

Hamas in the Spotlight

Feb 28, 2008



Articles & Testimony

This past week's news placed Hamas in the spotlight, with press coverage of key Hamas activity in the West Bank, Egypt and Jordan. While Hamas suffered significant setbacks at the hands of Israeli and Jordanian authorities, the group fared much better in Egypt.

First the good news. Coming on the heels of the suicide bombing in Dimona, which was executed by Hamas operatives based in the Hebron area, the Israeli military raided and shut the Islamic Charitable Society (ICS) in Hebron. The ICS was not only a major conduit of funds for Hamas, it also raised funds through businesses it owns, including real estate in Hebron, and it runs a dairy farm. Unlike the majority of the nearly one hundred organizations closed down by Palestinian Authority security forces in the West Bank, almost all of which were small charities of little significance, the ICS is a backbone of the Hamas infrastructure in the southern West Bank.

But beyond their fundraising and money-laundering roles, Hamas charities like the ICS provide day jobs and a veneer of legitimacy to Hamas operatives. For example, Adil Numan Salm al-Junaydi was the head of the ICS until he was arrested for Hamas activity in December 2004. According to the Palestinian news agency Wafa, al-Junaydi was arrested along with six others in a sweep of fifteen houses in the Hebron area. Junaydi was deported to Lebanon with other senior Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders in 1992, and served as the assistant administrative director for another Hamas charity, the al-Islah Charitable Society, before joining the ICS in Hebron.

Another former head of the society, Abd al-Khaliq al-Natsheh, also was arrested for his Hamas activities. Natsheh was also among the 1992 deportees, and was imprisoned twice in the 1990s on account of his terrorist activities, once in 1996 and again in 1998. After his release from an Israeli prison in 1998, Natsheh accepted an offer from Hamas political leader Khalid Mishal to assume the position of Hamas spokesman in Hebron. In this capacity, Natsheh would later concede to authorities, he referred several Hamas members interested in carrying out attacks to leaders of Hamas terror cells within the Qassam Brigades. Described as "one of the leading Hamas operatives in the entire West Bank," and a "Hamas military leader in Hebron," al-Natsheh oversaw an extensive terrorist infrastructure in Hebron which was responsible for many terrorist attacks carried out within Israel. These include the April 27, 2002, attack targeting Israelis in the community of Adora, which resulted in four deaths, including the death of a five-year old girl, as well as the attack at Karmey Tzur on June 8, 2002, in which two were killed and five wounded.

Meanwhile, across the Jordan Valley, Jordanian officials charged a group of five Hamas activists with "acquiring secret information that could jeopardize the safety of the kingdom." In a veiled reference to the extensive terrorist training regularly provided in Syria, the men were reportedly received military and security training "in an unidentified neighboring country," according to accounts of the indictment in the press. The five were accused of receiving training in "information security, tracing, resisting investigations and telecommunications," and were allegedly tasked by Hamas members in the "neighboring country" to recruit new members in Jordan, monitor military installations along its borders and surveil the Israeli embassy in Amman. The indictment alleged the men already successfully surveilled military sites on Jordan's borders with Israel and Syria and the Israeli embassy in

Amman.

The charges are reminiscent of the Hamas activity that led to the 1999 closure of Hamas offices in Amman, Jordan, where Hamas had until then maintained its headquarters. Citing materials seized in Hamas offices, then-prime minister Abdel Rauf al-Rawabdeh noted Hamas appeared to be "threatening the kingdom's stability. Other officials added that Hamas had been "conducting paramilitary training, raising funds for subversive purposes, using forged Jordanian passports, and recruiting in Jordan's Palestinian refugee camps and universities." According to Jordanian counterterrorism officials, "Hamas officials in Jordan were involved in weapons smuggling plots and infiltration efforts through northern Jordan and they were cooperating with Hezbollah to send weapons and recruits to the West Bank from Syria via Jordan."

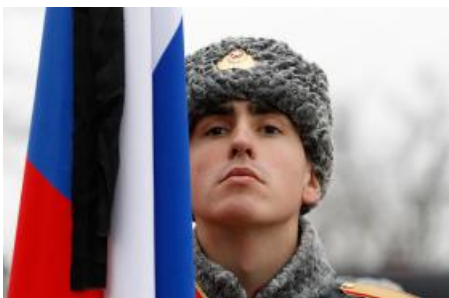
But the news has not been all good. In Egypt, Hamas fared better this week. Hamas has been proactively smuggling weapons across the Egyptian border for a long time, and more recently blew a hole in the border wall creating a breach that enabled Hamas operatives and civilian Palestinians alike to swarm into Egypt. Despite this, Egypt released twenty-one Palestinians to Hamas custody this week, including twelve people described as "directly affiliated with Hamas" who had been detained with explosives and weapons inside Egypt. According to press reports, they were believed to be trying to infiltrate back into Israel to carry out attacks.

By all accounts, Hamas control of Gaza is the most significant obstacle to resuming serious Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. So while news of crackdowns on Hamas in the West Bank and Jordan is welcome, the news out of Egypt could prove to be the most significant of these three developments.

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