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# The Return of Palestinian Nationalist Terrorism

by [Matthew Levitt](#)

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### Brief Analysis

**T**he State Department's annual Patterns of Global Terrorism report, which is scheduled for release in late May, is set to be a much longer and more detailed document than before. Among the many issues the report will have to address is the resurrection of secular Palestinian terrorist groups, some of which have not appeared on U.S. government terrorist lists in the past. The steady escalation of terrorist tactics and operations over the past year and a half is due as much to these groups as it is to Palestinian Islamist groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad that have dominated the Palestinian terrorism scene over the last decade.

Palestinian nationalist terrorism currently has two components: 1) dormant secular groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)—referred to collectively as "the fronts"—that have been revitalized after several years of inactivity; and 2) newly active nationalist, non-Islamist militias connected to the Palestinian Authority (PA), such as the Fatah Tanzim.

#### Resurrection of the Fronts

Prior to the start of the current intifada in September 2000, the PFLP had been largely inactive. After three years of relative silence, the PFLP held reconciliation talks with the PA in August 1999 and was almost dropped from U.S. government terrorist lists. But then the PFLP took responsibility for five car bombings, including four Jerusalem bombings within seven hours on September 4, 2001. Four PFLP terrorists also carried out the October 17, 2001, assassination of Israeli tourism minister Rehavam Ze'evi; their presence in Yasir Arafat's Ramallah compound was at the center of the dispute during the Israeli encirclement of the compound. In a marked shift, PFLP terrorists have also ventured into the traditional territory of radical Islamist extremists by carrying out suicide bombings, including a February 16, 2002, attack in Jerusalem that killed two and wounded thirty. On April 26, Israeli forces raided Qalqilya, foiling a PFLP plot to bomb a Tel Aviv skyscraper with an unusually powerful car bomb.

The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) also reconciled with Arafat in August 1999. The group was in fact removed from the State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) that October, but has

been added to the Treasury's Specially Designated Terrorists list created by executive order in the wake of September 11. Over the past few months, DFLP operatives have conducted a series of shooting attacks. The most severe was the August 25, 2001, suicide attack on an Israeli military position in Gaza, which left three Israelis dead and seven wounded. And on March 9, two members of the DFLP were killed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) while attacking the Erez checkpoint in Gaza.

For its part, Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command (PFLP-GC) has never renounced terrorism or reconciled with Arafat. While it has not claimed responsibility for any major terrorist attacks in Israel, the group has been active and remains on U.S. terrorism lists. Ziad Nafa, a former PFLP-GC member, recently told a Jordanian court that one of the thirteen suspects on trial for plotting to bomb the U.S. embassy in Amman asked him to arrange terrorist training for the group in Syria. Additionally, Jibril proudly claimed responsibility for the Santorini smuggling ship, which Israeli authorities seized in the Mediterranean on its way toward Gaza on May 7, 2001. Jibril announced that his group had already made three successful arms shipments, and pledged to send Palestinian extremists more weapons. Most recently, the Lebanese army arrested seven members of PFLP-GC on April 6 for firing rockets across the Lebanese border into northern Israel.

Even the Iraqi-sponsored Palestine Liberation Front (PLF), which has not conducted a successful attack since 1992 but remains on U.S. terrorist lists, has resurfaced. In November 2001, Israeli authorities arrested fifteen members of a PLF cell who were planning a series of spectacular attacks in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and at the Ben Gurion airport. The cell had already planted roadside bombs, conducted shooting attacks, and abducted and murdered Yuri Gushstein, an Israeli civilian teenager. The cell, some of whose members received terrorist training in Iraq, was also involved in smuggling weapons into the West Bank from Jordan. In addition, PLF operatives have been active in distributing Iraqi funds to the families of Palestinians killed or wounded in confrontations with Israelis. Iraq now offers a \$25,000 reward to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers.

#### Terror Associated with the PA

The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a self-proclaimed military wing of the PA's Fatah faction, has received funding, materials, and support from both the PA and Fatah, and has conducted numerous roadside shootings, ambushes of IDF personnel, attacks on civilian population centers, and suicide bombings both in the West Bank and within the Green Line. Members of the Brigades have been responsible for several high-profile attacks, most notably the January 17, 2002, attack on a bat mitzvah celebration at a Hadera banquet hall that left six Israelis dead and thirty-three injured. The Brigades were the first to introduce female suicide bombers in the January 27 attack by paramedic Wafa Idris in downtown Jerusalem. The U.S. government recently added the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades to all of its terrorist lists.

Arafat's Force 17 presidential security forces as well as the Fatah Tanzim militia have engaged in similar attacks, including numerous bombings, roadside ambushes, and shooting attacks. For example, Jamal Mustafa Ahwil, Tanzim head in the Jenin refugee camp, was responsible for the suicide bombings that took place on November 27, 2002, in Afula and on March 21, 2002, in Jerusalem. Under the guidance of Fatah secretary-general Marwan Barghouti—and often paralleling their day jobs as members of the various Fatah-dominated Palestinian security organizations—Fatah-associated elements have conducted numerous terror attacks with weapons, funding, and logistical support from senior PA officials. Nasser Abu Hamid, a founder of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, admitted that Barghouti was involved in procuring and paying for weapons used in attacks on Israelis and that explosives used in al-Aqsa attacks came from Force 17 stockpiles. According to documents seized in Arafat's Ramallah compound and information derived from interrogations of captured militants, Arafat personally approved funding requests for terrorist operations, including funds specifically earmarked for bombing attacks.

The reinvigorated secular terrorist groups have also conducted joint operations with their Islamist counterparts.

The Saladin Brigades are a joint venture between members of Fatah and Hamas, and make up the military component of the Popular Resistance Committees (PRCs). The Saladin Brigades claimed responsibility for the February 14 attack on an Israeli Merkavah tank that left the tank itself demolished and killed three of the four soldiers inside. The Return Brigades, another amalgam of secular and Islamist groups, has taken credit for several shootings such the February 20 ambush that killed six IDF soldiers and the February 27 murder of an Israeli in the Atarot industrial zone of Jerusalem. The PRCs based in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip are also composed of secular and Islamic groups. Fatah, PA, Hamas, and PIJ members have claimed responsibility for mortar and shooting attacks under the auspices of the PRCs, and have also been involved in gun smuggling across the Egyptian border at Rafah.

## Conclusion

In an indication of the central role they now play in Israeli-Palestinian confrontations, secular Palestinians are at the epicenter of the standoff at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, just as they were in the recently resolved siege of Arafat's Ramallah compound. Israel charges that thirty Fatah-associated terrorists are still holed up in the Church of the Nativity. These confrontations highlight the resurgence of secular nationalist terrorists, who can be disruptive in attempts to deescalate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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