

Zawahiri Aims at Israel: Behind Al Qaeda's Pivot to the Levant

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Articles & Testimony

The latest terrorist plot against Israel may have resulted from a need to reassert al Qaeda's position among other jihadist groups, especially in Syria, but that doesn't make the threat of attacks against the West any less real.

On January 22, Israeli officials announced that, several weeks before, they had disrupted what they described as an "advanced" al Qaeda terrorist plot in Israel. Although al Qaeda-inspired jihadists had targeted Israel before (three men who had plotted an attack near Hebron were killed in a shootout with police in November), this marked the first time that senior al Qaeda senior leaders were directly involved in such plans.

That might seem somewhat surprising to casual observers, given Israel's place of pride in al Qaeda rhetoric over the years. Although the need to target Israel and Jews does feature prominently in the al Qaeda mythos, it has rarely translated into operational missions against Israel. And that is what makes this latest plot, which was traced back to al Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, so significant. Indeed, it speaks to a fear among al Qaeda's core leaders that the fight in the Levant -- particularly in Syria -- is passing them by.

PLAN ON IT

According to Israeli authorities, the recent plot began when Ariv al-Sham, a Gaza-based al Qaeda operative who worked for Zawahiri, recruited three men to take part in an attack -- two men from East Jerusalem and one from the West Bank. While it is unclear how Israeli security officials first came to know about the recruitments, which took place over Skype and Facebook, they apparently monitored these communications for a few months until they arrested all four in late December.

Sham's primary recruit, the Israelis report, was 23-year-old Iyad Khalil Abu-Sara, from the Ras Hamis neighborhood in East Jerusalem. Abu-Sara reportedly volunteered to carry out a "sacrifice attack" on an Israeli bus traveling between Jerusalem and Ma'aleh Adumim. The plan was for gunmen to shoot out the bus' wheels and overturn it.

After that, they would they would gun down the passengers at close range. Finally, they assumed, they would die in a firefight with police and first responders. Sham and Abu-Sara also sketched out simultaneous suicide bombings at a Jerusalem convention center, where a second suicide bomber would target emergency responders, and at the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv, which would be carried out by five unnamed foreign terrorists who would travel to Israel as tourists with fake Russian passports. In preparation, Sham sent Abu-Sara computer files for a virtual bomb-making training course. Abu-Sara was to prepare the suicide vests and truck bombs, and to travel to Syria for training in combat and bomb-making. He had already purchased a ticket on a flight to Turkey by the time he was arrested.

Sham's other two recruits -- Rubin Abu-Nagma and Ala Ghanam -- were working with him on carrying out attacks on Israel as well. Abu-Nagma reportedly planned to kidnap an Israeli soldier from Jerusalem's central bus station and bomb a residential building in a Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem. He, too, learned to manufacture explosives online. Ghanam, who lived in a village near Jenin, a Palestinian city in the northern West Bank, was tasked with establishing a Salafi jihadi cell in the West Bank that would carry out future attacks.

Israeli authorities were shocked by Zawahiri's involvement. He directly instructed Sham to carry out this plot. But perhaps even more surprising was how fast -- mere months in all -- the plot developed. "Abu-Sara and Al-Sham coordinated a trip to Syria, and money transfers. This all happened very quickly," a security official said. "All three channels formed at a fast rate."

BEYOND RHETORIC

Israel and the Palestinian cause have long been lightning rods for al Qaeda. In nearly every one of his public statements from 1990 to 2011, Osama bin Laden referenced the Palestinian cause. In 1994, he wrote a letter to the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia entitled "The Betrayal of Palestine," taking issue with the Grand Mufti's endorsement of the Oslo Accords a year earlier. In his 1996 declaration of war against the West, bin Laden once more invoked the Palestinian cause to rally Muslims to fight "the American-Israeli" alliance. And in a 1998 fatwa, bin Laden, Zawahiri, and others called on Muslims to kill Americans and their allies -- civilians and military personnel alike -- and to liberate the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. Even 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed saw in the September 11 plot an opportunity to denounce Israel. In the original plans for the attack, he was reportedly tasked with hijacking a plane himself, landing it at an airport after nine other flights had been crashed, and giving a speech denouncing U.S. support for Israel, the Philippines, and repressive Arab governments.

Although, until now, that rhetoric has rarely translated into actual operations against Israel, there have been some exceptions. Richard Reid, the British "shoe bomber," prepared for his 2002 mission by testing airline security on Israeli's El-Al airlines and scouting potential targets in Israel and Egypt. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed claims to have been involved in a variety of plots for attacks on Israel, including one in which planes from Saudi Arabia would enter Israeli airspace and crash into buildings in Eilat, Israel's southernmost city. The one part of his plan that succeeded was the November 2002 attack on the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, which killed three Israelis and wounded 20 more. Similarly, long before Zarqawi became famous as the leader of al Qaeda, he had reportedly attempted to set up a terrorist cell to target Israel. By 2001, the Treasury Department reported, Zarqawi had received more than \$35,000 for training Jordanian and Palestinian fighters in Afghanistan and facilitating their travel to the Levant. Zarqawi "received assurances that further financing would be provided for attacks against Israel," and according to some reports may have traveled to the Palestinian territories himself by 2002. But nothing came of it.

These exceptions prove the rule: al Qaeda's plotting against Israel has never matched its anti-Israel propaganda. And that harks back to debates that raged between the group's future leaders in the waning days of the jihad against Russia in Afghanistan. Following the Soviet withdrawal in February 1989, bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam -- a West Bank Palestinian who served as chief ideologue of the Afghan jihad -- disagreed over where the jihadi fighters should go next. Bin Laden pointed to the United States, which supported Arab governments that were insufficiently Islamist

and should be toppled and replaced with a new caliphate. In this, he followed Zawahiri and the Egyptian Islamists who long emphasized the imperative of toppling apostate Muslim regimes. Having turned away from the Palestinian conflict because it had been dominated by secular militant groups, he now saw an opportunity to reinvigorate that struggle with Islamist underpinnings as the next jihadi front. Azzam was killed in a mysterious 1989 car bomb, and the rest is history.

The al Qaeda senior leadership has generally not focused its operations on Israel, nor has it been particularly receptive to Gaza-based groups that have claimed to be affiliated with or inspired by al Qaeda. During the December 2008-January 2009 war in Gaza, al Qaeda expressed support for Palestinian fighters and denounced Arab states for failing help them, but stopped short of backing up its words with action. A few months later, in August 2009, when a Hamas raid on a Salafi jihadi mosque in Gaza ended in a gun battle that left some 24 dead and 130 wounded, al Qaeda leaders denounced Hamas and called on Allah "to avenge the blood of the murdered men and to destroy the Hamas state." Bin Laden and Zawahiri also called for jihad in Gaza, but al Qaeda still never recognized any of the Palestinian groups that took up its charge.

WIN, LOSE, OR DRAW

So why the sudden change of course? Like bin Laden, Zawahiri, now leader of al Qaeda, has long placed targeting Israel farther down the operational totem pole than more immediate targets. In the 1990s, Zawahiri maintained, "the road to Jerusalem passes through Cairo." In other words, Palestine could be liberated only after illegitimate and insufficiently Islamic regimes in places such as Egypt were dealt with. Years later, in a letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq, Zawahiri would explain that targeting Israel was a "fourth stage" goal following (or coming at the same time as) the expulsion of Americans from Iraq, the establishment of an Islamic emirate there, and extending the jihad to secular countries neighboring Iraq.

Well, al Qaeda's war in Iraq, once believed to have been defeated, is now on the rebound, thanks to the group's efforts next door in Syria. In one sense, then, the decision to target Israel could be seen as Zawahiri ticking off the boxes in his long-planned strategy.

In another sense, though, the recent foiled plot has more to do with Zawahiri and other senior al Qaeda leaders' standing among other global jihadi groups. Events in Syria are quickly changing the nature of jihadi enterprise. Its epicenter is no longer Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, or Yemen, but the heart of the Levant -- al Sham -- in Syria. There, two al Qaeda affiliates -- ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra -- are fighting the Assad regime and its Shiite allies and more moderate Syrian rebels. The two groups have not merged, and only one (al-Nusra) has pledged allegiance to Zawahiri. Indeed, when Zawahiri instructed ISIS to focus on Iraq and leave the Syrian theatre to al-Nusra, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi flatly refused. This week, Zawahiri responded in kind, blaming ISIS for "the enormity of the disaster that afflicted the Jihad in Syria" and disavowing its ties to al Qaeda. "ISIS," Zawahiri insisted, "is not a branch of al Qaeda and we have no organizational relationship with it."

Meanwhile, other Islamist groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham, remain independent even as they share some ideological underpinnings with al Qaeda. Today, the jihadi centers that are drawing new recruits, donations, and foreign fighters are not run by al Qaeda. Knowing that, Zawahiri perhaps felt the need to be able to claim something big that jihadist fighters of all shapes and sizes could rally around. What better than an attack on Israel?

Among those who study terrorism and political violence, a debate rages over the continued relevance and importance of the traditional al Qaeda core and other al Qaeda senior leadership. The debate was given new life by a flippant comment that President Barack Obama made in a *New Yorker* interview in which he lauded his administration's successful "decimating" of al Qaeda along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and played down the threat of al Qaeda franchises more focused on attacking their homelands than that of the United States. Obama

compared such groups to a jayvee team -- not as dangerous as the varsity teams that carried out 9/11. As for that team, the State Department recently asserted that "the entire leadership been decimated by the U.S. counterterrorism efforts. [Zawahiri is] the only one left." At this point, a State Department spokesperson speculated, Zawahiri likely spends "more time worrying about his own personal security than propaganda, but still is interested in putting out this kind of propaganda to remain relevant."

Zawahiri's plotting against Israel may well have resulted from a need to reassert his position among other jihadist groups, especially in Syria, but that doesn't mean that the threat of terrorism is less real. However one defines al Qaeda today -- as a singular group with a few close franchises, or as the sum of all franchises and decentralized parts -- it is clear from plots like this one that the West, including Israel, need beware.

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