

Palestinian Terrorists Expand Their Reach

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The bombing of a U.S. convoy in Gaza on Wednesday, which killed three American contract employees of the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv and injured a U.S. diplomat, was neither unprecedented nor unexpected. Indeed, U.S. embassy employees narrowly escaped injury in a similar attack last June, when unknown assailants detonated two bombs near their vehicle.

It is uncertain who is responsible for this week's attack. But Palestinian security officials quickly arrested several members of the Popular Resistance Committee (PRC), a conglomeration of former and current members of Fatah, Islamic Jihad, Hamas and the various Palestinian security forces. Whether the PRC is responsible is unclear. But such a strike would certainly be in keeping with its methods: The group's most daring and successful attack was a Feb. 14, 2002, roadside bombing that demolished an Israeli armoured tank.

Although Palestinian terrorist groups openly targeted Americans in the 1970s and 1980s, they largely abandoned this strategy after the 1993 Oslo Accords. In February, 2002, however, George Tenet, the director of the CIA, told Congress that if Palestinian groups "feel that U.S. actions are threatening their existence, they may begin targeting Americans directly, as Hezbollah's terrorist wing already does." On Dec. 21, 2002, a Palestinian gunman fired on a German diplomatic vehicle at close range as it drove through Jenin. Similar incidents occurred in February, 2001, and November, 2002, when Palestinian gunmen fired on Canadian and Danish diplomatic vehicles, respectively. Beyond the PRC, suspicion for this week's attack will quickly fall on a narrow spectrum of candidates who may have acted on their own or in tandem:

- Hamas. The Hamas leadership in Damascus is unlikely to risk the consequences of issuing a direct order to attack Americans. But individual Hamas cells may be acting on increasingly vocal support for such attacks. On Dec. 17, 2001, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) released a joint manifesto declaring that "Americans are the enemies of the Palestinian people [and] a target for future attacks." The following day, Hamas leaders issued a statement declaring that "Americans [are] now considered legitimate targets as well as Israelis." And in February, 2003, Hamas spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmed Yassin called on Muslims to "threaten Western interests and strike them everywhere" in the event of a "a crusaders' war" in Iraq.
- Palestinian Islamic Jihad. On March 26, 2002, PIJ terrorists attacked members of the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH), a civilian observer mission, murdering two Swiss observers and injuring a Turk. Diab

Shawachi, head of a PIJ cell in Hebron, and Abed al-Jabaro, a member of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades recruited into PIJ by Shawachi, were formally charged with the attack. According to the indictment, Shawachi fired at the observers' car even though the victims had identified themselves as TIPH representatives.

- Other Palestinian organizations have also threatened Western targets. For example, a leader of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades declared in April, 2002, that "Now, American targets are the same as Israeli targets." In May, 2002, members of another group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), detonated a bomb in the garden of the British Council in Gaza City -- just hours after the transfer of five PFLP terrorists and a Palestinian Authority official to a Jericho jail where U.S. and British civilian observers were stationed to verify their confinement.

- Hezbollah. Although Hezbollah has not killed Americans recently, it does target them, as Mr. Tenet indicated in 2002. Moreover, according to statements by captured operatives and other information made public by Israeli intelligence, Hezbollah and Lebanon-based operatives from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have recruited a network of rogue Fatah cells to serve as Hezbollah's West Bank cadres. Hezbollah is particularly well-known for its skill at manufacturing and placing sophisticated roadside bombs, a skill the group has now transferred to the West Bank and Gaza. Indeed, the aforementioned PRC destruction of an Israeli tank in February, 2002, was executed with the assistance of a Hezbollah agent who infiltrated Palestinian territory to provide the PRC with technical and operational advice.

In mid-2002, a type of mine that had previously been used only by Hezbollah in Lebanon was found in Hebron. Israeli authorities conducting a search in Hebron during that same month arrested Fawzi Ayub, a Hezbollah operative who had entered the territories by sea using a Canadian passport.

- Al-Qaeda. Osama Bin Laden's group has clearly indicated that Americans are its principal target. The question is whether the organization has enough of a presence in Gaza to have carried out this week's attack.

In August, Israel submitted a report to the UN stating that it had thwarted several attempts by al-Qaeda operatives carrying foreign passports to enter Israel in order to gather intelligence and conduct attacks. Israel also noted that it had captured Palestinians recruited by al-Qaeda abroad to conduct attacks in Israel. Moreover, pamphlets signed by the "Bin Laden Brigades of Palestine" have been found in Palestinian areas encouraging Palestinians to continue "in the footsteps of Osama bin Laden."

Last month, such reports found support in the United States: The U.S. Treasury Department highlighted al-Qaeda plans and funding for attacks in Israel, including "training on explosives . . . and remote-controlled devices" such as the one employed this week.

Regardless of who conducted this week's attack, it highlights the increasingly international nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet while Western nations have taken a unified stance against al-Qaeda, European nations especially have been more muted in regard to Palestinian groups and their regional allies.

In the wake of Wednesday's attack, U.S. officials would do well to press European and Middle Eastern partners to join Washington in redoubling efforts to delegitimize terrorist groups who purport to fight in the name of Palestinian nationalism. Clearly, it is not just local Israelis and Arabs who are threatened by their murderous campaigns -- but Americans, Canadians, Europeans and everyone else who seeks peace for the region. ❖

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