

Sponsoring Terrorism: Syria and Islamic Jihad

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Articles & Testimony

This is the third in a series of MEIB studies on Syrian ties to extremist groups listed by the US State Department as terrorist organizations. The first two articles addressed the PFLP-GC and Hamas. An article on Syrian relations with Hezbollah was published in the February 2002 issue.

Ramadan Abdullah Shallah

On November 15, not long after Palestinian gunmen killed twelve Israelis in the West Bank town of Hebron, the Al-Jazeera satellite television station broadcast a telephone interview from Damascus with Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Abdullah Shallah. "I extend congratulations to our heroic mujahideen . . . who were able to carry out this remarkable operation. It included members of the Jerusalem Brigades, the military wing of Islamic Jihad in Palestine," he boasted.¹

After American officials called upon Syria to expel the organization, the foreign ministry in Damascus replied that "the Syrian government has more than once made clear the informational character of these offices, whose work is limited to expressing their viewpoint," adding that "operations are planned and carried out in the occupied territories . . . not based on instructions issued by the media offices that are found in some Arab capitals." For good measure, the statement accused the United States of being "responsible for the current bloodletting" because of its policies in the Middle East.²

In fact, the evidence linking Islamic Jihad operations to its operational headquarters in Damascus is overwhelming.

Background

Islamic Jihad in Palestine (Al-Jihad Al-Islami fi Filastin) originated in the 1970s among Palestinian students in Cairo, notably Fathi Shiqaqi, a former leftist who had grown disillusioned with the secular Palestinian movements and joined the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. By the mid-1970s, he had rejected the teachings of the Brotherhood, which held that the destruction of Israel must await an "internal jihad" to reform and unify the Islamic world, and embraced the 1979 revolution in Iran as a model of action. Although a number of other radical Palestinian Islamists inspired by the Islamic Republic in Tehran adopted the name Islamic Jihad as a cover for terrorist activity,³ the

faction started by Shiqaqi is the one that flourishes today.

Following the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981, Shiqaqi was expelled from the country and returned to Gaza, where he formally established the movement. Unlike the Palestinian Hamas movement, which would emerge in the late 1980s, Islamic Jihad made little effort to develop a social and educational infrastructure or attract a mass following. Shiqaqi believed that a campaign of spectacular terrorist attacks against Israel in the name of revolutionary Islam would inspire a popular revolt. After securing funding from Iran's mullahs, who had ended their early flirtation with the PLO and were anxious to sponsor like-minded (if Sunni) Palestinian revolutionaries, Shiqaqi began developing the group's military apparatus, the Jerusalem Brigades (Saraya al-Quds), which started carrying out attacks against Israeli soldiers in the mid-1980s. The most notorious was the Gate of Moors operation in October 1986, when Islamic Jihad operatives threw hand grenades at military recruits attending an induction ceremony near the wailing wall in Jerusalem, wounding 70 and killing the father of a soldier.

In 1988, after spending two years in an Israeli prison for smuggling arms into Gaza, Shiqaqi was deported to Lebanon and the following year established a headquarters in Damascus. This transition brought Islamic Jihad leaders into direct contact with Iranian officials for the first time through the Islamic Republic's embassies in Beirut and Damascus. Unlike Hamas, which strove to spread its external political and military infrastructure across several different countries in the 1990s and came to depend primarily on Syria only after its activities were curtailed elsewhere, the Islamic Jihad presence abroad has always been concentrated in Syria and Syrian-occupied Lebanon. Islamic Jihad operatives soon began training at Hezbollah camps in Lebanon, under the supervision of Iranian Revolutionary Guards stationed in the country, and carried out some joint operations with Hezbollah against Israeli forces in south Lebanon during the 1990s.

Although Islamic Jihad and Hamas were fierce rivals in the early years, after the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords both joined the Damascus-based Alliance of Palestinian Forces (APF) and set aside their differences. By 1995, Hamas had also established its operational headquarters in Damascus (its political office was then still in Amman) and, at the behest of Iran, the two were coordinating their terrorist activities.

In 1995, Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for a deadly string of terrorist attacks, including twin suicide bombings in January that killed 22 Israelis in Beit-Lid, an attack in April that claimed eight lives in Kfar Darom, and a suicide bombing in August that killed five people in Jerusalem. After each attack, the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin blamed Shiqaqi for issuing the orders to strike, but the latter maintained that "the planning and execution of suicide operations are being done inside the occupied Palestinian territories . . . we don't send weapons, money or men from outside," while Syrian President Hafez Assad rebuffed American demands to expel the Islamic Jihad leader from Damascus. As it turns out, Shiqaqi was instrumental to the group's operational capacity. After his assassination in October and a brief spate of attacks in early 1996, Islamic Jihad terror attacks dropped off so dramatically that in 1997 the Jerusalem Post reported "a void in the organization so deep that the group barely functions today."⁵

With the beginning of the Palestinian uprising in September 2000, however, Islamic Jihad sprang back to life. Since then, it has claimed responsibility for scores of terrorist attacks. In part, this has reflected the group's greater coordination with other Palestinian groups, as well as the Palestinian Authority (PA) security services. A critical factor in its revival was an increase in Iranian funding for the group. According to American officials, Tehran began paying Islamic Jihad millions of dollars in cash bonuses for each attack against Israel.⁶ In order to maintain control over the expanding, Iranian-funded Islamic Jihad infrastructure in the territories, centered in Jenin, Shallah has made sure that orders and money are distributed to operatives from his headquarters in Damascus.

Syrian Operational and Logistical Support

As early as 1993, Shiqaqi acknowledged that he received Iranian funding and channeled it to operatives in Gaza and the West Bank. "Iran gives us money and supports us," he said in an interview with Newsday, "then we supply the money and arms to the occupied territories and support the families of our people. Just about all of it goes there because that's where most of our organization is."⁷

The most detailed evidence that Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus planned attacks, sent orders for attacks to operatives in the territories and funneled money to them, comes from the documents of PA intelligence agencies seized by Israeli forces in the West Bank earlier this year and deemed authentic by American officials. In an October 2001 document, Palestinian Preventive Security chief Jibril Rajoub briefed Yasser Arafat on the activities of Palestinian terrorist groups in Syria, citing intelligence indicating that "intensive meetings are being held in Damascus, in which leaders of the Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front and the Hezbollah take part, in an attempt to increase the joint activities "inside," with financial support from Iran."⁸

The documents also show that Shallah and other Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus maintained close contact with the group's operatives on the ground in the West Bank. One such operative was Tarek Az Aldin, from the Jenin area, who served as a coordinator for several terrorist cells in the West Bank and was "the link to the movement's central headquarters in Syria."⁹ Another Damascus-West Bank link was Taabat Mardawi, a senior Islamic Jihad operative responsible for the deaths of 20 people and injury of 150 others, who "was instructed and operated by Islamic Jihad headquarters in Syria, with which he was in contact."¹⁰ Documents seized by Israeli forces during Operation Defensive Shield highlight the regular contact Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus maintained not only with Mardawi, but with Ali Saffuri, perhaps the most senior Islamic Jihad operative in the West Bank until his capture in April 2002.¹¹

Saffuri and Mardawi regularly called Shallah, including once in the midst of battling Israeli forces in Jenin during Operation Defensive Shield in April 2002. In their communications with superiors in Damascus, both by phone and email, the two sought clarifications of the group's policies regarding terrorist attacks, informed them of successful attacks so Damascus-based leaders could claim responsibility, requested funds, and received instructions diagrams for making improvised explosive devices and producing arms. In his interrogations, Saffuri acknowledged that during the last Ramadan (late 2001) the leadership in Damascus gave him approval to reach an agreement with Fatah elements for carrying out joint Islamic Jihad-Fatah attacks.¹²

While PA officials insist that these documents are forgeries, Saffuri himself acknowledged that they were authentic. In a September interview with CBS "60 Minutes," Saffuri reacted to descriptions in PA documents of his role in at least ten suicide attacks by asking, "truthfully, I mean, how did you get this from the Palestinian Authority? These are secret documents. They are not supposed to be disclosed."¹³

Documents seized by Israeli forces also give specific details of how Shallah transfers funds from Damascus to the personal bank accounts of individual Islamic Jihad terrorists. In one case, Shallah sent Bassam al-Saadi, the Islamic Jihad official in charge of finances in Jenin, \$127,000 to "aid the families of those killed or arrested," but the funds somehow "disappeared." This, and another case in which \$31,000 failed to reach Saffuri, have created significant internal rifts with the organization over charges of internal corruption.¹⁴ The flow of money from Damascus to Jenin was so massive that Islamic Jihad was funding operations by other groups. One of internal documents of the PA General Intelligence (GI) agency notes that Islamic Jihad "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."¹⁵

Akram Ajuri, a senior Islamic Jihad leader in Damascus who directs operational activity in the West Bank, also maintained direct contact with field activists in the West Bank. Ajuri recruited Muhammad Mahmud Ismail Barawish back into operational service after Barawish was released from a Palestinian jail in early 2001, and transferred \$7,000 to him for the purpose of reorganizing the Islamic Jihad network in Hebron.¹⁶ Barawish and others under his

command maintained regular contact with Ajuri, and received instructions to recruit operatives for "quality attacks." To facilitate these attacks, Ajuri provided Barawish with upwards of \$100,000 in operating funds, which Barawish then transferred on to two military activists he recruited.¹⁷ Barawish reported back to either Ajuri or another person in Damascus named "Muhaned" on terror attacks executed by the cell.

Beyond harboring Islamic Jihad leaders who order, plan and finance terror attacks, Syria actively promotes these attacks by providing for training of the group's operatives. Through the interrogations of Nasser Aweiss and other senior al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and Islamic Jihad operatives, Israeli authorities learned that members of Islamic Jihad have been undergoing terrorist training in Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command (PFLP-GC) camps south of Damascus. Traveling through Jordan, the Palestinian trainees are met at the Jordanian-Syrian border by Syrian officials who check their names against a pre-approved list and escort them to camps run by the PFLP-GC. Iranian-funded PFLP-GC instructors train the Palestinians in terrorist tactics, while Syrian officials remain on the sidelines assuring the trainees are properly cared for.¹⁸ Ziad Nafa, a former PFLP-GC member, told a Jordanian court in February that one of the thirteen suspects on trial for plotting to bomb the US embassy in Amman asked him to arrange terrorist training for the group in Syria.¹⁹

American Reaction

After the al-Qaeda attacks in September 2001, the Bush administration focused once again on the role of state sponsors, but with a twist. The wording of President Bush's September 20, 2001, declaration - "From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime" - implicitly offered state sponsors a virtual amnesty for previous actions, should they jettison the terrorist option and join fully in the campaign to stamp out terror.²⁰ This message was reinforced vis-a-vis the Syrian when the United States did not oppose its election to the world's most elite security club -- the United Nations Security Council - one week later. Still, Syrian support for terrorism continued unabated and even increased.

Just five days after Syria assumed its seat on the Security Council, Shallah claimed responsibility for a June 5, 2002, suicide bus bombing at the Megiddo junction in northern Israel that killed 17 people and wounded over 40 more. The attack was believed to have been the work of Iyad Sawalha, a commander and bombmaker whose assassination came months later. In interviews with al-Jazeera and other media outlets, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres stated that Shallah in fact ordered the Megiddo attack from his Damascus headquarters. Later that month, when President Bush called on Syria to "choose the right side in the war on terror by closing terrorist camps and expelling terrorist organizations," one can safely assume he had Islamic Jihad squarely in mind.²¹

Conclusion

While Syria officials stress the "informational character" of the Damascus offices of Islamic Jihad and other terrorist groups and claim that their work "is limited to expressing their viewpoint,"²² these offices clearly direct fund, and coordinate terrorist operations in the West Bank and Gaza. They serve specifically operational functions, and they do so at the behest of - and in the service of - the Syrian regime.

Despite President Bush's call for Damascus to expel terrorist organizations from Syria and close down their camps, the Syrian foreign ministry has again made it clear that it has no intention of shutting down these facilities. Syria's proactive support for terrorist groups, some of them with "global reach" has expanded, not shrunk, since September 11, and its proxies have engaged in increasingly heinous attacks. If Senators Bob Graham and Richard Shelby have their way, the Assad regime will be given an ultimatum: close down terrorist headquarters and training camps in Syria and Lebanon, or the United States will close them down itself.

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Notes

1 Reuters, 15 November 2002.

2 United Press International, 18 November 2002.

3 Others include Islamic Jihad - Al-Aqsa Battalions (Al-Jihad al-Islami - Kata'ib al-Aqsa), established in Jordan in 1982 by followers of Sheikh As'ad Bayyud al-Tamimi; Islamic Jihad - The Temple (al-Jihad al-Islami - Bait al-Maqdas), a faction of the Fatah movement which emerged in the early 1980s; and the Islamic Jihad Squad (Tanzim al-Jihad al-Islami), an Islamist offshoot of the Palestinian Popular Liberation Forces (PPLF) started by Ahmad Muhanna in the 1980s.

4 United Press International, 25 August 1995.

5 "The big fish that got away," The Jerusalem Post, 17 October 1997.

6 "A Secret Iran-Arafat Connection Is Seen Fueling the Mideast Fire," The New York Times, 24 March 2002.

7 "Terrorism Inc.: Islamic Jihad Founder Admits Funding by Iran," Newsday, 11 April 1993.

8 "Iran and Syria as Strategic Support for Palestinian Terrorism (Based on the interrogations of arrested Palestinian terrorists and captured Palestinian Authority documents)," Israel Defense Forces, Military Intelligence, September 2002.

9 Arrest of a Leader Islamic Jihad Operative, IDF, 20 June 2002.

10 Jenin, the Capital of the Palestinian Suicide Terrorists, IDF, 18 April 2002. Appendix C: Characteristics of Two Arch-Terrorists from the Jenin Area Captured by the IDF, in document format.

11 "Iran and Syria as Strategic Support for Palestinian Terrorism (Based on the interrogations of arrested Palestinian terrorists and captured Palestinian Authority documents)," IDF, Military Intelligence, September 2002.

12 Ibid.

13 CBS 60 Minutes: The Arafat Papers, 29 September 2002.

14 The Cooperation Between Fatah and the PA Security Apparatuses with PIJ and Hamas in the Jenin Area, IDF, 9 April 2002.

15 Ibid.

16 "Iran and Syria as Strategic Support for Palestinian Terrorism (Based on the interrogations of arrested Palestinian terrorists and captured Palestinian Authority documents)," Israel Defense Forces, Military Intelligence, September 2002.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., and Colonel Mirri Eisen (Israel Defense Forces), interview by author, Tel Aviv, 6 June 2002.

19 Daniel Sobelman, "Jordan to Indict 18 on Terror-linked Charges," Ha'aretz, 7 February 2002.

20 George W. Bush, Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, 24 June 2002.

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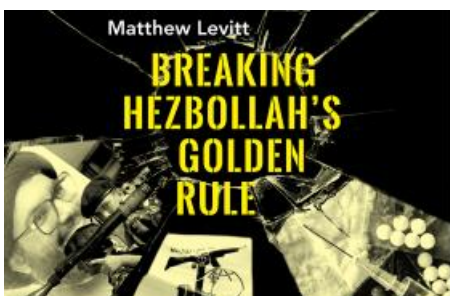
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