Israel as an Al-Qa`ida Target: Sorting Rhetoric From Reality

By Matthew Levitt

A VARIETY OF GROUPS in the Palestinian Territories claim to be affiliated with or inspired by al-Qa`ida. None of these groups, however, have been welcomed into the al-Qa`ida franchise. Moreover, this bottom up phenomenon where local Palestinian groups reach out to al-Qa`ida is not matched by a top down effort by al-Qa`ida’s core leadership or even its established affiliates to create an official al-Qa`ida faction in the Palestinian Territories. Nevertheless, in nearly all of al-Qa`ida’s public statements, the liberation of Palestine is a goal and Israel is denounced as an enemy. Al-Qa`ida’s extensive anti-Israel rhetoric, however, is not matched with the parallel operational focus on targeting Israel.

Instead, it appears that Palestine is employed as a useful lightening rod through which al-Qa`ida can tap into the emotional attachment of Muslims and Arabs worldwide. The place of Palestine and Israel in al-Qa`ida’s speeches and operations is shaped by its need to construct narratives, often focused on specific populations and conflicts, that support its radical and violent agenda. Al-Qa`ida, explained French scholar Gilles Kepel, combines elements of Salafism—a literalist interpretation of Islamic history akin to Saudi Wahhabism—with jihadism.1 Al-Qa`ida utilizes some aspects of jihadism, namely the legitimization of violent action to achieve political means, to its organizational, logistical and operational agenda. To do this, it must place conflicts throughout the world that involve Muslims into a singular, radical narrative in which Islam in general and Muslims in particular must defend themselves from Western aggression. For al-Qa`ida, the Palestinian cause is a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. Since the Israel-Palestine conflict is perhaps the single most animating regional conflict for many Arabs and Muslims, its resonance provides al-Qa`ida with a powerful rhetorical tool for radicalization, recruitment, and fundraising.

This article shows how al-Qa`ida has always been interested in the Palestinian issue, demonstrates the gap between al-Qa`ida’s rhetoric and its operations targeting Israel, and finally identifies the few attacks that al-Qa`ida has conducted against Israel and Jewish targets.

Al-Qa`ida’s Interest in Palestine

Although al-Qa`ida’s primary focus has been the United States and its presence and influence in Muslim countries, Palestine has featured prominently in al-Qa`ida’s statements and propaganda from the early outset of the group’s founding. In fact, nearly every public statement made by Usama bin Ladin since 1990 has mentioned the Palestinian cause, often represented through references to the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem that strike both religious and political chords among Muslims and Arabs worldwide.2

One of Bin Ladin’s earliest public statements, a letter addressed to Shaykh Abdul Aziz bin Baz, the late grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, illustrates the early attachment of the Palestinian cause to al-Qa`ida. The letter, written in December 1994, was entitled “The Betrayal of Palestine.” The basis of the letter was a repudiation of the Saudi dynasty and Bin Baz’s complicity with Saudi rule. The object of Bin Ladin’s ire, and the true focus of the proclamation, however, was Bin Baz’s endorsement of the Oslo Accords a year earlier, in 1993:3

The legal duty regarding Palestine and our brothers there—these poor men, women and children who have nowhere to go—is to wage jihad for the sake of God, and to motivate our umma to jihad so that Palestine may be completely liberated and returned to Islamic sovereignty.4

Two years later, Bin Ladin’s 1996 declaration of war against the United States invoked the Palestinian cause to rally Muslims to fight “the American-Israeli” alliance:

Your brothers in Palestine and in the land of the two Holy Places are calling upon your help and asking you to take part in fighting against the enemy—your enemy and their enemy—the Americans and the Israelis. They are asking you to do whatever you can, with one’s own means and ability, to expel the enemy, humiliated and defeated, out of the sanctities of Islam.5

This “Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,” while leveraging the Palestinian issue for rhetorical purposes, focused on the United States, not Israel. Similarly, a February 1998 fatwa issued by Bin Ladin and a host of other radical Islamists insisted that killing “Americans and their allies—civilian and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.” The fatwa justified this call to terrorism in the name of liberating “the al-Aqsa mosque and the holy mosque from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.” In both pronouncements, the Palestinian issue is referenced in global, Islamic terms, not Palestinian nationalist ones, and is only one part of the larger call to liberate Islamic lands and defend the umma from the perceived enemies of Islam. Although still powerful rhetorical images leveraged to inflame the emotions of their intended audiences, neither liberating Palestine nor attacking Israel are themselves central themes.

Instead, al-Qa`ida has leveraged Palestine as a cause to support its call to jihad writ large. Consider, for example, how Ayman al-Zawahiri concluded in his 1996 treatise “The Cure for Believers’ Hearts” that Arab and Muslim regimes that accept the United Nations and Israel as legitimate entities have lost their credibility and authority. Al-Zawahiri

---

4 Ibid., p. 9.
counted the Palestinian Liberation Organization as one of these turncoat entities, and used such logic to pave the way for attacks against the West, “apostate” Arab regimes, international organizations and Israel.  

There is precedent among al-Qa`ida ideologues for this discrepancy. At least until the mid-1990s, Ayman al-Zawahiri maintained that “the road to Jerusalem passes through Cairo,” meaning that only after illegitimate and insufficiently Islamic regimes such as Hosni Mubarak’s in Egypt were toppled could Palestine be liberated. Years later, al-Zawahiri would write to al-Qa`ida in Iraq leader Abu Mus’ ab al Zarqawi that targeting Israel was a “fourth stage” goal following the expulsion of the Americans from Iraq, establishing an Islamic emirate in Iraq, and extending the jihad to the secular countries neighboring this new emirate (although it could come at the same time, he said). Meanwhile, al-Qa`ida ideologue Abu Mus’ ab al-Suri reportedly doubted Bin Ladin’s own “willingness to take the fight to the heart of the Middle East,” a move al-Suri felt was essential. In contrast, al-Suri’s lectures stressed “the strategic impact of striking Jewish, American, and Western interests in the heart of the Arab world.”

Al-Qa`ida Rhetoric on Operations Targeting Israel

Al-Qa`ida’s leaders have often stated their desire to attack the state of Israel. Yet while the intent and imperative of killing Israelis and Jews features prominently in al-Qa`ida’s rhetoric, it has rarely translated into operational attacks on Israel, its citizens abroad, or Jews more generally.

Most of al-Qa`ida’s rhetoric regarding operational planning targeting Israel references not concrete, near-term planning, but rather notional intent to ultimately target Israel as part of an Islamid ideological vision to “liberate” all Muslim lands. In the words of Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Palestine was a land of Islam, and it is an individual duty for every Muslim to liberate it.” Al-Qa`ida has even linked its involvement in Iraq to its eventual conflict with Israel. The leader of the al-Qa`ida-linked Islamic State of Iraq, the elusive Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, stated that Iraq has “paved the way for invading the Jewish state,” which would then lead to “the restoration of Jerusalem.” Other al-Qa`ida leaders, such as Abu Lahit al-Libi, echoed this linkage, asserting that all of al-Qa`ida’s actions are to prepare for conflict with Israel. Abu Lahit stated, “the preparations we make and all the fighting in the cause of God we carry out in the East and West is preparation and training for fighting the Jews in the al-Aqsa Mosque.” Likewise, al-Zawahiri stated in a video released in January 2006 that once U.S. President George W. Bush conceded defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan, al-Qa`ida would turn its attention toward the Palestinian cause. A “routing” would soon take place in Palestine, al-Zawahiri warned.

Both Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri have addressed al-Qa`ida’s lack of operations in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. When questioned on this issue, al-Zawahiri responded in April 2008 that al-Qa`ida “strive[s] as much as we can to deal blows to the Jews inside Israel and outside it, with Allah’s help and guidance.” He supported this statement by urging Palestinians to perform jihad. He tried to make a distinction between his criticism of Hamas leaders and their decision to participate in elections and Hamas fighters. Hamas leaders should not adhere to a secular constitution, al-Zawahiri complained, but “as for the mujahidin of Hamas and the rest of the mujahidin in Palestine, I supported them and continue to support them, and I call on the umma to aid them.”

Al-Qa`ida’s operational absence from the Palestinian arena was perhaps most glaring during the December 2008-January 2009 war in Gaza. During this conflict, dubbed Operation Cast Lead by Israel, al-Qa`ida released written statements and media messages expressing support for the Palestinian fighters, and often denounced Arab states for failing to act in the defense of Gaza. Al-Zawahiri deliberately directed part of his statement toward Egypt, saying, lifting the siege imposed on Gaza is your responsibility that you must take up. If you organize and participate in a campaign of strikes, demonstrations and protests that persist until the siege is lifted from over our people in Gaza, then Hosni Mubarak, the criminal traitor, is bound to give in.

Al-Baghdadi, al-Zawahiri and Bin Ladin all released statements calling for jihad in Gaza, but none of al-Qa`ida’s proclamations provided any indication that al-Qa`ida itself would support its stance with action.

Al-Qa`ida Attacks Targeting Israel

The delta between al-Qa`ida’s rhetorical focus on Israel and its lackluster efforts to translate its propaganda into action is significant. Al-Qa`ida attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets have been small-scale and half-hearted. For a group that has executed spectacular attacks involving sophisticated planning throughout the world, al-Qa`ida’s record of targeting Israel is remarkably poor. Most of al-


7 A copy of the letter is provided by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, and can be found at the following URL: www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/pdf/CTC-Zawahiri-Letter-10-05.pdf.


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Maliach, p. 360.


Qa’ida’s operational planning that focused on Israel never even came to fruition. Even if they had, the majority of these plots were not of the scale typical of al-Qa’ida attacks.

According to U.S. intelligence, for example, at the time of his capture in March 2002, the Palestinian al-Qa’ida facilitator Abu Zubayda was “trying to organize a terrorist attack in Israel and he had enlisted the help of Zarqawi in finding a smuggling route into Israel for moving persons and materials.”16 This was not Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s first attempt to target Israel. A year before these attacks, and long before he became famous as the head of al-Qa’ida in Iraq, al-Zarqawi reportedly attempted to set up a cell to target Israel. By 2001, according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, al-Zarqawi had received more than $35,000 for work in the Palestinian Territories. He personally planned to use this money to train additional Jordanian and Palestinian fighters in Afghanistan, to purchase passports, and to facilitate travel to the Levant. Al-Zarqawi “received assurances that further financing would be provided for attacks against Israel” and according to some reports may have traveled to Palestine himself by 2002.17

Richard Reid, the “Shoe Bomber” convicted of trying to blow up an American airliner flying from Paris to Miami, prepared for his mission by testing out airline security on Israel’s El Al airlines and scouting out potential targets for attack in Egypt and Israel. After his scouting trip, Reid reported back to an associate in Afghanistan with a variety of suggestions on how and where to conduct attacks in Israel, including specific information on Israeli buildings, Ben Gurion airport, the Wailing Wall plaza, and suggested that the reception area of the Tel Aviv train station would be a particularly good bombing target, especially on a Saturday night, because it could be entered without being searched and contained at least 100 people at the arrival time of any given train.18

Al-Qa’ida, however, never acted on any of Reid’s detailed surveillance.

At hearing in March 2007 before his U.S. military tribunal in Guantanamo Bay, 9/11 mastermind Khalid Shaykh Muhammad claimed to have been involved in 31 terrorist plots, including several targeting Israeli or Jewish targets—most of which never occurred. These included plots to fly airplanes from Saudi Arabia into buildings in the southern Israeli city of Eilat; sending several “mujahidin” into Israel to survey “strategic targets”; targeting Israeli embassies in India, Azerbaijan, the Philippines and Australia; plotting to attack an El Al Israel Airlines flight from Thailand; the Mombasa, Kenya attacks; plotting to attack U.S., British and Jewish targets in Turkey; and plotting to attack an American oil company in Indonesia that Muhammad described as “owned by the Jewish former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.”19 While the veracity of these statements is unknown, the attacks in Kenya, Turkey, and a similar attack—using rockets, not planes—on Eilat did in fact occur.

Of the attacks that did take place, some focused on soft targets that while Jewish were in no way connected to Israel. For example, in April 2002, an al-Qa’ida affiliated suicide bomber detonated a truck bomb in front of a historic synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba. The attack, tied to Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, killed 21 people, including 16 Europeans.20 In November 2003, al-Qa’ida-affiliated terrorists bombed two synagogues in Istanbul.21 One reason al-

Qa’ida may have focused on soft Jewish targets is the perception that targeting Israel directly is too difficult due to its robust security measures.

Seven months after the Djerba synagogue attack, al-Qa’ida-affiliated terrorists carried out the group’s most successful terrorist attack against Israeli targets. In November 2002, al-Qa’ida operatives attacked the Paradise Hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, a popular vacation spot for Israeli tourists. Three Israelis were killed and approximately 20 more were seriously wounded.22 In a nearly simultaneous strike nearby, al-Qa’ida fighters shot a portable surface-to-air missile at an Israeli Arkia Airline passenger plane flying from Kenya to Israel.23 While the missile missed its mark, the coordinated Mombasa attacks demonstrated a high level of skill and capability, the effects of which reverberated widely as aviation experts grappled with the implications of al-Qa’ida terrorists targeting passenger flights with shoulder-fired missiles.

Al-Qa’ida attacks against Israel since then have been neither as sophisticated nor as successful. In January 2006, Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qa’ida in Iraq, claimed responsibility for a rocket attack in northern Israel. Although unverifiable, he claimed that he was ordered to conduct the attack by Usama bin Ladin and described the attack as “the beginning of blessed action to strike the Zionist enemy at the heart of its existence.”24

Conclusion

In the near-term, Israeli experts assess that while al-Qa’ida has not shifted its operational focus to target Israel, the threat of Salafi-jihadi attacks from both local groups in Gaza and al-Qa’ida affiliates remains serious. As in the Danish cartoon crisis, al-Qa’ida could easily take advantage of local events to inspire local groups or regional affiliates to prioritize attacks against Israel. For al-Qa’ida, an ideal outcome is an attack

Chronology,” U.S. Department of State, undated.

in which the group itself plays nothing more than an inspirational role.

Israeli officials express concern over the rise in prominence and operational capability of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its interest in targeting Israeli and Jewish targets in North Africa, Europe and possibly Israel. AQIM today, one official explained, “is al Qaeda’s long arm in Europe” and is proactively seeking to carry out attacks, including operations against Jewish targets. Given its access to Muslim-European and Palestinian operatives who could potentially enter Israel, and the plethora of Jewish and Israeli targets in Europe where AQIM maintains an active network, Israeli analysts see AQIM as the al-Qa`ida element most intent and capable of targeting Israeli interests.  

Nevertheless, al-Qa`ida and its global jihad have not yet come to Palestine in any meaningful way. This is in part due to the hostile reception Hamas has provided Palestinian Salafi-jihadi fighters in Gaza. In August 2009, for example, security forces from the Hamas-run government in Gaza— together with militants from the group’s Qassam Brigades terrorist wing—raided a mosque affiliated with a Salafi-jihadi preacher and engaged in protracted gun battles with his followers, all members of the group Jund Ansar Allah. The clashes, which left some 24 people dead and 130 wounded, followed a Friday sermon by their cleric, Shaykh `Abd al-Latif Musa, condemning the de facto Hamas government and announcing the establishment of an Islamic emirate in Palestine. Al-Qa`ida in Iraq denounced the Hamas attack on its website, calling on Allah “to avenge the blood of the murdered men and to destroy the Hamas state.” The episode highlights both the presence in Gaza of Salafi-jihadi groups inspired by but not formally affiliated with al-Qa`ida and the tensions between these groups and Hamas, a violent Islamist but still Palestinian nationalist group in power in Gaza.

Under stress, however, al-Qa`ida could seek to bolster its image by focusing not only its rhetoric but its operational focus on Israel in an effort to take ownership of the emotive Palestinian issue. Spurred on by al-Qa`ida’s continued rhetorical focus on Israel, regional affiliates could ultimately carry out successful attacks on Israeli targets. Local Salafi-jihadi groups in the Gaza Strip could catapult themselves to center stage and demand the attention of al-Qa`ida’s core leadership with just one successful attack inflicting significant casualties or targeting a major international figure. In the words of one senior member of the Salafi-jihadi Jaljalat group operating in Gaza, “So far al-Qa`ida has not sponsored our work. We are waiting to carry out a big jihadi operation dedicated to Shaykh Usama bin Ladin. However, our course and doctrine are similar to those of al-Qa`ida. If al-Qa`ida asks us to pledge allegiance to it, we are completely ready for it.”

Understanding History’s Seven Stages of Jihad

By Sebastian L.V. Gorka

The post-9/11 debate on the meaning of “jihad” has often floundered at a superficial understanding of the term. Jihad is often simply referred to as either “striving” or “holy war.” Jihad, however, must be understood to consist of four varieties of human activity agreed upon by Islamic theologians and jurists. The first is the jihad of the heart, the so-called “greater jihad” of fighting evil within oneself. The second and third definitions involve the jihads of the mind and tongue, the condoning of “right” behavior in others and counseling those who have gone astray. Finally, there is jihad of the sword. Jihad of the sword is most relevant for the counterterrorism community today because it rests at the foundation of the global jihadist ideology.

The concept of jihad of the sword has been repeatedly reinterpreted and redefined since the days of the Prophet Muhammad. During this extensive time period, jihad by the sword has been used by protagonists to rally co-religionists in the pursuit of a political objective. Al-Qa`ida and the broader Salafi-jihadi movement have also reinterpreted this concept to justify the direct targeting of civilians in terrorist attacks.

To properly understand the historic significance of al-Qa`ida, it is relevant to review the contextual evolution of the concept of jihad and the great success al-Qa`ida has had in redefining it for the current conflict. Since the days of the Prophet Muhammad, jihad by the sword has been shaped by seven, historically-shaped political conceptualizations of jihad, occurring in the following order: empire building; the suppression of apostate subjects; the revolution against “false” Muslim leaders; the anti-colonial struggle and “purification” of the religion; countering Western influence and *jahiliyya;* guerrilla warfare against secular invaders; and finally the direct targeting of civilians in terrorist attacks. This article will identify each contextual interpretation and the significance of jihad as terrorism.

---

25 Personal interviews, Israeli intelligence officials, Tel Aviv, Israel, September 2009.
26 “The Struggle Between Hamas and the Jihadi-Salafist Networks in the Gaza Strip Affiliated with the Global Jihad,” Intelligence and Terrorism Center, October 4, 2009.

---

1 *Jahiliyya* refers to the age of polytheism and “unbelief” that existed before the Prophet Muhammad.