through negotiations have failed, Hamas officials maintain, kidnappings work. Indeed, Israel has released many jailed militants -- many convicted of heinous crimes -- for kidnapped Israelis such as Gilad Shalit and even for the bodies of dead Israelis held by groups such as Hamas or Hezbollah.

Arouri's intimate familiarity with the West Bank -- he lived near Ramallah, attended college further south in Hebron, and worked with Muin Shabib to the north near Nablus -- makes him uniquely suited to overseeing Hamas operations there, and for pursuing the strategy of kidnapping. Moreover, Arouri knows better than most what is required to reconstitute Hamas's covert, operational infrastructure across the West Bank in the face of a security crackdown, since he's done it before. Now, as then, Hamas depends on the support and guidance of Hamas's external leadership. Back then, Hamas relied on the funding and support of key operatives in the United States, such as Mousa Abu Marzouk and Mohammad Salah. Today, Hamas needs similar external support, and it is coming, at least in part, from Arouri in Turkey.

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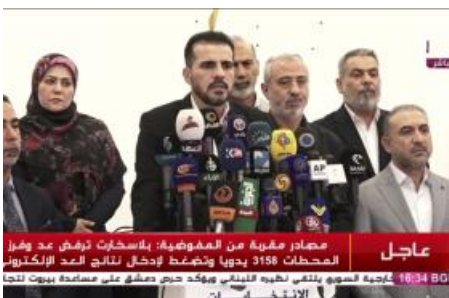
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