

Terror at the Hajj

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Brief Analysis

Among the two million Muslims participating in this year's Hajj in Mecca were a relatively small number of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs. While the vast majority of these pilgrims devoted all of their time in Mecca to religious purposes, others participated in meetings with terrorist operatives as well. Indeed, Hamas, Hizballah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have all attempted to recruit future terrorists—particularly from the coveted Israeli Arab pool—during the Hajj and lesser pilgrimages to Mecca (or 'umrah). For example, over the past two-and-a-half years, Israeli security forces have arrested two Hizballah terrorists recruited during the Hajj and seven other terrorists recruited while making 'umrah. The fact that terrorist groups of any sort are operating at the Hajj has dangerous implications for the United States. Indeed, it would be naive to assume that al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations targeting U.S. interests are not using Mecca as a convenient and secure location for their own meetings, recruitment, and fundraising.

Israeli Arabs, Palestinians, and the Hajj

Partaking in the Hajj (The greater pilgrimage), one of the five pillars of Islam, is a once-in-a-lifetime obligation for all able-bodied Muslims. Over a ten-day period during the twelfth month of the Islamic year, pilgrims participate in a series of rites in Mecca's Grand Mosque and throughout the city proper. Those foreigners who travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj typically remain in Mecca for three to four weeks. Muslims who cannot come to Mecca during the Hajj may perform 'umra, an abbreviated course of the rites, at any other time of the year. These "lesser pilgrimages" can take as little as an hour and a half to perform, in contrast to the six days of the Hajj.

Saudi Arabia has imposed country-specific quotas on the number of pilgrims it will permit at the Hajj. The typical quota is one pilgrim per thousand Muslims in a given population. By that standard, about 4,000 Palestinians and Israeli Arabs would be able to participate in the Hajj each year. This year, however, the Saudi government increased the number of Palestinians chosen by lot to 10,000. In addition, many of the Palestinians chosen are relatives of so-called "martyrs" who have been invited as guests of the king (last year there were 1,000 such invitees).

At the same time, the intifada has complicated the logistics of pilgrimage for Israeli Arabs and for Palestinians living in the territories under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority (PA). For example, all such individuals are required to complete travel documents at the Israeli Ministry of the Interior, and simply getting to the ministry is difficult in light of tightened security. Moreover, according to Mustafa Hashim Deeb, the Palestinian ambassador to Saudi Arabia, PA officials and all Palestinians under the age of thirty-five were prohibited from attending last year's Hajj. Those Palestinians and Israeli Arabs who are permitted to make the trip to Mecca must travel to Turkey or Jordan in order to procure a flight to Saudi Arabia.

Security Threat to Israel

A few Israeli Arabs and Palestinians use the pilgrimage to Mecca as an opportunity for terrorist gatherings and recruitment. Seven of the nine suspects arrested for such activities over the past two-and-a-half years were Israeli Arabs, a population group that will become an increasingly vital target for terrorist recruitment once the completed

West Bank security fence prevents Palestinian terrorists from perpetrating attacks inside Israel. Another suspect was a Palestinian from east Jerusalem; such individuals are likely to be coveted by terrorist recruiters because of their special identity papers, which give them relatively free access to Israel.

Each of the nine suspects engaged in a variety of terrorist-related activities under the aegis of a different terrorist organization. In October 2001, the Israeli General Security Service (Shin Bet) arrested Hizballah member Suleiman Ahmad Suleiman Rizek of Jerusalem for allegedly spying on Israel and recruiting other terrorists. Rizek was recruited while attending the Hajj in February 2001. Upon returning to Israel, he recruited his son to his cause and then began to carry out—with the assistance of Hamas funds—the two primary tasks assigned to him: collecting intelligence on the Israeli settlements near his home and examining the possibilities of acquiring weapons.

In November 2002, Shin Bet arrested Hizballah member Ahmed Awiti of Gaza for coordinating terrorist attacks. In February 2001, Awiti had accompanied a delegation to Mecca for the Hajj, where a Hizballah operative recruited him into a cell that the organization was establishing in Gaza. After explaining Hizballah's desire to help the Palestinians in their struggle against Israel, the operative gave Awiti the phone number for a Hizballah agent in Gaza and instructed him to contact the agent upon his return. This agent then dispatched Awiti to Lebanon for military training and briefings on select missions. Awiti was arrested upon his return from Lebanon. He later admitted links with other terrorist organizations; he had undergone similar training with Fatah in Lebanon during the early 1990s and used this knowledge in subsequent years to train Hamas members.

In March 2003, three Israeli Arabs from the Galilee area were arrested for allegedly planning to perpetrate a terrorist attack near Haifa on behalf of PIJ. The founder of this cell, Mahmoud Abed al-Halim, had been recruited by PIJ while making a pilgrimage to Mecca with a group of other Israeli Arabs in November 2002. Upon his return to Israel, al-Halim recruited his cousins Ibrahim Abed al-Hamid and Muhammed Abed al-Hamid. The three then scouted locations for suicide attacks and made plans to lead bombers to these sites. Prior to their arrest, the cousins had conducted surveillance at a discotheque, a shopping mall, and a coffeehouse. The trio had also considered obtaining weapons from Negev Bedouin.

In July 2003, four Hamas members from the Galilee area were arrested for "assisting the enemy during wartime and supporting a terrorist organization." All four were students who had joined Hamas in Jordan and been recruited for terrorism-related activities during pilgrimages to Mecca:

Khadir Shalatah traveled to Mecca in 2002, where he met with a Hamas operative who informed him that he would undergo military training upon his return to Jordan. Shalatah received training in weapons and explosives and was taught how to fabricate cover stories, how to behave if captured and interrogated, and how to transfer coded messages from Hamas in Jordan to operatives in the West Bank and Gaza. He was then instructed to compile intelligence on Israeli bus routes, bus stops, entrances to malls, and security guards. Shalatah also attempted to recruit other Israeli Arabs to Hamas.

In 2001, Amin Hassan traveled to Mecca and met with the same Hamas operative who had met with Shalatah, whereupon he was instructed on security issues and operational behavior. Upon his arrest, he was preparing for a trip to Turkey in order to undergo military training. He admitted to already having compiled intelligence on public places in Haifa and Tel Aviv.

Rami Hiadrah joined Hamas after being recruited by Shalatah in Jordan. He then met with other Hamas operatives during a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Malek Zuabi was advised to join Hamas by several of his Islamic studies professors in Jordan, all affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. While on a pilgrimage, Zuabi met with a senior al-Qaeda official in Saudi Arabia, after which he smuggled media inciting support for al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden into Israel.

Conclusion

U.S. officials now warn that a very small but dangerous number of terrorist operatives are using pilgrimages to Mecca as a cover for some of their activities. Disrupting such efforts—wherever they are conducted—is central to the success of the global war on terrorism. Policymakers should press Riyadh to take steps toward thwarting the financial and logistical support activities that terrorist groups continue to carry out at Islam's holiest sites.

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