

Terrorist Attacks against Western Officials in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel

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Brief Analysis

The bombing of a U.S. convoy in Gaza today, which killed three American contract employees of the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv and injured a fourth, is neither unprecedented nor unexpected. Indeed, U.S. embassy employees narrowly escaped injury in a similar attack on June 28, 2003, when unknown assailants detonated two roadside bombs near their vehicle in the same area of today's attack. No group has claimed responsibility for these or prior attacks on traveling diplomats, but the accuracy of the perpetrators' preoperational intelligence and the overall sophistication of the attack suggests a well-planned, organized strike. Hence, suspicion will quickly fall on a narrow spectrum of candidates: Palestinian groups, Hizballah, and al-Qaeda.

Palestinian Groups

Although Palestinian terrorist groups targeted Americans often in the 1970s and 1980s, they largely abandoned this strategy after the 1993 Oslo Accords. In February 2002, however, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet 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." Indeed, several Palestinian groups are increasingly inclined to target American interests. Moreover, there is precedent for Palestinian groups attacking convoys of Western diplomats traveling in Gaza and the West Bank. On December 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.

Hamas. Although the Hamas leadership in Damascus is unlikely to risk the consequences of issuing a direct order to attack Americans, individual Hamas cells may be acting on increasingly vocal support for such attacks. On December 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." In June 2002, an official Hamas website featured a chat-room discussion in which participants considered various options for killing a group of five to fifteen Americans in Israel or Gaza. In February 2003, Hamas spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmed Yassin published an open letter calling 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), murdering two observers (Jinjis Twintuk of Turkey and Catherine Broyikes of Switzerland) and injuring a third (Hussein Asraslan of Turkey). 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 executing the attack. According to the indictment, Shawachi fired at the observers' car even though they identified themselves as TIPH representatives.

Palestinian nationalist groups. Other Palestinian organizations have also threatened Western targets. For example, terrorists affiliated with the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades swore to avenge the arrest of Fatah and al-Aqsa leader Marwan Barghouti. In late April 2002, a "senior" al-Aqsa leader declared, "Now, American targets are the same as Israeli targets." On May 1, 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. The bombing came just hours after the transfer of five PFLP terrorists and a PA official to a Jericho jail where U.S. and British civilian observers were stationed to verify their confinement. PFLP claimed credit for the attack in a statement denouncing Britain's role in the incarceration of its members.

Hizballah

Although Hizballah has not killed Americans recently, it does target them, as Tenet indicated in 2002. Moreover, according to statements by captured operatives and other information made public by the Israel Security Agency (or Shin Bet), Hizballah and Lebanon-based operatives from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have recruited a network of rogue Fatah Tanzim cells to serve as Hizballah's West Bank cadres. Operating under the name "Return Brigades," Hizballah's Palestinian squads have engaged in arms smuggling, recruitment, attempted suicide bombings, and sniper and roadside shooting attacks.

Hizballah 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. In mid-2002, a type of mine that had previously been used only by Hizballah in Lebanon was found in Hebron. Not coincidentally, Israeli authorities conducting a search in Hebron during that same month arrested Fawzi Ayub, a Hizballah operative who had entered the territories by sea using a Canadian passport.

Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda 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 today's attack. Recently released information highlighted al-Qaeda's efforts to recruit Palestinians and conduct attacks in Israel. 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."

In September, when U.S. authorities designated Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and several of his associates as "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" entities, they revealed that Zarqawi not only has "ties" to Hizballah, but that plans were in place for his deputies to meet with Asbat al-Ansar, Hizballah, "and any other group that would enable them to smuggle mujaheddin into Palestine . . . [and] smuggle operatives into Israel to conduct operations." Zarqawi received "more than \$35,000" in mid-2001 "for work in Palestine," which included "finding a mechanism that would enable more suicide martyrs to enter Israel" as well as facilitating the provision of "training on explosives . . . and remote-controlled devices."

In a case of reverse recruiting, Palestinian groups may be seeking out al-Qaeda operatives to fight for the Palestinian

cause. According to Time magazine, Jordanian security officials have stated that two Hamas activists traveled to Afghanistan in spring 2003 "to recruit the remnants of al-Qaeda's network to join its operations in the Arab world."

Conclusion

Regardless of who conducted today's attack, it highlights the increasingly international nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The bombing demonstrated the cost of the permissive operating environment that Palestinian terrorists and others bent on attacking Israel and the peace process have enjoyed over the past three years. In the wake of this attack, U.S. officials would do well to press European and Middle Eastern partners to join Washington in redoubling efforts to delegitimize terrorism conducted in the name of Palestinian nationalism—terrorism that hurts both the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people.

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