

# The Threat of Jewish Terror in Israel and the West Bank

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

In 1995, Jewish extremist Yigal Amir caught Israeli society off guard when he assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in an effort to derail the Labor government's pursuit of a peace accord with the Palestinian Authority (PA). Today, Israeli society is coming to terms with a similarly acute Jewish extremist threat to the life of a prime minister; this time, however, the target is the Likud Party's hawkish Ariel Sharon. Although the prospect of right-wing Jewish elements targeting a right-wing politician may surprise some, Jewish extremist violence has actually been on the rise over the past several years.

## The Current Threat

Israeli security officials recently warned that a small band of Jewish extremists is bent on assassinating Sharon or committing other acts of terrorism aimed at preventing his planned unilateral withdrawal from all of Gaza and from isolated West Bank settlements. On July 20, 2004, Avi Dichter, chief of the Israel Security Agency (a.k.a. Shin Bet), warned the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that "a few dozen Jews in the territories want Ariel Sharon's death." Dichter also noted that, although only a few dozen extremists in the West Bank conduct "military activities" (including some members of the "hilltop youth" involved in erecting illegal outposts across that territory), they are supported by some 150 to 200 committed activists. Soon thereafter, Public Security Minister Tzachi Hanigby warned of a possible terrorist plot targeting the al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem: "There is a danger that [extremists] would make use of the most explosive site, in the hope that a chain reaction would bring about the destruction of the peace process." Other officials have voiced concern over several possible types of attacks against the mosque, including crashing a light aircraft or an unmanned, explosives-filled drone into the site. Indeed, Shahar Dvir-Zeliger, a suspected member of a terrorist cell, informed authorities in late 2003 that a group of three Jewish radicals was planning an attack on the mosque. In a sign of the potential regional flare-up that such an attack could spark, Hizballah secretary-general Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah recently warned that "the destruction of the Aqsa Mosque would result in the destruction of the Zionist entity." Threatening preemptive action, Nasrallah declared that members of his organization "should not wait lazily until the event takes place, and then cry and beat our faces."

## Spectacular Plots

Jewish extremists have undertaken numerous attacks against Palestinian civilians in recent years. Of these, two

large-scale plots carried out in spring 2002 highlight the potential magnitude of destruction for future attacks, as well as the vulnerability of Palestinian targets. On March 5, 2002, a homemade time-bomb exploded in the courtyard of a Palestinian school for boys in the Sur Bahir neighborhood of east Jerusalem, injuring two dozen students and two teachers. The school's headmaster and two teachers had spotted the bomb concealed in some bushes and were able to usher students inside to safety before it detonated, preventing a more devastating attack. A group calling itself "Revenge of the Innocent Babes"—apparently a Jewish extremist cell—sent beeper messages to news agencies immediately after the blast accepting responsibility for the attack. The bombing was also claimed under the names "The Fighters of the Kingdom of Israel" and "The Avengers of the Oppressed."

A group of Jewish terrorists deployed a far more powerful bomb the following month. Shlomo Dvir and Yarden Morag, together with Ofer Gamliel and other accomplices, had planned a large-scale attack against a Palestinian girls' school and the adjacent Mukassad Hospital in the A-Tur neighborhood of east Jerusalem. On April 29, Dvir and Morag hitched a trailer packed with explosives, fuel, and shrapnel to a security jeep from the Bat Ayin settlement, where they resided, and drove it to the target. They programmed the explosives to detonate the following morning, when students would be congregating in the schoolyard before class. The attack was foiled only by chance, when Israeli police officers from a nearby station happened to pass by on patrol as Dvir and Morag were unhitching the trailer near the school. Upon searching the trailer, the officers found the explosives and dispatched a bomb squad to neutralize them. In October 2003, Dvir, Morag, and Gamliel were sentenced to prison terms ranging from twelve to fifteen years for their role in the plan. Both this and the March 5 plot are particularly frightening because of their intent to inflict terror on a mass scale by targeting a particularly vulnerable group (students) at soft targets.

#### An Increasing Trend

Over the past few years, a clear pattern has emerged showing increased Jewish extremist violence against Palestinian and Arab civilians:

August 2001: Jewish extremists are blamed for the death of Khaider Gedua Kna'an of Hizme, who was shot while driving to work on the Hizme-Mishor Adumim road. This was the fourth roadside shooting perpetrated by suspected Jewish terrorists against West Bank Palestinians during summer 2001.

September 2002: In the West Bank village of Yatta, four miles south of Hebron, five Palestinian students were wounded when a bomb exploded in the playground of the Zif Elementary School. Police suspect that Jewish terrorists were responsible for planting the explosives.

August 2003: Nine young Jewish men were arrested for planning and carrying out attacks on Palestinians.

January 2004: Yitzhak Pas and his brother-in-law Matityahu Shvu, both linked to the Bat Ayin cell of Jewish militants, were sentenced to fifteen months in prison after accepting a plea bargain convicting them of weapons-related charges. Pas and Shvu had been detained at the Hizme checkpoint in the West Bank in July 2003, while on their way to Jerusalem. A search of their car had revealed forty kilograms of explosives stolen from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

March 2004: Eliran Golan was charged with the attempted murder of Issam Makhoul, an Arab member of the Knesset. Golan is also suspected of having placed nine bombs throughout the Haifa area, with targets that included a mosque and Arab-owned homes and cars. In court, Golan stated that his intent was to strike at those who were harming Israel's security.

#### Conclusion

The broad scope of the Jewish extremist threat is cause for alarm. A successful, spectacular attack against Palestinian civilians or symbolic or religious sites would not only be tragic in its own right, but would also undercut

Israel's planned withdrawal from Gaza and threaten efforts to deescalate almost four years of violence between Israelis and Palestinians. Palestinian civilians are not the only group at risk of being targeted by Jewish extremists. In Hebron, for example, individuals such as Israeli police officers, IDF soldiers, Western diplomats, and European peace monitors have all been the targets of attacks by Jewish extremists. Moreover, although the few Jewish militants who are currently active all reportedly hail from the West Bank, a recent poll conducted by Haifa University's National Security Center uncovered several disturbing trends among Israeli Jews in general, including those living in Israel proper. For example, the poll found 11 percent support among Israeli Jews for the proposition, "There are circumstances under which there is no choice but to resort even to the use of arms to prevent the government from implementing its policy," and 8 percent support for the notion that it would be acceptable to physically harm political leaders in order to prevent a "looming political disaster."

Indeed, Jewish extremists appear to be both capable of and intent on conducting attacks to prevent such "disasters" as a withdrawal from Gaza. Although recent major terrorist plots have failed or been disrupted, the allure of executing a spectacular attack remains strong among such extremists. As Avi Dichter warned in late 2003, "For the state of Israel and the Jewish people in the diaspora, Jewish terrorism is liable to create a substantial strategic threat." Given the danger that such terrorism imposes on efforts to deescalate violence and promote regional stability, it is a threat to U.S. national security interests as well.

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