

The U.S. Indictment of Palestinian Islamic Jihad Militants: The Iranian Connection

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Brief Analysis

On February 20, 2003, the U.S. Department of Justice announced the indictment of eight leading members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). The indictment provides a wealth of detail about the close connection between PIJ and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Background on PIJ and the Indictment

PIJ is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. Department of State. In a statement published the day of the indictment, Attorney General John Ashcroft described PIJ as "one of the most violent terrorist organizations in the world," a group "committed to suicide bombings and violent jihad activities." Quoting from the "Manifesto of the Islamic Jihad in Palestine," a document discovered during the course of the investigation, Ashcroft emphasized the manner in which the text referred to the United States as "the Great-Satan America." He also asserted that PIJ's purpose was "to destroy Israel and end all Western influence in the region."

PIJ was established in 1981 with an ideology that blended Palestinian nationalist ideas, themes drawn from the beliefs of the Muslim Brethren, and the teachings of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Shi'i leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (this despite the fact that PIJ was a Sunni movement). When Fathi Shiqaqi, PIJ's first leader, moved to Lebanon, he also enhanced the organization's ties with Hizballah.

The fifty-count indictment announced in February charged the eight defendants with operating a racketeering enterprise from 1984 until the present in support of numerous violent terrorist activities associated with PIJ. The defendants include Sami al-Arian, described as PIJ's "North American leader," and Ramadan Shallah, the organization's secretary-general and former executive director of the World Islam and Studies Enterprise (WISE), a think tank founded by al-Arian in Florida. Four of the eight defendants have been arrested in Florida and Illinois, while the other four are free abroad.

It is noteworthy that al-Arian allegedly continued to participate in this conspiracy even after his office was raided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Immigration and Naturalization Service in November 1995, shortly after the nomination of Shallah as head of PIJ. Moreover, the long delay between that raid and the recent indictment follows the same pattern as the case of the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia; the bombing occurred in June 1996, but indictments were not issued until June 2001.

Connections between PIJ and Iran

Besides taking a long time to produce indictments, the Khobar and PIJ cases share another commonality: active Iranian government support for the two indicted organizations. The Khobar indictment specifically mentioned that the group involved -- Saudi Hizballah -- was inspired, supported, and directed by elements of the Iranian government. Although the PIJ indictment contains no such clear statement, the document does provide much information about Iranian involvement in the organization's terrorist activities against Israel and its financial, logistical, and recruitment activity inside the United States.

For example, the indictment explains that PIJ infighting prior to Shiqaqi's death was resolved by the 1994 Beirut Agreement, which reaffirmed Iran's role as the organization's "strategic partner." At the time, the group was in financial straits and under pressure from Iran to clean up its spending practices. Al-Arian was asked to conduct an audit and propose financial reforms, after which "Iran needed to be notified." Iran is also identified at least nine times in the indictment as a major source of funds for PIJ. Indeed, Iranian representatives (also designated as "the third party") were present during some of PIJ's discussions regarding financial problems and were notified of the decisions that the organization made as a result of internal debates; eventually, Tehran "intervened in the PIJ because of its financial difficulties."

Such difficulties even led to disputes between PIJ leaders about who would "deal" with the Iranians and about how such negotiations should be handled. Al-Arian feared that "Shiqaqi would make his own deal with Iran" and that "because the financial situation was so desperate, the PIJ would try to raise money by selling several of the houses they owned." Similarly, Hassan al-Khatib, PIJ's treasurer, stated that he had convinced the Iranians "not to authorize payments to Fathi Shiqaqi when he requested money." Some PIJ leaders had even suggested confronting the Iranians by "telling them strongly that disbursement of PIJ funds was none of their business," whereas others, such as Bashir Nafi, a PIJ leader currently free in the United Kingdom, counseled against such measures. He "worried that PIJ members would succumb to Iranian pressure because everyone in the PIJ needed money." Much of the money went "to the families of the martyrs and detainees."

Moreover, in 1996, federal court records related to the al-Arian investigation showed repeated calls from his Tampa home to the Iranian Interest Section in Washington. Although these records were not cited as part of the latest accusations, the February indictment does claim that al-Arian changed his communication methods in order to protect sensitive contacts as a result of the negative publicity surrounding WISE since 1996.

The close relationship between PIJ and Iran is by no means a secret; PIJ leaders often refer to it publicly. In a 1999 interview, Shallah defended the relationship, as did Ziyad Nakhalah (aka Abu Tariq), PIJ's second in command, in an August 2001 interview. Indeed, when pressed to explain why the alliance with Iran and Hizballah has not produced "field successes and qualitative operations such as the ones achieved by Hizballah," Nakhalah boasted that PIJ is the third military power in the Palestinian arena after Fatah and Hamas, "as confirmed by public opinion polls."

PIJ is in fact a frequent perpetrator of terrorism in Israel. Since the beginning of the current intifada, PIJ has been responsible for 19 suicide bombings and 7 car bombings in which at least 53 Israelis were killed (including two U.S. citizens mentioned in the February indictment) and more than 500 wounded (including three U.S. citizens). At least 12 other PIJ suicide bombings have been thwarted by Israeli security forces or by "work accidents" committed by the terrorists themselves. PIJ has even attempted to increase the scope of such attacks; in September 2002, Israeli security forces intercepted a truck containing a half-ton bomb prepared by PIJ and intended for the city of Haifa.

The Challenge to the U.S. Government

In addition to sponsoring PIJ's terrorist activities, Tehran has sought to arm other Palestinian organizations, including the Palestinian Authority itself. Prior to the highly publicized January 2002 seizure of fifty tons of high-quality Iranian weaponry on the Gaza-bound ship *Karine-A*, Israeli forces seized two boats -- the *Calypso* and the *Santorini* -- involved in smuggling Iranian arms from Lebanon to Gaza. In addition, because the Bush administration has dealt a serious blow to the flow of money between various U.S.-based Palestinian charities and Hamas, the organization has been forced to seek closer ties with Tehran in order to compensate. Moreover, Israeli sources report that Iran probably funded the deadly January 7, 2003, suicide bombing in Tel Aviv carried out by the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.

In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said that Iran has

distinguished itself somewhat from Iraq and North Korea, its peers in the "axis of evil," in part because it has "done some good things in the war on terrorism." Perhaps so, but the Bush administration must find the means to pressure Tehran into abandoning all of its support for terrorism, without overlooking the regime's past involvement in terrorist activities or perpetuating the hardliners' grip on power at the expense of the country's moderate reformist forces.

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