

# Terror from Damascus (Part I): The Palestinian Terrorist Presence in Syria

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**S**yrrian sponsorship of terrorism topped the agenda of Secretary of State Colin Powell's recent trip to Damascus, and his visit was quickly followed by conflicting reports regarding the status of various terrorist headquarters there. The coming weeks will determine whether the Damascus offices of Hizballah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), and other terrorist groups have in fact been shut down, and, far more critically, whether their activities have been curtailed. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Syrian officials continue to describe the Damascus headquarters of these terrorist groups as "media offices." By harboring these groups, Syria is complicit in their terrorist activities, which include inciting, recruiting, training, coordinating, funding, and directing terrorists staging operations from Syria itself and from Syrian-controlled Lebanon.

## Palestinian Terrorists in Syria

The most significant Palestinian terrorist groups enjoying the safe harbor and sponsorship of the Syrian government are Hamas, PIJ, and PFLP-GC. These groups maintain offices in both Damascus and the adjacent Yarmouk refugee camp, including at least two Hamas offices, one PIJ office, and five PFLP-GC offices. Smaller Palestinian groups run at least eleven other offices in the Syrian capital.

Hamas. From their Syrian safe haven, Hamas leaders Khaled Mishal, Mousa Abu Marzouk (whom the U.S. government has named a Specially Designated Terrorist), Imad al-Alami, and others actively launch terrorist operations. Indeed, according to London's Sunday Telegraph, early intelligence suggests that Asif Mohammed Hanif and Omar Khan Sharif, the British suicide bombers who struck Tel Aviv last week, were recruited, trained, and sent on their mission by al-Alami in Damascus. This intelligence further suggests that the two "were led by a Hamas or Hizbollah guide through Jordan to the Allenby Bridge crossing into the West Bank." Such activity is not unusual. Since Syrian president Bashar al-Asad took office, Israeli authorities have uncovered more than twenty Hamas activists who were recruited in various Arab countries and sent to Syria for terrorist training. The recruits received weapons training as well as lessons in intelligence activities, hostage taking, suicide operations, and the preparation of explosives. Moreover, Syrian officials have themselves urged Hamas and other groups to step up attacks. In May

2002, for example, Damascus reportedly offered Hamas direct financial aid if it revived its tactic of suicide bombings.

Hamas leaders have acknowledged the central role that their group's Damascus-based "political" leaders play in operational decisionmaking. Hamas military commander Salah Shehada asserted that "the political apparatus is sovereign over the military apparatus, and a decision of the political [echelon] takes precedence over the decision of the military [echelon], without intervening in military operations."

PIJ. PIJ leader and Specially Designated Terrorist Ramadan Shallah operates out of Damascus with impunity, along with deputies such as Ziad Nakhala. Documents seized by Israeli forces revealed that Shallah sent Bassam al-Saadi, the PIJ official in charge of finances in Jenin, \$127,000 to "aid the families of those killed or arrested." In fact, the flow of money from Damascus to Jenin was so massive that PIJ eventually began funding operations by other groups. An internal document from the Palestinian Authority (PA) General Intelligence agency noted that PIJ "pays the expense of most of the activities that Fatah carries out. Additionally, the [Islamic] Jihad movement is adopting the [families of the] killed Fatah activists."

One of Shallah's deputies, Akram Ajuri, supervises Hamas terrorist activities in the West Bank from Damascus, maintaining direct contact with West Bank operatives. For example, he recruited Muhammad Mahmud Ismail Barawish back into operational service after the latter was released from a Palestinian jail in early 2001, transferring \$7,000 to him for the purpose of reorganizing the PIJ network in Hebron. Barawish and those under his command maintained regular contact with Ajuri, who instructed him to recruit operatives for "quality attacks." To facilitate such attacks, Ajuri provided Barawish with upwards of \$100,000, which Barawish then transferred to two of his recruits. Barawish reported back to either Ajuri or another individual in Damascus named "Muhaned" on terrorist attacks executed by the cell.

Other West Bank PIJ operatives in close contact with the group's Damascus headquarters include Tarek Az Aldin, a senior PIJ operative from the Jenin area. Aldin served as a coordinator for several PIJ terrorist cells in the West Bank and as "the link to the movement's central headquarters in Syria." Another such operative was Thaabat Mardawi, who was responsible for the deaths of 20 people and the injury of 150 others; according to an April 18 Israel Defense Forces report, Mardawi "was instructed and operated by the PIJ headquarters in Syria, with which he was in contact."

PFLP-GC. Through the interrogations of Nasser Aweiss and other senior al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and PIJ operatives, Israeli authorities learned that PFLP-GC operatives have been training members of al-Aqsa, PIJ, and other Palestinian terrorist groups in PFLP-GC camps near Damascus. These Palestinian trainees travel through Jordan to the Syrian border, where they are met by Syrian officials who check their names against a preapproved list and escort them to PFLP-GC camps. PFLP-GC instructors then train them in terrorist tactics, while Syrian officials remain on the sidelines and ensure that the trainees are treated properly. In February 2002, Ziad Nafa, a former PFLP-GC member, told a Jordanian court that one of the thirteen suspects then on trial for plotting to bomb the U.S. embassy in Amman had asked him to arrange terrorist training for the suspects in Syria. Beyond its activities in Syria itself, PFLP-GC is believed to maintain some fifteen offices and camps in Syrian-controlled Lebanon.

Weapons Smuggling. Palestinian terrorists also use Syria as a weapons-smuggling hub. In May 2002, for example, Israeli forces intercepted the weapons-smuggling ship Santorini. Dib Vaiza, the ship's captain, told Israeli authorities that the PFLP-GC smuggling operation had been facilitated by Syria and Hizballah. In December 2001, Jordan tried three Islamists accused of smuggling weapons from Syria to the West Bank for attacks on Israelis. Two other suspects remain at large, including Abd al-Muti Abu Miliq, a Palestinian with Syrian travel documents who was sentenced in absentia to fifteen years of hard labor for his role in the al-Qaeda millennial terrorist plot in Jordan. In June 2000, Israel arrested a Lebanese citizen traveling from Syria to the West Bank via the Allenby Bridge as he

attempted to smuggle weapons (including katyusha rockets) in his vehicle. And in January 2002, an Israeli court unsealed indictments against five Druze residents of the Golan Heights who were caught smuggling military-grade Claymore roadside bombs and hand grenades across the Syrian-Israeli border. The weapons, which bore instructions for achieving maximum casualties and damage to "people and vehicles," were to be delivered to the West Bank.

#### A Threat to Peace

Even as several Damascus-based Palestinian terrorist groups denied that Syrian officials instructed them to close their offices, one PA official commented, "Of course they aren't doing any journalistic work out there. . . . [They] have their own weapons, their own cells, as well as independent bases" in both Syria and Syrian-controlled Lebanon. Moreover, a PA security official has described Palestinian terrorist groups based in Damascus as "people who work for the Syrian intelligence," adding, "they are a big threat to the PA and the peace process." To be sure, the *raison d'être* of such groups is undermining the PA, hurting Israel, and torpedoing efforts to reach a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The liberation of Iraq, confirmation of Abu Mazen as PA prime minister, and presentation of the Quartet's Roadmap have created a rare opportunity to deescalate the past thirty-two months of Israeli-Palestinian violence and move toward a renewed peace process. It is now critical that Damascus heed President George W. Bush's June 24, 2002, call to "choose the right side in the war on terror." Not only must Syria close the offices and training camps of terrorist groups, it must also end its support for such groups, deport their leaders, and restrict their activities in Lebanon.

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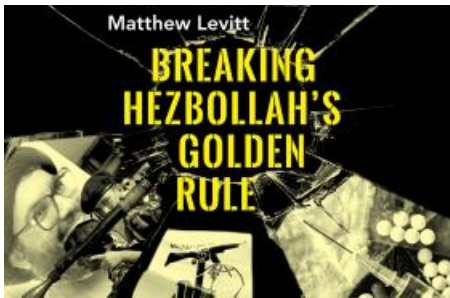
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