

Hamas Shifts to an Outside-In Operational Strategy

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Brief Analysis

Recent arrests indicate that Hamas may be extending its operational reach outside its Gaza base.

Historically, Hamas has limited its operational focus to Israel, with almost all of its attacks occurring within the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel proper. Although many non-Israelis have been killed in such attacks, most of them were unintended victims of inherently indiscriminate terrorist tactics. Recently, however, Hamas has expanded its area of operations. Information released by Israeli and American authorities suggests that the group has now extended its logistical efforts and even certain planning and operational activities as far afield as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, and China.

Rebuilding in the West Bank

Since May, Israeli security forces have arrested dozens of Hamas operatives spread throughout a network of some thirteen militant cells located in the southern West Bank and the Jerusalem area. The network carried out one attack, setting off a small improvised explosive device near the International Convention Center in downtown Jerusalem on March 23, killing a British citizen and wounding forty-seven Israelis. In another case the network successfully infiltrated an intended suicide bomber into Jerusalem from Hebron, but authorities thwarted the plot and arrested the would-be bomber on August 22.

Members of the network included more than twenty criminals recruited by jailed Hamas operatives in Israel's Ketziot Prison. Most of them were near the end of their terms at the time of recruitment and were soon released, whereupon they focused their efforts on recruiting more members and plotting kidnapping operations aimed at securing the release of Hamas leaders in Israeli prisons. Hamas leaders from Gaza helped direct the operations of these new West Bank cells and sought to provide weapons by smuggling them through Sinai and the Negev desert into the southern West Bank.

Among the plots foiled by the Israeli arrests were shootings, kidnappings targeting Israelis near Hebron or the Gush

Etzion bloc in the West Bank, and a Jerusalem suicide bombing planned for August 21. News of the arrests came as a surprise to many given the relative quiet the West Bank has enjoyed recently, which is largely a result of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation targeting Hamas activities there. Yet over the past six months, Israeli security officials have recorded a 25 percent increase in the number of threat warnings regarding potential Hamas attacks in the West Bank, especially in the Hebron, Nablus, and Ramallah areas.

U.S. and Iraq Target Hamas IED Expert

Most startling is the news regarding Muhammad Hisham Muhammad Ismail Abu Ghazala (a.k.a. Mansur/Khadim al-Hussein), a Hamas explosives expert targeted by both Washington and Baghdad for his ties to al-Qaeda, Iran, former Saddam regime elements, networks responsible for proliferating improvised explosive devices in northern Iraq, and various terrorist organizations throughout the country. The United States recently listed him as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under Executive Order 13224, which targets those who carry out or support terrorism. According to the State Department press release announcing the designation, he has worked with rockets and unmanned aerial vehicles and disseminated remote detonation designs to former regime elements and other terrorists in Iraq. The department also highlighted his links with Tehran -- "the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism" -- and al-Qaeda.

For its part, Baghdad has offered a \$50,000 reward for information leading to his capture. According to Iraqi national security advisor Muwaffaq Rubaie, Abu Ghazala is among the insurgency's top supporters, which is why he appears thirty-third on the Iraqi government's "41 Most Wanted List." The description of his activities provided in that list is nearly identical to the State Department's.

Perhaps most surprising, nothing in the U.S. designation suggested that Abu Ghazala broke with Hamas to join the Iraqi insurgency or partner with elements tied to al-Qaeda. To the contrary, the press release emphasized -- in the present tense -- that he "plays an integral role in Hamas." His terrorist activities have apparently caught the attention of other U.S. agencies as well, with the State designation serving to "highlight the threat posed by Abu Ghazala while simultaneously assisting and complementing the law enforcement actions of other U.S. agencies."

Operational Meetings in Saudi Arabia

Israeli authorities report that Hamas members recently met with new recruits from the Hebron area in Saudi Arabia, giving them operational instructions passed down from the group's military wing leaders from Gaza. One of the participants, Mamoun Qafisha, was described as "a Hamas military operative who handles recruits in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] from his residence in Saudi Arabia."

In the past, Hamas operatives have held meetings in the kingdom during the Hajj pilgrimage, and the group's finance committee has long been known to operate out of Jeddah (for more on these points, see "[A Hamas Headquarters in Saudi Arabia?](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2378)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2378>) and "[Terror at the Hajj](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2137)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2137>)). Yet the news of Hamas military operatives establishing themselves there and holding terrorist meetings in their Saudi homes is new. One of Qafisha's recruits -- Hussein Qawasmeh, the chief explosives "engineer" of the Israeli-targeted Hamas network discussed above -- built the bomb used in the March 23 Jerusalem attack, and another such device was found at his home in Hebron. Similarly, Ahmed Madhoun, one of the Hebron cell's leaders, was recruited at another meeting in Saudi Arabia by Hamas activists from Gaza. Madhoun was reportedly given \$10,000 to recruit and arm a new Hamas cell in Hebron whose primary mission was to kidnap an Israeli soldier.

Activities in Syria, Turkey, China, and Egypt

According to Israeli officials, Hamas is now dispatching operatives around the world on a variety of missions,

especially weapons procurement. In February, Israeli agents nabbed Dirar Abu Sisi, a Hamas rocket engineer from Gaza who had been operating in the Ukraine. And in July, they arrested Ayman al-Adam, a Jordanian courier of Palestinian descent whose family hailed from the Hebron area. Through him, Hamas leaders in Syria delivered money and instructions on how to assemble bombs and execute kidnappings to members of the Hebron cell. During questioning, al-Adam stated that his Hamas handler in Syria sent him on missions not only to Hebron, but also to Turkey and China.

In addition, Israeli security officials assert that the scale and scope of Hamas political and operational activity in Turkey -- long a comfortable place for the group -- have increased significantly over the past two years. What is not clear is the extent to which Turkish authorities are aware of the operational efforts. Over the past few months, Hamas operatives in Syria have been moving some of their activities to Turkey, where they enjoy greater operational freedom under the Erdogan government. According to the Shin Bet, Hamas operatives in the West Bank received funding, guidance and training from Hamas headquarters personnel not only in Syria but also in Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, at least one of the Hebron-area operatives arrested since May was also "involved in operations carried out on behalf of the Hamas headquarters in Syria in other countries, including China and Turkey." According to the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet), its investigation revealed that Hamas activities in China centered on money laundering and weapons procurement, while efforts in Turkey focused on recruiting new operatives.

The group has also become more active in Egypt. With the Mubarak regime gone, the transitional government weak, the Muslim Brotherhood ascendant, and Syria's Asad regime increasingly isolated, Israeli security officials expect to see more Hamas leaders and operatives departing Syria for Egypt in the near term. With black market arms flowing east from Libyan depots, and with the Sinai largely ungoverned and under-patrolled, Egypt has also become a hub for weapons procurement. And as the August attack near Eilat showed, Hamas strikes in southern Israel are increasingly likely to include not only Palestinian fighters from Gaza, but also Egyptians (e.g., Sinai Bedouins) and, Israeli officials fear, other foreign fighters.

Implications for U.S. Policy

As it broadens its activities in other countries, Hamas is improving its chances of both rebuilding its military infrastructure in the West Bank and broadening its militant "resistance" activities from a solely Palestinian affair to one that draws foreign fighters to the ungoverned spaces of Sinai and Gaza. To its credit, the State Department has led a concerted effort over the past few months to press foreign governments about cracking down on Hamas activity within their borders. Recent events underscore the need to redouble these efforts, however, focused on disrupting Hamas logistical, financial, and operational plans abroad before the group acquires greater capabilities and reach.

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