

Who Pays for Palestinian Terror?

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Articles & Testimony

Just three days before Palestinian terrorists violated the Palestinian-Israeli cease-fire with a pair of suicide bombings an hour apart, Palestinian prime minister Mahmoud Abbas denied that sources in Saudi Arabia fund Palestinian terrorist groups like Hamas. Following meetings with Saudi Arabia's King Fahd and Crown Prince Abdullah in Jeddah, Abbas told reporters on August 9 that "Saudi financial assistance to needy Palestinians goes through the Palestinian Authority and not to militant groups."

Not so. In fact, recent intelligence estimates indicate that up to 60 percent of Hamas's annual budget -- some \$12 to \$14 million -- flows from the kingdom. Some of the money comes from official sources, including government-sponsored telethons and charities run and overseen by government officials, while still more comes from individuals and organizations whose activities are tolerated by Saudi officials.

Unfortunately, Abbas's blanket exoneration of the Saudis indicates that, instead of addressing the problem of Palestinian terrorist groups seeking to undermine the peace process and their continued funding by Saudi benefactors, Palestinian leaders are now following the Saudi practice of denial.

Long after the identities of the September 11 hijackers were known, Saudi interior minister Prince Nayef continued to question whether 15 of the 19 hijackers were indeed Saudis. In an interview with the Arabic language weekly 'Ain al Yaqeen on November 29, 2002, Prince Nayef stated, "We put big question marks and ask who committed the events of September 11 and who benefited from them. Who benefited from [the] events of 9/11? I think they [the Zionists] are behind these events."

Saudi diplomats from Berlin to Los Angeles, as well as Saudi-funded religious organizations from Cambodia to Mauritania, have fallen within the purview of continuing international investigations of terrorism. Nonetheless, Saudi foreign minister Prince Faisal responded to the redaction of 28 pages in the congressional report on the 9/11 attacks by insisting that Saudi Arabia is "an active and strong ally in the war on terrorism" and dismissing suspicion that Saudi individuals may have assisted the hijackers as "misguided speculation . . . born of poorly disguised malicious intent."

Prime Minister Abbas knows better. In December 2000, long before his appointment as prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas wrote a letter to Prince Salman, governor of Riyadh, complaining about Saudi funding of Palestinian

terrorism. When Israeli forces raided the West Bank in Operation Defensive Shield in April 2002, they uncovered Abbas's letter, marked "personal," in which he noted that "the Saudi committee responsible for transferring the contributions to beneficiaries is sending large sums to radical committees and associations including the Islamic Association [al Jamiah al Islamiyah] which belongs to Hamas, the al Salah Association, and brothers belonging to the Jihad in all areas."

Similarly, when Israeli forces raided the Tulkarm Charity Committee, they found material lauding Hamas suicide attacks and records showing the International Islamic Relief Organization, a Saudi charity deeply involved in terror financing, had donated at least \$280,000 to the Tulkarm Charity Committee and other Palestinian organizations linked to Hamas. Israeli authorities found that many of the checks made out to Hamas organizations were drawn from the corporate account of al Rajhi Banking and Investment at Chase Bank. Several charitable and banking institutions tied to the al Rajhi banking family (including the SAAR Foundation in Northern Virginia) are under investigation as terrorist fronts.

In another example, Israeli authorities arrested Osama Zohadi Hamed Karika, a Hamas operative, as he attempted to leave Gaza via the Rafah border crossing in December 2001. Karika was found with documents detailing the development of the Qassam rockets Hamas has been shooting from Gaza into Israel in the last few years. He admitted under questioning that he was on his way to Saudi Arabia to brief unidentified persons on the development of the rockets and to obtain their funding for the project. Before his arrest, Karika had already made one successful trip to Saudi Arabia, where he had secured initial funding for the Qassam rocket program.

Not all such funding comes from organizations. In October 2002, Treasury Department undersecretary for enforcement Jimmy Gurule traveled to Europe armed with a list of "about a dozen of al Qaeda's principal financial backers, most of them wealthy Saudis." Gurule went to present his European counterparts with "specific information on selective, high-impact targets" in an effort to have them "designated terrorist financiers and have their assets blocked." Many of these individuals also fund Hamas, prompting Gurule to press his European counterparts "to reconsider the common European and official E.U. distinction made between political or social wings and military or terrorist wings of organizations such as Hamas."

Also in October 2002 -- the very month the Saudis released a new statement detailing their purported efforts to combat terrorist financing -- Crown Prince Abdullah personally invited Hamas leader Khaled Mishal to Saudi Arabia to attend a conference of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth. The assembly, it should be noted, enjoys close ties to the royal family and has come under increased scrutiny for its own suspected ties to terrorist elements.

Responding to this week's suicide bombings, White House spokeswoman Claire Buchan called dismantling Palestinian terror networks "the highest priority." And in an interview on Egyptian television, Secretary of State Powell criticized Hamas for stressing the temporary nature of the three-month cease-fire. Powell continued: "It is time to end the use of terror as a way of achieving a political objective. It's part of the solution for the Middle East. It's also part of the global campaign against terrorism."

If the administration means what Powell said, it will not be distracted from the issue of Saudi funding. The latest Hamas and Al Aksa Martyrs Brigade suicide bombings demonstrate once again that such groups cannot be co-opted. Indeed, between the money they have received from their Saudi backers and the opportunity the current cease-fire has provided them to regroup and rearm, Palestinian terrorist groups are if anything better funded and more capable now than they were before. So curbing their Saudi funding is more urgent than ever. ❖

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