

Could Hamas Target the West?

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Articles & Testimony

Read (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/opedsPDFs/470ce9b96e387.pdf>) the full text of this article (PDF).

This article was adapted from the chapter of the same name in the author's book, **Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=265>) (Yale, 2006).

On 22 March 2004, Israeli security forces assassinated Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yasin. His deputy and successor, Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, issued a statement implying that Hamas would avenge Yasin's death with attacks on Israel -- and on the United States. "The war against Islam is the same war which is launched in Iraq," Rantissi proclaimed. "In Palestine also, there is a war against Islam. So, the Islamic nation should wake up and shake the land under the feet of those Zionists and the Americans who back them." Although Rantissi withdrew the threat the next day, the State Department immediately issued a travel advisory warning Americans of possible terrorist threats. The advisory warned: "In the aftermath of the killing of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a Hamas spokesman has threatened revenge against Israel and U.S. interests . . . all U.S. citizens [are urged] to depart Gaza as early as it is safe to do so. . . ." Four weeks later, on 17 April 2004, Rantissi himself was killed by an Israeli rocket in a targeted assassination. At Rantissi's funeral procession, a masked Hamas member in camouflage told the Washington Post, "Bush stands next to Sharon and after that they assassinate Rantissi." The militant said he believed it was meaningful that American and Israeli leaders had met just prior to the attack on Rantissi. "We should carry our fight against the Americans as much as we are against Israel," concluded the militant. "Israel and America share the same face." Hamas political leader Khaled Mishal also blamed America for the assassination, suggesting that Bush had endorsed the missile attack during a White House meeting with Sharon. "What Bush told Sharon in the White House three days ago is the clearest green light and cover for Sharon's crimes and for what has happened to Dr. Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi. Thus, it [the United States] is the one responsible for this crime."

U.S. authorities took the Hamas threat seriously, particularly because Hamas had threatened U.S. interests in the past. For example, on 18 December 2001, Hamas issued a statement warning that, "Americans [are] now considered legitimate targets as well as Israelis." In June 2002, an official Hamas website featured a chat room discussion in which participants discussed various ways to kill a hypothetical group of American citizens in Israel proper or the Gaza Strip. Among the proposed ways to dispose of the Americans was running over the "American dogs," throwing a Molotov cocktail at their cars, burning them in their cabin on the beach, poisoning them, or shooting them "as an example for others like them." Such murders, said one participant, would make "Americans understand they are not safe in Muslim countries."

Despite such expression of violent anti-Americanism, Hamas has not joined al-Qaeda's global jihad. They have not yet bought into the strategy (shared by many other outgrowths of the Muslim Brotherhood) that militants can best undermine local governments by targeting the Western powers that support them. Despite shared ideological roots with al-Qaeda-affiliated groups like the Egyptian Islamic Group, Hamas sees itself as a local "resistance" organization and has traditionally limited its operations to targeting Israelis in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Although

many foreigners have died in Hamas attacks, these have been incidental casualties of the group's indiscriminate terrorist attacks, not intentionally targeted victims. But there is reason to question whether Hamas's local focus will continue, or if -- and under what conditions -- Hamas may expand its focus to include targeting Western interests. Nor is the prospect of such an expansion of targets determined solely by Hamas's top leadership. Indeed, it is far more likely that intentional attacks on Western interests would be the work of Hamas cells or individual members acting independently -- either completely on their own or with tacit approval from Hamas leaders. Not only could a change in Hamas modus operandi occur at multiple decision-making levels, it could target Western interests in one of several ways. Hamas activists may target Israeli or Jewish interests abroad, target U.S. or other Western interests in Israel and the Palestinian territories, or target Western interests abroad. . . .

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