

The Globalization of Hamas Terrorism

A White Paper
by
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Executive Summary

There is evidence that Hamas has discussed attacking targets in the US and Canada and has recruited foreign nationals who could be used to carry out such operations. US policymakers need to understand the threat posed by Hamas' emerging pan-Islamic interpretation of jihad and its perceived role in the global anti-American jihad. In the meantime, Hamas' rhetoric adds to the incitement fueling the jihadist movement worldwide, especially in encouraging young Muslims to go to fight US forces in Iraq.

Introduction: Jamal Aql in Gaza

In mid-December, while Saddam Hussein's capture dominated the headlines, a potentially deadly threat that was closer to home escaped public attention. Israel announced that it was charging Jamal Aql, a Canadian citizen born in the Gaza Strip, with receiving training from Hamas¹ to conduct terrorist attacks in Canada and New York City.² Aql's arrest provides important evidence that Hamas could be close to conducting its first attacks outside Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip,³ whose targets could include Americans. Previous Hamas attacks have claimed over a dozen American victims, but the group has not deliberately targeted Americans. Hamas appears now to have discussed such attacks and made contingency plans to execute them.

During his interrogation Aql reportedly stated that Hamas gave him the task of assassinating a senior Israeli official⁴ visiting Canada and of targeting Canadian and American Jewish community leaders in both Canada and New York City. Aql was also told to raise money for Hamas in Canadian mosques.⁵ According to both Canadian and Israeli press reports, Aql revealed that he was trained in the use of weapons during a trip to Gaza, when he was supposedly visiting family and seeking out a bride. Israeli reports have additionally claimed that Aql was taught how to use explosives. Aql's father has called the allegations "nonsense." Hamas has denied any link to Aql.⁶ In Canada, despite his apparent limited financial means, Aql was reportedly enrolled in a costly training school for truck drivers, which aroused suspicion as to his intentions.⁷

Editorial closing date:
January 30, 2004



The Foundation for
the Defense of Democracies

News of Aql's plans and arrest prompted remarkably little relief among Canadians that a terrorist threat had been averted. Rather, with the exception of Canadian Jewish leaders,⁸ the news was viewed with skepticism and derision.

Israel's announcement of Aql's confession was portrayed as precipitate and Canadian officials openly questioned the veracity of Israel's charges. They objected to Israel's public announcement of Aql's alleged confession before a trial, terming it "inappropriate" and "totally unacceptable."⁹

Some Canadian press reports charged that the Israeli authorities extracted the confession through either coercion or maltreatment.¹⁰ The Canadian foreign ministry called on Israel to "respect" Aql's Canadian citizenship and expressed regret at the lack of "consultations," as well as statements by Israeli officials casting doubt on Aql's innocence.¹¹

Israel made mistakes in its handling of the initial announcement, but these do not necessarily invalidate its findings. The Israeli failure to inform Canada at an early stage about the arrest and investigation of Aql and its intention to prosecute him was an error. Comments that might be deemed prejudicial were also bound to be open to criticism. On the other hand, the official Canadian reaction exhibited a lack of understanding and sympathy for Israel's predicament, which was bound to have irritated Israeli officials. The Israelis had, after all, potentially saved the lives of Canadian and American citizens.

Hamas in North America

Although often viewed as an exclusively West Bank and Gaza strip based organization, Hamas has a global network of supporters and an active presence in North America. The best known case of Hamas in North America was Musa Abu Marzuk, a leading member of the

organization, who lived in northern Virginia, near Washington, DC. He was detained for 22 months and was then deported to Jordan in 1997. He now lives in Syria and was indicted in December 2002 for violating US laws on financing terrorism. Abu Marzuk was also linked to the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, an organization closed down by US authorities in December 2001 for their links to terrorist groups.¹² Even though Abu Mazruk denied any connection to Hamas, the Hamas response to the possibility that Abu Marzuk might be deported to Israel was to state that it had taken "the decision to strike and to hit back if the United States makes this move."¹³

While the number of Hamas operatives in North America is not known, the nature and extent of its operations here is more important. North America is attractive to Hamas for several reasons. First, the group is known to conduct lucrative fund raising. Second, Hamas seems to have debated attacks in North America and could mobilize members already here to conduct such attacks. Hamas leaders—appear, however, to be divided as to whether such attacks are politically wise. On the one hand, attacks would make the case for Israel that terrorism directed against Israelis is no different from terrorism against Americans. On the other hand, there is a feeling that terrorist attacks abroad would please Hamas supporters in the West Bank and Gaza, at less risk of prompting costly Israeli retaliation in the West Bank or Gaza.

The presence of terrorists with a Hamas-like proclivity to violence and Hamas style sympathies in North America goes back at least eight years. FBI agents in Brooklyn, New York arrested Ghazi Ibrahim Abu Mayzar and an accomplice, Lafi Khalil, both West Bank Palestinians in August 1997 for planning to blow up a New York City subway station.¹⁴ At a Brooklyn apartment the two used, police found nail-studded bombs, a manifesto espousing hatred of Jews and Americans, and an apparent suicide note. Abu Mayzar was determined to leave Canada, his country of residence, and

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establish himself in the US. In January 1997, he was arrested in Washington state on his third attempt in a year to gain entry to the US. Claiming he faced persecution by Israel if forcibly returned to the territories, Abu Mayzar sought asylum in the US as the Canadian government had refused to allow him to return to Canada. Abu Mayzar later withdrew his asylum claim and promised to leave the US voluntarily. In fact, Abu Mayzar moved to Brooklyn, New York City. US officials disagreed on Abu Mayzar's links to Hamas. Some said that he had contacted Hamas members using pay phones in Brooklyn, while another discounted any link to Hamas altogether.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the similarity between Abu Mayzar's views and plans and the outlook of Hamas and its *modus operandi* were striking.

In 1999, Mousa Hamed al-Astal, a Gaza-born Palestinian, sought political asylum in Canada. His immigration bid failed because it was judged to have been made on false pretences. In a 1997 petition to the Federal Court of Canada (FCC), al-Astal claimed that Hamas had attempted to recruit him at least four times and had threatened to kill or beat and humiliate him if he refused. Al-Astal argued that if he were returned to Gaza he would either be detained and tortured by the Israeli authorities or put to death by Hamas. In response in March 1999, the FCC upheld an administrative ruling that al-Astal's fears of persecution were unfounded. The FCC determined participation in Hamas is not the result of forced recruitment.¹⁶ The fact that Hamas has no need to pressure young Palestinians to join, was later confirmed in a public statement in May 2002 by Salah Shihadah, a Hamas military commander. Shihadah said that: "We do not groom martyrdom-seekers or select certain people to be martyrs. Scores of youth come forward to us seeking to be martyrs. We start preparing them after they come forward to us."¹⁷ The Israeli army killed Shihadah in a "targeted killing" operation in July 2002.¹⁸

In October 2002, Canada's Citizenship and Immigration Department announced

it had deported Qasem Ibrahim Qasem Hussein, a Hamas recruiter and bomb expert, to Jordan on March 4, 2002. Canada had determined that Hussein was "complicit in crimes against humanity based on the widespread and systematic murder of Israeli citizens and Palestinian collaborators by Hamas between 1994 and 1998, when he was an active member."¹⁹ The then Canadian minister of immigration said that the deportation demonstrated the government's commitment to ensuring that Canada is not used as a safe haven by terrorists.²⁰

Hamas has a long record of fundraising in North America. The FBI reported in 2002 that it believed that Hamas had been collecting money in Canada for nearly a decade.²¹ The amounts of money that have been raised are unclear. Funds that Hamas has raised in North America serve two purposes: first, to support the group's social services network that, in turn, maintains the group's popularity and helps attract recruits; second, to pay for acts of terrorism and provide support to terrorists' families.

Is Hamas Preparing Attacks Outside the Middle East?

Several indicators suggest that Hamas may be engaged in contingency planning for its first attacks outside of Israel and the territories. First, recent Hamas rhetoric defines jihad more broadly than in the Israeli-Palestinian context, suggesting that the group is warming to the idea of conducting attacks outside of Israel and the territories. Second, if links to Hamas leaders can be established, the case of Jamal Aql represents an officially-sanctioned Hamas effort to broaden the theater of jihad. Third, Hamas' success in recruiting foreign nationals increases its capability to commit terrorist attacks outside of Israel

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and the territories. Fourth, recent botched attempts by Hamas to target Israeli leaders and increasing difficulty in accessing targets inside Israel may explain Hamas' interest in attacking such targets elsewhere.

At a minimum, the group's leaders are defining a role for Hamas in the jihadist movement that transcends the Israel-Palestinian conflict, a movement that shares Osama bin Laden's view that the Islamic world is engaged in a life or death struggle with the US and its allies (which it terms the "Crusaders") and in particular with Israel (which it refers to as "the Zionists" or "the Jews"). Hamas members see their battle

against Israel as part of the same pan-Islamic struggle as the war being waged by former Ba'athists and Islamists against the US in Iraq. Despite Hamas' emotive and inflammatory rhetoric on the situation in Iraq, there is no indication that its members have participated in the ongoing terrorist attacks there.

Until recently, Hamas leaders have identified Israel as their target. However,

Hamas statements since 2003 suggest a limited shift towards including among its enemies those who it sees as imposing their will on Muslims, both in Iraq and elsewhere. The perceived US bias in favor of Israel, a long-standing Palestinian complaint, and the US military presence in Iraq as of 2003 also explain why Hamas leaders increasingly speak of a general need for a global jihad.

In many ways, Hamas has become a leader of jihadist rhetoric targeting the US presence in Iraq. For example, in January 2003, Abd-al-Aziz Rantisi, second-in-command of Hamas inside the West Bank and Gaza and whom some experts view as a likely successor to Hamas' spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yasin,²² called on Iraqis to "prepare an army of martyrdom seekers and tens of thousands of explosive belts to confront any US aggression."²³ Rantisi also

sought to justify a jihad against "Crusaders" by claiming a threat to "Arab land" and Islam. In an essay posted on a Hamas-affiliated website, Rantisi wrote: "[Crusader] ambitions go beyond Iraq and Palestine and their aims are to control the land and the resources."²⁴ Quoting the Koran, he continued: "'Nor will they cease fighting you until they turn you back from your faith.' Give a chance to the mujahideen [religious fighters] to repulse this sinful aggression."²⁵

In late November 2003 on the same Hamas-affiliated website, Sheikh Ahmad Yasin said that "jihad for the cause of Allah was the only path towards ridding the Muslim nation of colonization." Yasin hoped for victories in "Palestine, Iraq, Chechnya and Afghanistan" and that Muslims everywhere would double their support of the mujahideen.²⁶

The Hamas debate on attacking the US

In an April 2003 article tellingly titled, "Why shouldn't we attack the United States?" Rantisi wrote:

"The divine equation is to refer to our enemies in the same manner as they treat us. Therefore, it is no wonder if we fight those who fight us and make peace with those who make peace with us and stop attacking us. What should we do if the enemy attacks us like he did in Iraq, Sudan, Libya and other Arab and Islamic countries? Obviously, we should attack him. This is a moral and national duty – but, above all, a religious one."²⁷

The following month, Rantisi said that the US was a legitimate target because it had threatened the security of Muslims worldwide. Rantisi wrote:

"While the Americans caused us to lose our sense of security in Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, Chechnya, Kashmir, and elsewhere, by attacking us directly or by supporting our enemies, we should retaliate by

terror against the United States... Why wouldn't we run after them as they do with us? Why wouldn't we terrorize them as they do with us? We are capable of doing so. Don't we have the right to turn our bodies into human bombs, as long as we have no weapons of mass destruction? The two Iraqi female suicide bombers Nashed and Widad²⁸ have proved that we were capable of depriving the United States of safety. This weapon is the best we own to confront the American terrorism."²⁹

Hamas leaders have been careful to distinguish between what they see as a "duty" to attack US targets and the short-term political wisdom of doing so. For the moment, at least in public statements, the Hamas position appears to be that such attacks are not considered politically expedient. After an October 2003 bomb attack in the Gaza strip that killed five US security personnel contracted to the US Embassy in Tel-Aviv, Yasin declared:

"We are against such operations... We do not want to open another front with the US. We are fighting any enemy that occupies our land. True, the US is the supporter of our enemy, but our strategy is to target the occupation and to avoid any expansion of the struggle arena."³⁰

However, in subsequent statements in November 2003 and again in January 2004, Yasin said he was opposed to "carrying the battle to other states" but he seemed to leave open the possibility of attacks against US interests in countries that, like the US, have already declared Hamas a terrorist group, frozen its assets, and taken other measures against the group. Yasin was perhaps intentionally vague as to the timing of such attacks. Yasin seems to believe that attacks in foreign countries would risk creating new enemies for Hamas, unless those countries have already acted against Hamas, in which case attacks there may be permitted. Note

Yasin's commanding tone in his comments, which is indicative of his suspected military—and not simply spiritual or political—role in the group.

"We are fighting our enemy on the land of Palestine. We do not want to take our battle outside Palestine. If we do, we would be encouraging other states to stand alongside our enemy. If others are not with us, we do not want them to be against us. We do not want to antagonize the regimes in the world against us. We will not threaten their interests so that they would not threaten ours.

Do not carry the battle to other states so they do not mobilize their masses against you. If you carry out any operation against the United States in any other country, that country will support the United States. Instead of being supported by one state, it will then be supported by 10 or 20 states. This means that you have mobilized the world against you. This is wrong.... Striking the United States should be in the appropriate place."³¹

In a January 2004 interview with *al-Majallah*, a Saudi-owned London newspaper, Yasin said, "Our aims do not include expanding the battle.... If, however, the enemy shifts the battle against us abroad, the matter will be reassessed."³² Though Yasin here speaks in the future tense and does not define actions "against us abroad," logic dictates that legal actions regarding Hamas' status and funding could be viewed by Hamas as, eventually, provocative enough to justify a military response.

Statements by terrorist groups can sometimes give an indication of how the terrorists' strategy is evolving and what the next set of targets might be. In March 2003, Rantisi expressed his group's interest in targeting Israeli leaders. After a Israeli helicopter missile strike killed four Hamas

members,³³ including Ibrahim Muqadmah,³⁴ Rantisi declared:

“The assassination of Muqadmah will launch a new stage of war against the Jews. All Israeli leaders will be open targets for Hamas. There is a call and an order from Hamas’ political leadership to the Qassem Brigades to target Israeli leaders.”³⁵

Notably, Rantisi includes all Jews as potential targets and, perhaps purposely, leaves open where such attacks should or will occur. Rantisi’s remarks, like that of Shaykh Yasin above, provide further evidence of the involvement of Hamas’ political leadership in directing the group’s terrorist agenda.

When asked in January 2004 if Hamas intends to target Israeli officials, Shaykh Yasin said, “everything is left open to [Hamas’] military wing without any restrictions” – again, suggesting the group’s terrorist agenda is dictated by its political leaders.³⁶

From Hamas’ perspective, targeting Israelis abroad, perhaps in the US, has some obvious attractions. An attack on an Israeli target overseas (broadly defined to include Jewish targets) would allow Hamas to circumvent Israel’s hardened defenses. In a report reviewing Palestinian terrorism against Israel in 2003, the Israeli government noted that countermeasures are forcing the terrorists to identify new means of attack. A Palestinian Islamic Jihad member admitted under interrogation that Israel’s security fence, now under construction, was causing terrorists to “think of completely different ways to perpetrate attacks.”³⁷

A final reason why Hamas might elect to target Israeli leaders abroad is because

the group’s attempts to do so within Israel have failed. In February 2003, Israeli security authorities disrupted two Hamas-linked terrorist cells in the West Bank city of Bethlehem whose planned attacks included an attempt to kill Prime Minister Sharon.³⁸ A similar planned attack was disrupted in June when Israeli authorities seized two Arab residents of east Jerusalem who admitted to being tasked by Hamas to collect information on Sharon and senior Israeli VIPs.³⁹ Such efforts demonstrate a concerted effort to kill high-level Israelis. Based on experience, Hamas may calculate that exploiting foreign nationals, such as Canadian Jamal Aql, could ensure better results than its previous attempts. On April 30, 2003, Hamas successfully used a British Muslim to conduct a suicide bombing attack at a Tel-Aviv nightclub.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The Aql incident has worrying implications. Hamas seems to have considered and started to conceptualize terrorist attacks in North America. It is quite possible that Aql was supposed to be a “sleeper,” trained and ready to attack Israeli and Jewish targets in North America as and when the Hamas leadership felt that it was politically appropriate to do so.

Hamas’ capability and apparent interest in globalizing its terrorist campaign must be taken more seriously by US officials. Hamas has a presence in dozens of countries throughout the world. It has foreign affiliates whose role ranges from low-level sympathizers, with little or no institutional connection to the group, to key financial and organizational leaders. Hamas’ potential for operational activity abroad is limited but extensive enough to pose a security threat, especially given its ability to recruit foreign nationals. There are enough indicators to suggest that Hamas is an emerging terrorist threat to the US, both in word and, possibly, in deed. —

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- ¹Hamas: Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyya (Islamic Resistance Group). The official English language website is <http://www.hamasonline.com/index.php>. A useful overview is available at http://www.ict.org.il/inter_ter/orgdet.cfm?orgid=13.
- ²Israeli Government Press Office, December 8, 2003, reported by *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)* ; *Jerusalem Voice of Israel Radio*, December 15, 2003, reported by *FBIS*.
- ³Henceforth "Israel and the territories."
- ⁴"Canadian is Hamas Assassin, Israel Says," by Jeff Sallot, *The Globe and Mail*, December 5, 2003. Available at: <http://www.globeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20031205.wxakka1055/BNStory/Front/>.
- ⁵"Canadian Man's Ties to Hamas Raise Calls for Greater Vigilance," by Bill Gladstone, *JTA*, December 9, 2003. Available at: http://www.jta.org/page_view_story.asp?intarticleid=13544@intcategoryid=2. Aql reportedly was ordered to raise money ostensibly for the families of suicide bombers, but instead to use the money to purchase weapons and to pay costs associated with identifying and casing possible targets.
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