

Terrorist Links of the Iraqi Regime

Aug 29, 2002



Brief Analysis

On August 28, 2002, a U.S. federal grand jury issued a new indictment against five terrorists from the Fatah Revolutionary Command, also known as the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO), for the 1986 hijacking of Pan Am Flight 73 in Karachi, Pakistan. Based on "aggravating circumstances," prosecutors are now seeking the death penalty for the attack, in which twenty-two people -- including two Americans -- were killed.

The leader of the ANO, the infamous Palestinian terrorist Abu Nidal (Sabri al-Banna), died violently last week in Baghdad. But his death is not as extraordinary as the subsequent press conference given by Iraqi intelligence chief Taher Jalil Haboush. This press conference represents the only time Haboush's name has appeared in the international media since February 2001.

Iraqi Objectives

What motivated the Iraqi regime to send one of its senior exponents to announce the suicide of Abu Nidal and to present crude photographs of his bloodied body four days (or eight days, according to some sources) after his death? It should be noted that the earliest information about Nidal's death came from al-Ayyam, a Palestinian daily close to the entity that may have been Abu Nidal's biggest enemy -- the Palestinian Authority.

At this sensitive moment in U.S.-Iraqi relations, Abu Nidal could have provided extraordinarily damaging testimony with regard to Saddam's involvement in international terrorism, even beyond Iraqi support of ANO activities in the 1970s and 1980s. In publicizing Nidal's death, the regime's motives may have been multiple:

- To present itself as fighting terrorism by announcing that Iraqi authorities were attempting to detain Abu Nidal for interrogation in the moments before his death. "As is known to both friends and enemies, Iraq's record on the issue of terrorism and disrupting security, whether pan-Arab or foreign, is clean. Iraq is not involved with these practices," claimed the Iraqi chief of intelligence, who also informed reporters that Abu Nidal was expelled from Baghdad in 1983 after the regime "learned that [he] was engaged in activities that harm the Iraqi national security and the Arab national security." He omitted that from 1974 to 1983 the ANO waged dozens of terrorist attacks from its headquarters in Baghdad against Syria (including two assassination attempts against the Syrian foreign minister at the time, Abdul Halim Khaddam), Fatah (murdering several Palestine Liberation Organization representatives in Europe), Jewish targets (attacking synagogues in Vienna, Rome, and Brussels; a Jewish school in Antwerp; and a Jewish restaurant in Paris), Jordan (killing several diplomats), and the Israeli ambassador in London, whom ANO assassins wounded (an event that triggered the war in Lebanon). And this is a partial list.
- To send a signal to internal elements tempted to cooperate with the United States and the Gulf kingdoms in a war against Iraq. The implied message is that Abu Nidal's fate was sealed because of his alleged contacts with an unnamed foreign country against Iraqi interests (possibly Saudi or Kuwaiti intelligence agents).
- To try and convince the world that Abu Nidal had not been given shelter and safe haven in Iraq since 1999, but rather entered the country illegally. Iraqi security forces were apparently "unable to trace him," although some Arab states had informed Iraqi authorities of his presence at the time.

Iraqi Support for Terrorism

Although Abu Nidal was known to be living in Iraq in 2001, when Jordan's state security court sentenced him to death by hanging for his role, along with four of his followers, in the last known terrorist attack by the ANO (the January 1994 assassination of a Jordanian diplomat in Beirut), Iraqi authorities did not extradite him. Nor has Iraq made any attempt to punish Nidal for the numerous Americans, British and French citizens, and other nationals injured or killed in ANO attacks over the years.

In an interesting side note, Abu Nidal's former spokesman, Atef Abu Baker, has claimed in an interview with al-Hayat that Nidal informed ANO leaders of his responsibility for the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland (Nidal was living in Libya at the time). This statement, which contradicts the Lockerbie trial's verdict, has received some publicity in Europe, but nevertheless appears to be a cheap attempt to dismiss Libyan involvement in the bombing.

The death of Abu Nidal and the press conference by the Iraqi intelligence chief seem to be part of another disinformation campaign by Iraqi intelligence. The most recent leg of that campaign included the May 2002 permission that the regime granted CBS reporter Lesley Stahl to interview Abdul Rahman Yasin, the only unincarcerated participant in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Yasin was indicted for the bombing but later escaped to Iraq. Stahl also interviewed Iraqi deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz, who claimed that Yasin had been in prison in Iraq since 1994. Aziz asserted that Iraq had offered to hand Yasin over to the United States in 1994 and later in October 2001, in order to prove that Iraq was not involved in the 1993 bombing. The Americans refused, Aziz stated. A U.S. intelligence official was quoted by CBS as saying that the Iraqis failed in their attempt to have the Americans sign a document confirming Yasin's whereabouts since 1993; apparently, U.S. officials did not agree with the Iraqi version of the facts.

The case of Abu al-Abbas (Mahmoud Abbas), secretary-general of the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF), provides another example of safe haven provided by Iraq to a known terrorist leader. Abbas was responsible for the October 1985 hijacking of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro and the killing of elderly disabled passenger Leon Klinghoffer, an American citizen. In 1998, within the framework of the Oslo agreements, Israel permitted Abbas to return to the Gaza Strip. Fearing an extradition request by the United States, he chose the confines of Baghdad instead.

In October 2000, with the outbreak of the current Palestinian intifada, Abbas announced on Iraqi television that the PLF would resume confrontations with Israel; this, following the "call made by President Saddam Hussein to open the door for volunteering [which] is an order to fight for us." Iraq recruited and trained PLF activists in Iraqi camps and equipped them with arms that they used to carry out terrorist attacks in Haifa (April 2001) and the West Bank (July 2001). In July 2001, Mohammed Kandil, a Palestinian from the West Bank, was arrested upon the discovery that he was recruited by Iraqi intelligence to build a terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank. Apparently, his operational plans included infiltrating Ben Gurion International Airport with a car bomb.

Lately, Iraq has also revived its proxy organization, the Arab Liberation Front (ALF), with the specific mission of encouraging suicide operations against Israel from the West Bank and Gaza. One of ALF's leaders, al-Hajj Rateb al-Amleh, is responsible for providing material support to the families of Palestinian suicide terrorists. This support has included public events at which the presentation of \$25,000 Iraqi checks payable to the families of "martyrs" is used to glorify Saddam Husayn and encourage the solidarity between the Iraqi regime and the Palestinian people against their common "Zionist" and "imperialist" enemies.

Conclusion

It is ironic to read news articles with titles such as "Saddam Cuts Off Terror Links Following the Abu Nidal Death." The crude lies that the Iraqi chief of intelligence has proffered to the media constitute yet another attempt of the

Saddam regime to hide its past -- and possibly present -- involvement in international terrorism. It took the United States five years to unearth juridical evidence connecting Iranian intelligence agents and the Lebanese Hizballah with the Khobar Towers bombing, even though the information had been available in 1996 at the beginning of the investigation. No political or military action followed, notwithstanding this evidence. Hopefully, the terrorist nature of the Saddam Husayn regime and its belligerent ambitions will be addressed more seriously and swiftly.

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