

Palestinian Terrorist Groups Threaten U.S. Interests

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Feb 14, 2003

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

In a recorded statement released this week, Osama bin Laden called on Iraqis to carry out suicide attacks against Americans. Al-Qaeda is not the only terrorist organization to call for such attacks, however; just four days earlier, Hamas spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmed Yassin published an open letter calling on Muslims to "threaten Western interests and strike them everywhere" in the event of a "a crusaders' war" against Islam in Iraq. Indeed, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet told the Senate Intelligence Committee this week that "the days when we made distinctions between terrorist groups are over." Moreover, in February 2002, Tenet told Congress that if Palestinian groups "feel that U.S. actions are threatening their existence, they may begin targeting Americans directly, as Hizballah's terrorist wing already does." In fact, several Palestinian groups are increasingly inclined to target American interests.

Hamas

Hamas has long been active in the United States, using it as a base for fundraising and logistical support—a situation that U.S. authorities should regard as unacceptable, to the same degree that European authorities regard al-Qaeda's support activities as unacceptable. Consider the following examples:

Five days before the September 11 attacks, Federal Bureau of Investigation and Customs Service agents raided the offices and froze the assets of Infocom, an internet company linked to Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzook, who has been listed as a Specially Designated Terrorist by the U.S. government. In December 2002, several individuals, including Marzook and his wife Nadia, were indicted on charges associated with Infocom's illegal exports to state sponsors of terrorism and business dealings with designated terrorists.

In December 2001, the Bush administration froze the assets of the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, labeling it a Hamas front organization. The al-Aqsa International Bank and the Beit al-Mal Holdings Company, two financial institutions linked to Hamas and based in the Palestinian territories, were also subject to this financial blocking order.

Several Hamas activists have been deported from, or refused entry to, the United States. Ghassan Dahduli, a longtime leader of the Hamas-affiliated Islamic Association for Palestine and an associate of convicted al-Qaeda operative Wadi al-Hage, was deported on November 26, 2001, while another suspected Hamas associate, Sabri

Samira, was barred from returning to the United States after visiting the Middle East in January 2003.

The U.S.-led war on terror has also affected the internal debate within Hamas regarding the targeting of Americans. On December 17, 2001, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) released a joint manifesto declaring that "Americans are the enemies of the Palestinian people . . . [and] a target for future attacks." The following day, Hamas leaders issued a statement declaring that "Americans [are] now considered legitimate targets as well as Israelis." That same month, Time magazine reported that "somewhere in a Hamas safe house, militants inflamed by the American war in Afghanistan are debating whether it is time to add U.S. targets in Israel and the territories to their hit list." More disturbingly, in June 2002, an official Hamas website featured a chat-room discussion in which participants considered various options for killing a group of five to fifteen American citizens in Israel or the Gaza Strip. These options included running over the "American dogs," throwing Molotov cocktails at their car, burning them in their cabin on the beach, poisoning them, or shooting them "as an example for others like them." Such murders would make "Americans understand they are not safe in Muslim countries."

Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Hamas is not the only group capable of, or inclined toward, targeting U.S. interests. In July 2000, when President Bill Clinton said he would "seriously consider" moving the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, PIJ secretary-general Ramadan Abdullah Shallah warned, "The U.S. administration is fully responsible for the consequences of such an act of aggression and should expect a response from the Palestinian people at the proper time and place." Shallah added that Clinton's "threat" to move the embassy amounted to "a statement of war against our people and our Muslim holy sites." Similarly, in a March 2001 statement issued in response to PIJ's inclusion on a British list of international terrorists, the group announced, "We in Islamic Jihad condemn the aggression and call on our people and [the Arab] nation to strike British and American interests in the region, boycott their products, and break the sanctions on Iraq."

More recently, Shallah implicitly threatened both the Saudi and U.S. governments. Speaking at a March 2002 conference held in advance of the Arab summit in Beirut, Shallah derided Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's offer to normalize relations with Israel as part of a larger peace plan, asking, "Who has the courage to raise the Israeli flag in the sacred land of Mecca?" Palestinians, he went on, "will go after anyone who tries to give up the rights of the Palestinians, because Palestine is part of the crown of the Arabs." That same month, PIJ terrorists murdered two members of the Temporary International Presence in Hebron and injured a third, intentionally targeting the Swiss and Turkish peace observers.

Secular Groups and Rogue Elements

Various secular Palestinian organizations have also indicated their intention to target Americans. For example, terrorists affiliated with the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades swore to avenge the arrest of Fatah and al-Aqsa leader Marwan Barghouti. In late April 2002, a "senior" al-Aqsa leader declared, "Now, American targets are the same as Israeli targets." Since September 2000, there has also been a marked increase in attacks carried out by individual Palestinians unaffiliated with any particular group. For example, in October 2001, a Palestinian living in Saudi Arabia killed one American citizen and wounded another in a suicide bombing at al-Khubar. The Saudi investigation determined that the bomber was acting alone for "unverified motives relating to the Palestinian Intifada." It is possible that similar lone elements or rogue cells could take it upon themselves to carry out attacks against U.S. interests, as appears to have been the case in the July 2002 shooting attack at the El-Al ticket counter at Los Angeles International Airport.

Conclusion

To be sure, the threats issued by Palestinian terrorist groups against U.S. and Western interests have thus far

amounted to much rhetoric and little action. Yet, given the backdrop of increased anti-Americanism and the spread of Islamist terrorist groups, Washington can no longer assume that this trend will hold. The appropriate policy response to these threats, as Tenet noted, is to target all terrorist groups. After all, it is fruitless to make distinctions between such groups when even those that are not operationally linked (e.g., al-Qaeda and Hamas) have critical logistical and financial links.

Unfortunately, the State Department adopted a different approach when it chose not to list Palestinian terrorists wanted for killing Americans on its "Rewards for Justice" program website. In its February 2002 Report on Terrorist Activity in which United States Citizens Were Killed, the State Department attempted to explain this omission, citing "significant concern . . . that such publicity would be detrimental to ongoing efforts to capture these fugitives and could increase the danger to American citizens and facilities overseas." This flawed approach—refraining from openly pursuing terrorists for fear of retaliation—should not be permitted to spread.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow in terrorism studies at The Washington Institute.

Policy #413

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

♦
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)