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A Hamas Headquarters in Saudi Arabia?

By Matthew Levitt
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Israeli authorities on September 27 announced the arrest of an Israeli-Arab Hamas activist who played central militant, political, and financing roles for the group in coordination with what Israeli authorities described as a “Hamas command in Saudi Arabia.” The arrest is just the latest evidence that support for Hamas in particular and Islamic extremism in general continues to emanate from within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Hamas HQ in Saudi Arabia

Until he was arrested last month, Yakub Muhamad Yakub Abu Etzev was in contact via e-mail with senior Hamas officials in Saudi Arabia. According to Israeli authorities, Abu Etzev confessed to receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Hamas headquarters in Saudi Arabia as well as instructions that he passed on to Hamas field operatives. The funds entered the West Bank through human couriers and money changers, often under the cover of charity work.

The Hamas office in Saudi Arabia reportedly instructed Abu Etzev to open a “communications office” to report developments on the ground to Hamas operatives abroad. The Hamas leaders in Saudi Arabia provided the funding for this venture in addition to money for the families of suicide bombers and imprisoned terrorists and a variety of Hamas institutions. Abu Etzev was personally involved the creation of local Hamas committees in towns and villages with funds from Hamas’s Saudi office.

Past Hamas Activity in Saudi Arabia

The revelation that Hamas operates a command center in Saudi Arabia with close ties to Hamas militants executing attacks and the movement’s political and social-welfare (*dawa*) operations is remarkable. But neither the fact that individual Hamas operatives are active in Saudi Arabia nor the fact that Hamas receives significant funding from within the Kingdom is news. Unlike its official presence in Syria, Iran, Yemen, and Sudan, Hamas has never maintained a formal office in Saudi Arabia. But individual Hamas activists, as well as many supporters, have long raised funds from within the Kingdom.

As early as 1994, Palestinian scholar Ziad Abu Amr noted, “The widespread belief is that Hamas has received money [from] the governments of Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states,” adding that such support is believed to have continued after the 1991 Gulf War to punish the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) for its support of Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait. In 1997, the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* cited unnamed Palestinian officials who complained, “Riyadh’s help to Hamas has grown with the opening of new [financial] channels,” and revealed that “over 140 billion lire [\$37.32 million] has been collected in Saudi Arabia and the other oil monarchies.” In September 2003, David Aufhauser, general counsel to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, said in congressional testimony that despite some success in curbing terror financing, “by no means have we crossed the bridge of the issue of terrorist financing emanating from Saudi Arabia.” Aufhauser noted that not only is it donating to Hamas not a crime in Saudi Arabia, but Hamas raises “enormous amounts of money” during the month of the Hajj alone—a period so lucrative for Hamas that it sends its political director to the Kingdom.

Individuals, charities, and banks tied to the Saudi ruling class are among the most prolific supporters of Islamist extremism, of both the Palestinian and the global varieties. The al-Raji family has been tied to Hamas funding, as have other members of the Saudi elite, such as Khari al-Agha and Abd al-Rahim Nasrallah, who is believed to have laundered and transferred funds through charitable organizations fronting for Hamas in Europe. Together, Nasrallah and Zayd Mahmoud Zakarna, the head of Hamas's Jenin charity committee, are suspected of arranging the transfer of hundreds of thousands of dollars to Hamas.

Individual contributions from Saudi Arabia were instrumental in helping Hamas develop the Qassam rockets it routinely shoots into Israel from Gaza. In December 2001, Israeli authorities arrested Hamas operative Osama Zohadi Hamed Karika as he attempted to cross the Rafah border crossing at Gaza. He had on his person documents detailing the development of the Qassam rockets. Under questioning, he admitted that he was on his way to Saudi Arabia to brief unidentified supporters on the development of the rockets and to obtain their continued funding for the project. Karika also told his Israeli interrogators that he had personally secured initial funding for the rocket program in Saudi Arabia.

Unfulfilled Pledges to Curb Hamas

What is perhaps most disturbing is that such activity persists despite repeated Saudi pledges to curb terror financing and the promotion of Islamist extremism from within the Kingdom.

In the wake of domestic al-Qaeda terrorist attacks, Saudi authorities took action against al-Qaeda financiers, severely curtailing the funding these financiers provided to Hamas as a consequence. By restricting Islamist charities that fund both al-Qaeda and Hamas—such as the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) and the International Islamic Relief Organization—Saudi funding for Hamas all but dried up for a period of time. According to an Israeli report, in the second half of 2004, “Saudi authorities began severely limiting charitable money transfers from their country to Hamas institutions in the [Palestinian Authority]-administered territories.”

But while Saudi authorities did take several steps against terror financing—including restricting charities to a single account from which funds can be withdrawn and eliminating cash disbursements from charitable accounts—many of their most significant antiterror promises were not implemented. Saudi authorities had committed to establishing a Financial Intelligence Unit and an oversight commission for charities, but failed to do either. In any event, the commission would have been of limited use even if established; some of the most significant charities in need of oversight, including WAMY and the Muslim World League, were expressly excluded from the commission's planned purview.

According to Saudi officials, then-Crown Prince Abdullah officially withdrew the Kingdom's support for Hamas in early 2002. But special Account Ninety-Eight funds created by the government to funnel money to Palestinian organizations continue to function and fund Hamas despite reported pledges to close the accounts made more than eighteen months ago. Just last month, Saudi television ran a program on the jihad in Palestine that implored viewers to donate funds to the Palestinian intifada. A caption on the screen informed donors that they could send funds through the Saudi Committee for Support of the al-Quds Intifada's Account Ninety-Eight, “a joint account at all Saudi banks.” Meanwhile, a speaker instructed viewers, “Jihad is the pinnacle of Islam.” He explained that the funds would go directly to those waging jihad, where it would, in his words, “help them carry out this mission.”

Conclusion

Funding for terrorist groups, including Hamas, continues to flow from within Saudi Arabia, albeit at a slower pace than previously. But the exposure of a Hamas command center operating from Saudi Arabia marks a disturbing upgrade of Hamas's presence in the Kingdom. Still, there is good news. The move may be a reaction to the sharp increase in international pressure and attention now focused on Syria, where Hamas leaders have based themselves since being expelled from Jordan in the 1990s. The revelation that Hamas

terrorism aimed at undermining the regime of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas is being planned from Saudi Arabia should give Washington sufficient motivation to press Riyadh for tangible action to put a quick end to such activity.

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