Arafat's Very Own Terror Brigades

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If Washington is not careful, sidelined PA Chairman Yasser Arafat will build the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades into the strongest Palestinian rejectionist group and emerge triumphant from his current isolation.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visited Washington last week to garner support for a Middle East cease-fire that includes dismantling Palestinian terrorist groups in the West Bank and Gaza. With the focus on Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), however, one terror organization has been largely ignored: the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, which threatened Sunday to end its truce with Israel.

If Washington is not careful, sidelined Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat will build the Brigades into the strongest Palestinian rejectionist group -- and emerge triumphant from his current isolation.

To understand how, first realize that Arafat and the Brigades are inextricably linked. In fact, Arafat helped form the terrorist group.

With the Intifada's launch in September 2000, suicide bombings quickly made radical groups like Hamas and PIJ more popular than Arafat's Fatah in the "Palestinian street." So Arafat and his cadres attempted to imitate the popular Islamic groups by creating one of their own.

The newly formed Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades co-opted Islamic symbols and slogans, drawing heavily from the Koran and Islamic tradition. And the Brigades soon matched Hamas by sponsoring suicide bombings -- more than two dozen to date (including a thwarted attack last week).

Almost three years later, Brigades members openly admit their membership in Arafat's Fatah faction. Malik Jallad, a

Brigades commander in Tulkarm acknowledges, "we belong to Fatah." One Brigades foot soldier told USA Today, "Our commander is Yasser Arafat himself."

Even Palestinian Authority minister Abd al-Fattah al-Hamayel admits that Fatah funds the organization. Arafat, for his part, calls the group's cadres his "children."

And documents seized by the Israeli military show financial links. In one instance, Arafat paid out $20,000 to the group. From other files, it's clear that he bankrolled everything from explosives to guns and gas money.

Today, Arafat uses the Brigades as a tool to undermine both peace efforts and his political adversaries.

• After a cease-fire with Israel was declared in late June, Zakaraya al-Zubaydi, the Brigades commander in Jenin, issued a leaflet slamming it. Days later, his fighters carried out the first major violation of the truce when they killed a Bulgarian in the West Bank.

In public, Arafat claimed to order the arrest of Zubaydi and his gang. In private, the Palestinian leader authorized a $10,000 payment to them. When the governor of Jenin voiced disapproval of this illegal deal, Zubaydi had him kidnapped and beaten. Only a phone call from Arafat to the Brigades leader secured the official's release.

• When Nabil Amr, a Palestinian reformer, openly criticized the rampant corruption in Palestinian ministries, Arafat responded by sending masked gunmen from the Brigades to shoot up his house.

The group is also doing everything in its power to subvert Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas and sabotage a cease-fire that would put the peace process back on track. In one recent leaflet circulated in the West Bank, the Brigades called on Arafat to remove Abbas and his government. Another threatened the Israelis with "a thousand years war" led by "an army of martyrs."

By challenging Israel and weakening Abbas' authority, the Brigades bolster their standing in a Palestinian street that puts a premium on radical rhetoric and deed. They also strengthen Arafat. Indeed, the sidelined leader can assert his relevance by insisting that he is the only Palestinian leader with the authority and power to rein in the organization. Thus, the Brigades will be his ticket back into the game.

The United States should not allow Arafat to use the Brigades for these purposes. Washington must push for the disarming of this group with the same intensity as it is working to break up Hamas and PIJ. The State Department, after all, declared the Brigades a foreign terrorist organization last March. In recent months, the group has carried out more acts of violence against Israelis than Hamas or PIJ. And in February, Brigadier al-Haj Abu Ahmad revealed to the Saudi-based al-Majallah his plans to send hundreds of fighters from the Brigades into Iraq to fight the U.S.

The Bush administration has done a great job in sidelining Arafat to date. Dismantling the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, one of Arafat's last terror cards, will be a crucial step in the process of rendering him irrelevant. ❖

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