

Still With Us?

Testing Britain's Counterterror Resolve

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Last week, two disparate events tested Britain's resolve to take bold action in the war on terrorism. London passed the first hurdle with flying colors, arresting a wanted fugitive, and will hopefully show similar determination by shutting a terrorist front organization operating openly out of London. Coming on the heels of intelligence revealing al Qaeda plots to crash a hijacked aircraft into an important British building, it is critical London signal its continued resolve to fight terror. Last Thursday, British authorities arrested a former Iranian diplomat (traveling on a student visa with no diplomatic status or protection) for his role in a 1994 Hezbollah bombing attack in Argentina. London bristled at Iranian threats to downgrade bilateral relations and withdraw its ambassador over the arrest, seeking instead to forge a common European front on relations to Iran and exploring the possibility of an EU-wide downgrading of relations with Tehran over the exposure of Iran's frenetic nuclear program. The following day, the U.S. Treasury Department fingered the Palestinian Relief and Development Fund, or Interpal, as a U.K.-based Hamas front organization and branded it a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity." While it received a clean bill of health from the Charity Commission for England and Wales in 1996, Interpal has since been linked to the International Islamic Relief Organization, a Saudi charity and al Qaeda front organization currently under investigation by U.S. and other authorities. Investigators have also tied Interpal to Sheikh Mohammad Ali Hassan al Moayad. In addition to heading the Yemen office of the al Aqsa International Foundation, a Hamas front whose assets were frozen by U.S., British, German, and Danish authorities, Moayad was arrested in Germany for providing money, arms, communication gear, and recruits to al Qaeda. Now, following the U.S. designation, Britain's Charity Commission froze Interpal's accounts, forcing the charity to receive the commission's approval for any donations it seeks to send abroad.

Unfortunately, Interpal is only but one example of the logistical and financial support activity Hamas, Hezbollah, and other terrorist groups continue to conduct in the United Kingdom today. To be sure, though Abu Qatada and the Finsbury Mosque's Sarin-gas plotters have been apprehended, Hamas and Hezbollah support networks operate freely in the United Kingdom alongside such terrorist associates as Abu Hamza al Masri and Omar Bakri Mohamad. Hamas front groups in Europe have received increased attention over the past few months, in large part due to the

fact that in April two British Muslims of South Asian descent from Derby and Hounslow carried out a Hamas suicide bombing in Tel Aviv after being recruited in Britain and instructed by Hamas leaders in Syria. The following month, U.S. and British authorities froze the funds of the al Aqsa International Foundation. Now, the U.S. Treasury listed not only Britain's Interpal as a Hamas front, but also several smaller Hamas front organizations that worked closely with Interpal, including: France's Commite de Bienfaisance et de Secours aux Palestiniens, Switzerland's Association de Secours Palestinien, and the Palestinian Association in Austria. The designation also included the Sanabil Association for Relief and Development, a recently shut front in Lebanon that served as Interpal's subcontractor there. Of course, none of this should surprise—a recently released 1996 CIA document reveals that authorities were aware even then that Hamas fronts like Human Appeal International and Human Relief International were operating offices in London.

Less attention, however, has been paid to Hezbollah activities in Britain and Europe, which is why the arrest of Hadi Soleimanpur, the former Iranian ambassador to Argentina and a suspect in the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, is so significant. Soleimanpur's arrest came just days after Interpol issued a warrant for his arrest based on the request of an Argentine court on charges he and several other Iranian diplomats played central roles in plotting the 1994 attack, which killed 85 and wounded 250. (Saied Baghban, another Iranian diplomat indicted in the AMIA bombing, was apprehended and then released in Brussels this week). In fact, according to the Argentinean indictment in the AMIA bombing, Iran was also behind a pair of London bombings perpetrated by Palestinian terrorists on July 26 and 27, 1994, just a little over a month after the AMIA bombing.

Iran has a record of dispatching terrorists, particularly Hezbollah members, to conduct attacks in or from Britain. Back in 1989, Mustafa Maza, a Hezbollah operative staying in a London hotel, was killed when explosives he was carrying in his suitcase detonated prematurely. In a similar event, Hussein Makdad, a senior Hezbollah operative, made his way into Israel on a forged British passport in 1996 and was severely wounded while preparing explosives in his East Jerusalem hotel room.

Hezbollah used the U.K. as an operational platform from which to launch a comparable plot in Israel. In January 2001, British citizen Gerard (Jihad) Shuman, a Lebanese Shia and Hezbollah operative flew from Lebanon to Britain on his Lebanese passport, which he left with local Hezbollah operatives for later collection by a Hezbollah courier. A U.K.-based Hezbollah logistical support network provided Shuman with European clothing and other assistance, after which Shuman flew to Israel on his own British passport. Shuman stayed in Jerusalem, but was apprehended before being able to carry out his mission, believed to include collecting operational intelligence for a major terrorist attack in Israel. Hezbollah also maintains a robust fundraising and propaganda network in the U.K., raising tens of thousands of U.S. dollars for Hezbollah operations annually. The Lebanese Welfare Committee, which is registered as both a charity and a limited company and is co-located with the pro-Iranian Islamic Culture and Information Bureau, is suspected of raising funds for Hezbollah. So is the HELP Charity Association for Relief, which claims to raise funds for needy Lebanese but is believed to channel funds to Hezbollah. Meanwhile, the Abrar Islamic Foundation, formerly known as the Ahlul Bait Foundation, is suspected of funding both Palestinian terrorist groups and Hezbollah.

London now has the opportunity to take two strong steps in the war on terror by extraditing Soleimanpur—an Iranian who facilitated a deadly Hezbollah attack—to Buenos Aires, and by shutting Interpal—a Hamas front organization with ties to al Qaeda support networks. To their credit, British authorities are expected to lead the call for adding Hamas to the EU's terror list at this weekend's EU summit. But London's counter-terror campaign must also target Hezbollah, which maintains an even more-active and entrenched European network. Indeed, London's response to the global terrorist activities of groups like Hamas and Hezbollah and states like Iran will signal the strength of its resolve to fight the proponents of a global jihad, particularly those operating on British soil. ❖

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