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Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Getting By with a Little Help from Its Friends

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Prior to September 2000, the track record of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) terrorist attacks featured more failed and small-scale operations than successful or substantial ones; at the time, Hamas overshadowed PIJ in terms of terrorist activity. Yet, PIJ's profile has changed since then. In August 2001, Israel listed three PIJ members among its seven most-wanted terrorists, compared to one member each from Hamas, Force 17, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). In October 2001, PIJ secretary general Ramadan Abdullah Shallah asserted, "With the grace of God and the blessing of the blood martyrs, the Islamic Jihad movement is in the best condition it has ever been in," highlighting "its jihadist effectiveness and qualitative operations."

PIJ solidified its reputation in the annals of the current Palestinian intifada with the April 2002 standoff in Jenin. Thaabat Mardawi, a senior PIJ commander in Jenin arrested in the course of Israel's Operation Defensive Shield, proudly described the PIJ-led battle against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to a CNN interviewer: "It was like hunting . . . like being given a prize. I couldn't believe it when I saw the soldiers. The Israelis knew that any soldier who went into the camp like that was going to get killed. I've been waiting for a moment like that for years." PIJ's moment has indeed come; by all accounts, the group will remain a dominant and destructive factor for the foreseeable future.

Operational Ties to Other Groups

PIJ's sudden sprint to the front of the terrorist pack was facilitated by enhanced operational and logistical support from Palestinian terrorist groups and security services, and from Hizballah, Syria, and Iran. By striking these alliances, PIJ leaders enhanced their capabilities and resources exponentially, opening the door to joint attacks with other groups, increases in weapons and recruits, and advance warning of pending crackdowns.

Joint operations: Two people were killed in a joint suicide shooting attack by PIJ and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in Afula on November 27, 2001. PIJ commander Ali Safuri and al-Abdel Karim Aweis, a senior al-Aqsa commander and former Palestinian General Intelligence officer, planned the attack together. On January 25, 2002, a joint PIJ-Fatah suicide attack at the old central bus station in Tel Aviv wounded twenty-three people. Moreover, documents seized in Israel's raid of the Jenin refugee camp revealed that PIJ, Hamas, and Tanzim operatives had established a joint framework for patrolling the camp, including a "combined force" and a "joint operations room." Financial cooperation has been reported as well. According to internal Palestinian Authority (PA) General Intelligence documents seized by Israel, "the Islamic Jihad pays the expense of most of the activities that Fatah carries out. Additionally, the [Islamic] Jihad movement is adopting the killed Fatah activists."

Weapons and recruits: According to other PA General Intelligence documents seized by Israel, senior Palestinian security officers (including Jamal Switat—deputy head of PA Preventive Security in Jenin—and an officer named Al Rah), "supplied PIJ and Hamas in the Jenin area with most of the weapons in their possession." Additionally, Fatah bombmakers like Mutasen Hammad prepared explosives-laden suicide belts for both al-Aqsa and PIJ. PIJ's success in carrying out qualitative attacks has drawn terrorists from other groups to its ranks. Hamas member Rafat Tahasin Diyak grew so impatient waiting for the opportunity to carry out a Hamas attack that he "began to cry for joy, like a child" when informed of his selection as a PIJ suicide bomber by PIJ commander Mohammed Talwalbe.

Advance warning: Another Israeli-seized PA document states that Jamal Switat "is in charge of the [PIJ] and often contacts it and notifies it of the dates of planned arrests against them and who the wanted persons are."

The Tehran Connection

U.S. officials quoted in the New York Times confirmed that since September 2000, Tehran has employed an incentives system, paying PIJ millions of dollars in cash bonuses for successful attacks. In its West Bank raids, Israel seized a PA General Security report dated June 1, 2000, documenting a meeting at which Iranian ambassador to Syria Sheikh al-Islam demanded of Ramadan Shallah "that the PIJ and Hamas carry out terrorist attacks inside Palestine, without assuming responsibility for them." In early June 2002, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met with Shallah on the sidelines of a Tehran conference in support of the Palestinian intifada. According to a June 8 report in al-Sharq al-Awsat, Khamenei pledged to fund PIJ directly, separate from its funding

of Hizballah, and to increase PIJ funds by 70 percent to cover the expense of recruiting young Palestinians for suicide operations. In other words, to quote one of the U.S. officials cited by the New York Times, "the strategy is to make the West Bank another Lebanon."

In addition, an August 8, 2002, Middle East Newsline report claimed that Iran has financed terrorist training camps of its own under Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) Gen. Ali Reza Tamzar, the IRGC's commander in the Beka'a Valley. The IRGC camps instruct Hizballah, Hamas, PIJ, and PFLP-General Command terrorists in the use of the short-range Fajr-5 missile and the SA-7 antiaircraft rocket. The IRGC training program (which costs Iran \$50 million a year, according to the Daily Star in Beirut) also trains Lebanese and Palestinian terrorists to carry out "underwater suicide operations." In tandem with their Beka'a Valley training camps, the IRGC and the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security also run several terrorist training camps in Iran itself.

The Damascus Connection

Just five days after Syria assumed the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council, Ramadan Shallah claimed responsibility for the June 5, 2002, suicide bus bombing at the Megiddo junction in northern Israel that killed seventeen people and wounded over forty more. Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres told al-Jazeera television that Shallah personally ordered the Megiddo attack from his Damascus headquarters. In fact, Shallah and other PIJ leaders in Damascus have maintained close contact with a number of PIJ operatives on the ground in the West Bank. One such operative was Tarek Az Aldin, a senior PIJ operative from the Jenin area. According to a June 20 IDF press release, Aldin served as a coordinator for several PIJ terrorist cells in the West Bank and as "the link to the movement's central headquarters in Syria." Another Damascus-West Bank link is Thaabat Mardawi, who is responsible for the deaths of 20 people and the injury of 150 others; according to an April 18 IDF report, this PIJ commander "was instructed and operated by the PIJ headquarters in Syria, with which he was in contact." Documents seized by Israel indicate that Ramadan Shallah himself often transfers funds (\$127,000 in one instance) from Damascus to the personal bank accounts of individual PIJ operatives such as Bassam al Saadi, who is responsible for PIJ finances in Jenin.

Beyond harboring PIJ's leadership, Damascus actively promotes PIJ terrorism by facilitating terrorist training in Syria itself. Through the interrogations of Nasser Aweiss and other senior al-Aqsa and PIJ operatives, Israeli authorities have learned that terrorists from al-Aqsa, PIJ, and other Palestinian factions have been undergoing terrorist training in 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 Ahmed Jibril's PFLP-GC. Iranian-funded PFLP-GC instructors train the Palestinians in terrorist tactics, while Syrian officials remain on the sidelines and ensure that the trainees receive proper care.

Conclusion

The first anniversary of the September 11 attacks is a painful reminder of both the tragic loss suffered and the ongoing war on terrorism. As this war enters its second year, the United States and its allies must target state sponsors of terrorism as well as loosely affiliated terrorist networks. PIJ's recent ascension is an ominous warning of the potential price of any policy that fails to hold state sponsors accountable.

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