

# New Arenas for Iranian-Sponsored Terrorism: The Arab-Israeli Heartland

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**D**irector of Central Intelligence George Tenet testified before the Senate Select Intelligence Committee on February 6 that Iran continues to be "the foremost state sponsor of terrorism." Citing its attempt to transfer offensive arms to the Palestinian Authority (PA) aboard the *Karine-A* smuggling ship, Tenet said that there has been "little sign of a reduction in Iran's support for terrorism in the past year."

In reality, not only has there been no reduction, but there has in fact been a marked increase in Iranian support for terrorism. Two important new arenas for Iran's direct role in terrorist plots and operations are in the heart of the Middle East: Jordan and the Palestinian territories.

### Targeting Jordan

According to a story first reported in the London-based *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Jordan's King Abdullah met with President George W. Bush on February 1 and presented his hosts with evidence that Iran sponsored no fewer than seventeen attempts to launch rockets and mortars at Israeli targets from Jordan. This was, according to the king, an Iranian plot aimed at undermining the Jordanian regime and opening a new front against Israel. He reportedly said that detained Hizballah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) terrorists had admitted that Iranian instructors at Hizballah camps in Lebanon's Beka'a Valley trained, armed, and funded them. This story was raised en passant at a hearing of the House International Relations Committee on February 6, when representative Benjamin Gilman said to Secretary of State Colin Powell that "Jordan's King Abdullah recently told President Bush and your office that Iran has a large-scale plan to carry out terrorist acts against Israel from Jordanian territory." Powell responded that the United States is "taking it seriously. . . . We are going to make sure that the Iranians understand that this is inappropriate and that there are consequences to bear . . . We're using the channels that are available to us to bring pressure on the Iranians."

### Iranian Links to al-Qaeda

According to U.S. intelligence reports cited by the *New York Times*, bin Laden operatives approached Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) agents in 1995 and again in 1996 offering to join forces against America. In fact, phone records obtained by U.S. officials investigating the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania

revealed that 10 percent of the calls made from the Campact-M satellite phone used by bin Laden and his key lieutenants were to Iran.

On February 15, Turkish police arrested two Palestinians and a Jordanian who entered Turkey illegally from Iran on their way to conduct bombing attacks in Israel. According to the police spokesman in Ankara, the three fought for the Taliban, received terrorist training in Afghanistan, and were members of Beyyiat el-Imam, a group Feyzullah Arslan, a police spokesman, described as linked to al-Qaeda.

In two separate cases in Jordan, eighteen terrorists have been indicted on terror-related charges. In one case, thirteen people are accused of plotting to bomb the U.S. embassy in Amman last year; in the other, several people are charged with plotting to fire rockets at Israel from Jordan and to smuggle weapons from Syria to PIJ terrorists in the West Bank via Jordan, with Iranian support. Indicted in absentia with the latter group was Abu Miliq, a Palestinian with Syrian travel documents who is accused of providing the group with explosives and arms. Abu Miliq was convicted in absentia in September 2000 by the Amman State Security Court for planning attacks for al-Qaeda-associated terrorists targeting tourist sites in Jordan during the millennial celebrations. The joint terrorist plot by al-Qaeda-linked Abu Miliq and the Iranian-sponsored would-be rocketeers is especially interesting in light of reports that first appeared in the London Times on February 1, 2002, that a senior bin Laden operative -- a Yemeni who goes by the alias Salah Hajir -- has been meeting in Beirut with leaders of Hizballah, Iran's main proxy.

#### The Palestinian Arena

Iranian involvement in the Karine-A smuggling affair is now well documented. Speaking before the European Parliament in Strasbourg earlier this month, the European Union's Javier Solana described the Karine-A as "the link between Iran and the PA" and said that "such a connection had not existed for many years." Iran's involvement, however, was not limited to providing the PA with fifty tons of advanced weaponry. The Washington Post quoted a "senior US official" as confirming Israeli defense minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer's contention that Iran arranged for Hizballah external operations commander Imad Mughniyeh to purchase the ship. Mughniyeh's deputy, Haj Bassem, personally commanded the ship that met the Karine-A at the island of Kish south of Iran and oversaw the transfer of the Iranian weapons from his ship to the Karine-A.

Moreover, according to U.S. officials, Iran offered the PA a substantial discount on the arms in return for the PA allowing Iran to run a hospital in Gaza and other social-welfare organizations in the Palestinian territories. By this means, Iran would gain a foothold of its own in the Palestinian territories, through which it could build grassroots support, propagate its anti-Israel message, collect intelligence on the activities of U.S. officials, and provide direct support to Hamas and to PIJ. Outreach to the Palestinians in this fashion would follow efforts by Iran elsewhere to use humanitarian and diplomatic footholds as a cover for Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps or MOIS operatives collecting intelligence and supporting local terrorist groups. In 1998, Time magazine reported on a similar initiative in Kazakhstan; in 1997, a Defense Intelligence Agency report quoted in the Washington Times detailed such a plan in Tajikistan.

In fact, according to a report last month in the Israeli daily Yediot Ahronot, Israeli intelligence sources had already documented Iran's use of the social-welfare hook to recruit Palestinians into Hizballah. Israeli authorities arrested two Palestinians, Shadi Jaber, and Jihad Ibrahim Albasha, upon their recent return from Iran. According to the information they provided, the Iranian Committee for Aiding Wounded Victims of the Intifada has been working with Palestinians to find potential terrorist recruits among those wounded during the last seventeen months of violence. It has arranged for free travel, medical treatment, and terrorist training for Palestinians who return to the Palestinian territories to establish terrorist cells. Among those involved in the recruitment drive, according to Albasha, have been Iranian ambassador to Jordan Nosratollah Tajik, PA Minister of Detainees and Freed Detainees Affairs Hisham Abdel al Razek, and senior Hizballah operative Najafi Abu Mahadi.

According to Israel's Ma'ariv, Israeli authorities informed foreign diplomats in Israel earlier this month that Iran has been transferring money to terrorists in the West Bank and Gaza for the purchase of weapons, and that Tanzim operatives have traveled to Iran for "instructions and training." Other unnamed officials told the Israeli press that Iran has played on the "frustration and anger of Israeli Arabs" to collect intelligence on Israel and courier weapons and funds to terrorist cells.

### The Lebanese Arena

While Iran has begun operating in these new arenas, its traditional terrorist activities have continued unabated. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld commented in early February that the United States knows "Iran is very active in sending Hizballah terrorists down through Damascus into the Beka'a Valley and down in to Lebanon." Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres told a press conference outside the UN in New York that Iran's proxy Hizballah had deployed 10,000 rockets to southern Lebanon capable of penetrating well into Israel, while the Christian Science Monitor reported last week that "well informed sources" referred to "truck[load] after truckload" of weapons that arrived in southern Lebanon from May 2000 to December 2001.

### Conclusion

Iran was recently found guilty of this kind of terrorist activity in two civil cases from the 1980s and 1990s (involving Hamas and Hizballah) that were tried in U.S. courts. But one need not harken back to Iran's past terrorism-supporting activities to justify characterizing the regime as the "foremost state sponsor of terrorism." As the Jordanians and Israelis have highlighted, Iran is playing an even more direct role in international terrorism, together with terrorist groups of "global reach."

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