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Is Salafist Jihadism Making Inroads into the Israeli-Palestinian Arena?

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Two noteworthy incidents that were reported recently in Israel involved operatives connected to al-Qaeda and Salafist jihadism who were engaged in terrorist activity in Israel and the West Bank. These reports emerged against the current background of concern in Israel about the possibility of another intifada in the West Bank. The question that arises is whether elements belonging to Salafist jihadism, which is identified with al-Qaeda and global jihad, have also begun to play a significant role in incitement and in possible escalation to violence on a wide scale.

The first case reported on the administrative detention in 2010 of Abdul Latif al-Baraq, a Kuwaiti citizen of Palestinian origin whose family lives in Qalqilya. Al-Baraq, who holds a master's degree in biology from a Pakistani university, trained in al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and was recruited to the organization by Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's current leader. The intention was for him to recruit other Palestinians and channel his expertise toward a particular project in microbiology. Al-Baraq was also involved in terrorist activity planned by Abu Masab al-Zarqawi in Jordan following the attacks of September 11. He was arrested in Afghanistan, extradited to Jordan, and after being released and attempting to enter Israel, was arrested by Israeli security officials and since been held in administrative detention. He is seeking to be released to the Palestinian Authority (PA), while Israel seeks to send him to a third country because it fears that he will attempt to recruit al-Qaeda activists or disseminate his knowledge of bioterrorism.

In the second incident, which occurred last week, three Salafist jihadi members of a terror cell who were planning to launch terrorist attacks in Israel were killed in the village of Yatta south of Hebron. The cell was headed by a long-time Hamas operative who was once a member of the group's military wing, served time in an Israeli prison, and was also arrested by the PA. Following the operation, the Salafist jihadi umbrella organization in Gaza, Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin Fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdas, published an announcement claiming that the three were acting on its behalf, and called upon the

residents of the West Bank to join the struggle against the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian Authority collaborators.

As far back as 2000, there were a number of attempts to infiltrate operatives from al-Qaeda and its affiliates into Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank to gather intelligence for building a terrorist infrastructure. The most prominent attempts came to light in 2000, when Samer Hindawi (of the West Bank) and Nabil Ukel (of Gaza) were arrested, and in 2001, when Richard Colvin Reid was sent to Israel and collected intelligence on Israeli targets on behalf of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind behind the September 11 attacks. Reid's mission was subsequently changed to blowing up an American Airlines plane over the United States using explosives hidden in his shoes. In 2004, two British operatives of Pakistani origin who were in touch with global jihadi activists in London were involved in a suicide attack in Israel under orders from Hamas.

In recent years, terrorists from several additional cells identified with global jihad ideology have been arrested in Israel proper. In June 2010 a cell of seven people from Nazareth between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-five was arrested. The cell's members were exposed to Salafist jihadi ideas on the internet, where they also learned how to use weapons and make explosives. In order to prove their abilities and their right to belong to "global al-Qaeda," three cell members murdered taxi driver Yefim Weinstein in November 2009. Following the murder, cell members decided to move to the practical phase of joining the ranks of global jihad and to travel to Somalia for training with al-Shabab. They were arrested by Kenyan authorities at the border crossing and extradited to Israel. In September 2011, another cell identifying with Salafist jihadism was arrested. The cell consisted of five youths from the village of Daburiyya, some of them students, who were planning to attack soldiers and police officers and seize their weapons to carry out terrorist attacks in the Daburiyya police station and in government offices.

These sporadic attempts have largely failed in the planning stage, but they indicate that among Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, there are those who are prepared to engage in terrorist activity in the name of Salafist jihadi ideas.

The relative freedom of action in the Gaza Strip since the disengagement has allowed terrorist groups in Gaza associated with Salafist jihadi ideas to organize more effectively, some of them with operatives formerly in Hamas or in groups that are close to Hamas. There is tension between Hamas and these groups, which has led to violent clashes in cases in which they directly challenged its hegemony. However, Hamas has not yet reached the stage of deciding to use systematic and continuous force to eliminate them.

The upheavals in the Arab world and the consequent undermining of power of various governments have created convenient areas of operation – some of them new – in the Middle East for Salafist jihadi elements. Among the most prominent areas in close

proximity to Israel are Sinai, Syria, and Lebanon, where foreign global jihadi operatives have also assembled in the past two years. There is concern that these elements will support and push for stepped up terrorist activity by their supporters and partners in the West Bank and within the Green Line as well.

The resurgence in violence in the West Bank in recent months, reflected in a number of deadly attacks that killed four Israeli soldiers and civilians, and an increase in stone throwing and firebomb attacks on Israeli civilians in Jerusalem and the West Bank have sparked concern regarding another round of violence. This fear has been reinforced by the many people predicting that failure of the political talks underway between Israel and the Palestinians could lead to renewed violence.

At the same time, it appears that the Palestinian organizations that oppose the Palestinian Authority, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, are responding to the resumption of negotiations with relative restraint and self-control, perhaps because they do not believe that the negotiations stand a chance. The fact that PA and Israeli security forces are continuing to effectively thwart terrorist attempts to establish an infrastructure and initiate operations in the West Bank, and that they are responding harshly to rockets launched from Gaza, has also contributed to the relative calm. Yet the restraint by Hamas and other organizations against Israel has also led to increased defections by frustrated members of these groups to Salafist jihadi organizations, which advocate unremitting violence.

In light of these factors, there is room for concern that in the future Salafist jihadi organizations and global jihadi elements will play a more significant role in terrorist attacks against Israel from nearby areas as well. Yet given the limited and sporadic nature of the attempts that were reported thus far, it is still too early to consider them a trend. If, however, the thin trickle becomes a stream of terrorist attacks by Salafist jihadis, the security forces of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, and Gaza will face further challenges. In turn, this could expand the basis for closer cooperation between Israel and the PA, Egypt, and Jordan.

