

Hamas's Tactics: Lessons from Recent Attacks

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Brief Analysis

On September 22, 2005, Abbas al-Sayyid was convicted of masterminding two Hamas suicide bombings: the March 27, 2002, attack at the Park Hotel in Netanya and the May 18, 2001, shopping mall bombing that killed five and injured one hundred. The Park Hotel bombing, considered the terror group's most devastating attack since the outbreak of the second intifada, had implications extending far beyond the murder of thirty innocent civilians. The attack prompted Israel to launch Operation Defensive Shield, the reoccupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Additionally, the bombing highlighted Hamas's program of radicalization and recruitment in Palestinian universities and the group's experimentation with chemical and biological agents.

Radicalization and Recruitment at Palestinian Universities

Many committed Hamas members willing to sacrifice their lives in terrorist attacks have emerged from the Kutla Islamiya (Islamic Bloc) at Palestinian universities, especially al-Najah University in Nablus. Funded in part through Hamas charities, the Kutla Islamiya has long been a critical component of Hamas's social and political infrastructure.

Kutla Islamiya's link to the Park Hotel attack. Several Hamas operatives involved in planning and executing the Park Hotel bombing were associated with the Kutla Islamiya at al-Najah University. For example, Muhammad Shrim was head of Kutla Islamiya activists at Khaduri College, a branch of al-Najah University. Shrim was recruited into Hamas's military wing by Amer Khedeiri, a Hamas operative responsible for Kutla Islamiya activities at several schools, including Shrim's Khaduri College. Shrim assisted in the Park Hotel attack in various ways: he obtained video cameras to record the bomber's will, prepared martyr posters, and supplied the suicide bomber's driver with a counterfeit Israeli identification card and instructions for purchasing a car with an Israeli license to transport the attacker on the day of the operation. Though Shrim turned down an invitation to be a suicide bomber, he agreed to provide logistics for other operations. He provided Hamas a safehouse in Tulkarm and established a military cell there tasked with carrying out shooting attacks. Ultimately, Shrim was sentenced to twenty-nine consecutive life sentences and twenty years in prison for his role in the Park Hotel bombing.

The Park Hotel attack was originally planned as a double suicide bombing, but the day before the attack one of the bombers, Nidal Qalaq, got sick and pulled out. Qalaq, a member of the Kutla Islamiya at the Tulkarm branch of the al-Quds Open University, was recruited for the bombing by Ali Khudeiri, a senior Hamas operative in Nablus and Tulkarm and a former engineering student at al-Najah University.

Al-Sayyid, the mastermind of the Park Hotel attack, was recruited into Hamas by Jamal Mansour. Mansour, like many other Hamas leaders, gained "executive experience" early in his career managing the Kutla Islamiya at al-Najah University from 1979 to 1982. Mansour subsequently took responsibility for Hamas's regional command in the West Bank while he remained involved in radicalizing Palestinian college students. Though Hamas claimed that Mansour was a purely political leader, Israeli intelligence officials believe he was involved in more than a dozen

deadly terrorist attacks, including the June 1, 2001, suicide bombing at the Dolphinarium discotheque in Tel Aviv that left twenty-one dead. Not long after the Dolphinarium attack, Mansour was killed in his Nablus office during an Israeli helicopter raid that targeted several Hamas leaders.

The case of Qeis Adwan. Just four days after the Park Hotel attack, on March 31, 2002, a Hamas suicide bomber blew himself up, killing fifteen people at the Israeli-Arab owned Matza restaurant in Haifa, which was popular with both Jews and Israeli Arabs. Qeis Adwan, a senior Hamas member, masterminded the bombing; he produced the bomb, recruited and dispatched the bomber.

Clearly, Qeis Adwan was a product of the recruitment and radicalization of the student body that prevails at al-Najah University. In 1996, Adwan began his architectural engineering studies at al-Najah. During his second semester, the Palestinian Authority (PA) imprisoned him for six months. In February 2000, Adwan and another student leader were imprisoned just days before a campus election in which Adwan was a candidate. Two thousand students gathered on campus to protest the detentions, forcing the PA to release the two men after three days. Adwan won the election and became leader of the al-Najah Student Union.

Adwan also found and dispatched the Hamas suicide bomber who perpetrated the August 2001 attack at the Sbarro Pizzeria restaurant in Jerusalem, a bombing that left fifteen people dead, including five children. One month later Adwan dispatched an Israeli-Arab he had personally recruited to perpetrate a suicide attack at a crowded railway station in Nahariya, leaving four dead. Yet Adwan's involvement in terrorism extended beyond recruiting and dispatching bombers. Adwan became a specialist in bomb making for Hamas terrorist activities, manufacturing weapons, explosives, and Qassam rockets. Adwan also coordinated military attacks and financial matters between the West Bank and Gaza Strip for Hamas, and, according to Israeli security services, was "in touch with Hamas headquarters in Jordan and Syria." Adwan had been on Israel's most-wanted list since summer 2001; on April 5, 2002, Israeli forces killed Adwan in a targeted assassination.

Unconventional Weapons: Another Option for Hamas

Recounting his exploits from prison, al-Sayyid said he envisioned acquiring cyanide for use in further terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians. In fact he may have come shockingly close to using a cyanide-laced suicide bomb against Israelis; al-Sayyid received a large quantity of the poison just before or soon after he masterminded the Park Hotel bombing.

To execute the Park Hotel attack, al-Sayyid equipped Hamas suicide bomber Abdel Baset al-Oudah with an explosive belt, disguised him as a woman, and dispatched him to carry out a suicide attack targeting civilians. As horrifying as this plot was, it had the potential to be much worse. In March 2001 and again in February 2002 -- just one month before the Park Hotel bombing -- al-Sayyid contacted his nephew, Tareq Ghanem Ahmed Zaydan, to obtain chemicals that could be used in attacks against Israelis, including a specific request for a vial of cyanide, which he received. Although cyanide ultimately was not used in the March attack, following the bombing, al-Sayyid informed Zaydan that he intended to use the cyanide in a subsequent suicide attack he was plotting. This was confirmed when al-Sayyid admitted to Israeli authorities after his arrest that he planned to insert cyanide poison into the explosive belts worn by suicide bombers. Zaydan, who was recruited into Hamas in 1997, studied pharmacology in Jordan and practiced the trade by profession in the West Bank. Not only did Zaydan provide his uncle with cyanide, but he also conducted research on the use of nerve gas and chlorine gas for Hamas. He delivered that information, along with ten pounds of cyanide poison, to Hamas in the summer of 1997. Ultimately, Zaydan was tried in Israel for his role in planning terrorist attacks and sentenced to six years in prison.

Al-Sayyid's interest in chemical-weapons terrorism fits the pattern of Hamas's pursuit for means to use unconventional weapons to increase the lethality of its attacks.

Hamas's history of seeking unconventional weapons. Since its establishment in December 1987, Hamas's military capability has increased markedly -- from rifles to Qassam rockets and more. There have been many reports of Hamas operatives planning and preparing attacks incorporating chemicals. Hamas has long sought to increase the lethality of its attacks by lacing shrapnel attached to its suicide bombs with chemicals. Israel's Health Ministry revealed that nails and bolts packed into explosives detonated by a Hamas suicide bomber in a December 2001 attack at the Ben-Yehuda pedestrian mall in Jerusalem were soaked in rat poison.

Furthermore, an interrogation of Hamas military leader Mohammed Abu Tir revealed that on the verge of the new millennium, Hamas intended to commit a mass murder of Israelis. The plan, masterminded by Adel Awadallah, then head of Hamas's military wing in the West Bank, involved the contamination of Israeli water resources. In his interrogation, Abu Tir admitted that Awadallah told him that he and others had "reached a high level in producing chemical substances which could cause mass murder if put into the drinking water or swimming pools" Awadallah allegedly determined that "activists must be found who could bring the chemicals into Israeli territory and suffuse it into water sources." In September 1998, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) killed Adel Awadallah and his brother Imad in a shootout at their West Bank hideout. Abu Tir was arrested shortly thereafter.

As early as February 2000, then director of Central Intelligence George Tenet testified before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "We know that a number of these (terrorist) groups are seeking chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear agents. We are aware of several instances in which terrorists have contemplated using these materials." He named a number of groups, including Hamas, saying, "Hamas is also pursuing a capability to conduct attacks with toxic chemicals." Although Hamas has not managed successfully to employ chemical or biological agents in an attack, the possibility that Hamas would attempt such an attack, and carry it out with success, is cause for concern.

In June 2002, Hamas reportedly held a strategic meeting in which the group decided to employ chemical weapons in addition to conventional bombs. According to press reports, Hamas issued a statement saying, "When we reach that stage using chemical weapons, the gates will be opened to launch suicide attacks with Allah's help." Further, Hamas admitted that it had attempted to use chemicals in bombs, but had failed because the crude, inexpensive chemicals used lost their effectiveness in the heat of an explosion.

Israeli security sources maintain that efforts by Hamas operatives to pursue unconventional weapons are not isolated incidents. In 2002, Israeli security reported arresting Palestinians, primarily members of Hamas, who admitted that the terror organization is not only interested in using unconventional weaponry but was also actively preparing to do so. In December 2002, Israel indicted Walid al-Ara, a student at the Islamic University in Gaza and a member of Hamas's military wing. Zahar Nasser, an aid to Qassam Brigades founder Salah Shehadeh, allegedly approached al-Ara in June 2002; Nasser reportedly asked al-Ara to help Hamas gather information on how to carry out an attack with biological weapons. Nasser and Shehadeh, however, were killed in July 2002.

In January 2003, an IDF spokesperson reported that Hamas had published on its website a twenty-three page manual written in 1996 titled *The Mujahedin Poisons Handbook*, which outlines how terrorists can prepare homemade poisons, chemical toxins and gases, and other deadly materials. In August 2002 the Israeli army ordered restrictions in the West Bank on the sale of chemical products that could be used in creating deadly explosives. According to an IDF statement, enforcing sanctions on the sale of acid, sulfur, and nitrate is "part of the war against the terrorist infrastructure."

Conclusion

The insight al-Sayyid's conviction offers into Hamas's operations show that the group remains a growing terrorist threat. Hamas continues to radicalize, recruit, and train students-turned-terrorists, and it maintains an intense

effort to acquire and use chemical and biological weapons in terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians.

The role of the Kutla Islamiya in active incitement to terrorist activity demonstrates the crossover between the military, political, and social elements of the Hamas infrastructure. While student associations might appear benign, a careful examination of groups such as the Kutla Islamiya demonstrates that they actively facilitate Hamas's terrorist attacks. Until the PA is able to compete effectively with Hamas in the battle for the trust and loyalty of Palestinian youth, many students will continue to express their social and political frustrations through violence.

Hamas has a long track record of pursuing unconventional methods to increase the lethality of its terrorist actions against Israelis. There is good reason to assume that Hamas will attempt to advance its military capacity to include chemical and biological agents if provided with the opportunity to do so. If the terrorist group is able to achieve its unconventional-weapons objective, Hamas not only will increase the fatalities caused by its bombings but will also create a dangerous precedent of using of banned agents in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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