

# Palestinian Participation in the Islamist Global Network

Apr 14, 2000



## Brief Analysis

On Monday, April 17, the trial of twenty-eight Islamists charged with the intention to bomb American and Israeli targets during millennium celebrations will begin in Jordan. The list of the arrestees as published in the Jordanian dailies al-Ra'i and al-Dustur indicates that at least nineteen are of Palestinian origin, including fifteen Jordanian citizens and four residents of Syria, Lebanon, and the United Kingdom (UK). The group includes Munir Husein Maqdash, a former senior commander of Fatah (a Palestine Liberation Organization faction headed by Yasir Arafat), and Omar Mahmoud Abu Omar, also known as Abu Qutadah, who allegedly financed the group from his political asylum in London. Also among the defendants is an American citizen of Palestinian origin, Khalil Dik, who was arrested in Pakistan and extradited to Jordan as part of this group.

The defendants were, according to the Jordanian authorities, part of the global Islamist network of Osama bin Ladin and his al-Qa'idah organization. The large proportion of Palestinians among the defendants should be no surprise, however, since in fact Palestinian Islamists have traditionally played an active role in the global Islamist networks. The recent arrests are but the latest episode in a long history of Palestinian involvement in the Islamist revivals in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Afghanistan, and other Arab countries beginning in the early 1950s.

The Islamic Liberation Party. In 1952-53, a group of Palestinians led by Shaykh Taqi al-Din al-Nabahani founded the Islamic Liberation Party (Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami). The party opened branches in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and later on in Germany, the UK and France. In the 1980s, it began operating in Turkey, India, and Pakistan, and in the 1990s widened its activity to Central Asia (mainly Uzbekistan) and the South Caucasus (primarily Daghestan). Although the party has not been involved in the "struggle" against Israeli rule in the West Bank and Gaza since 1967, it has a long history of terrorist and subversive activity elsewhere. In 1974, Dr. Salih Sirriyyah, a Palestinian member of the party, led the Islamist group that carried out the first terrorist operation-against the military academy in Cairo-in the era of the Islamic revival in Egypt. The party has also been involved in political subversion and terrorism against the regime in Jordan since the 1950s; early this year, there was another wave of arrests among its members and supporters there (as well as in Syria).

Although Palestinians have a strong influence in the party, they are not involved in all its branches and activities. The party has a large base in London, allowing it to influence Indian and Pakistani immigrants in the UK. And according to the Uzbek authorities, the Islamic Liberation Party was behind the attempt to assassinate Islam Karimov, the Uzbek president, in February 1999. More recently, in February 2000, members of the party were involved in violent clashes with the Lebanese Armed Forces in northern Lebanon.

Afghan Arabs. One of the most prominent ideologues of the Afghani struggle of the Mujahidin was Dr. 'Abdallah 'Azzam, a Palestinian living in Jordan, who moved in 1980 to Peshawar, Pakistan, to take part in the war in Afghanistan. 'Azzam influenced many Jordanians of Palestinian origin to join the Afghani jihad in the 1980s against the Soviet occupation, and to stay there or join the fight in other places (Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, or Chechnya) during the 1990s. 'Azzam is also the father of the theory of al-Qa'idah al-Sulbah (the solid base) which is the doctrinal foundation of bin Ladin's group. 'Azzam was killed by a car bomb in Peshawar in November 1989, as part

of the struggle among the various factions of the Afghan Mujahidin following the Afghani victory over the Soviets. 'Azzam has been well known and admired in the West Bank and Gaza for some time. Although his theories are not accepted by Hamas, a Hamas terrorist squad in the northern West Bank (the region of 'Azzam's birth) bears his name.

Jordan. Palestinian participation in Islamist terrorism in Jordan has been prominent among some small terrorist groups uncovered in Jordan since the 1980s, such as Jaysh Muhammad (the Army of Muhammad), al-Islah wal-Tahaddi (Reform and Challenge) and Takfir (Repudiation). One of the defendants in Monday's trial, Shaykh 'Isam al-Burqawi (known as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi), a Palestinian from Nablus, has had significant religious influence among Palestinians in Jordan. He was imprisoned there between 1995 and 1999.

Lebanon. Islamism appears to have spread in recent years to the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. February saw renewed activity by a small Islamist group called 'Usbat al-Ansar (the League of Supporters) in the Ein el-Hilweh camp. It also was interesting to see the previously mentioned Munir Husein Maqdash, a former prominent commander of the Palestinian Fatah organization in Lebanon, among the defendants in the millennium bombing plot.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). The only Islamic group in the entire Sunni Arab world that wholeheartedly supports the Iranian Islamic revolution and the Iranian regime is the PIJ. Its founder, Dr. Fathi Shqaqi, who was killed in 1995, was the first to praise and adopt the principles of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, which he did in a book published in Egypt in March 1979, just one month after the Iranian revolution. Iran's policy of "exporting the revolution" to the Sunni Arab world has been a total failure except for the PIJ's activities in the Palestinian arena.

Conclusion. Given this historical tradition, the relatively large participation of Palestinians in the Islamist global network in the last decade should come as no surprise. It should be noted, however, that much Palestinian sympathy for-and therefore participation in-this phenomenon takes place primarily outside of the Palestinian Authority. This is particularly true in the case of Palestinian support for Osama bin Ladin and the front groups around him. Bin Ladin and his ideas are unpopular with the Palestinian Islamic groups in the West Bank and Gaza. Indeed, the Palestinian struggle and the "liberation of Jerusalem" are not on bin Ladin's radar screen, and there is therefore no evidence of any connection or affiliation between the bin Ladin groups and the three main Palestinian Islamic movements-Hamas, the PIJ, and the Islamic Liberation Party-or the smaller Palestinian groups of Salafiyyun that adhere to the Wahhabi doctrine prevalent in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the political, economic, and social pressures of Palestinian society will continue to contribute to Palestinian support for the global Islamist struggle.

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