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Is Israel Aiding Islamist Groups?

By Joseph Fitsanakis

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THERE IS ADMITTEDLY NOTHING NEW about the discovery of yet another Islamic militant cell in Yemen. The US has long pointed [1] to significant al-Qaeda clandestine presence in that country. Eyebrows are bound to be raised, however, at news of a recent formal accusation by the Yemeni government that Israel offered to assist Islamist militants who had “prepared [...] car bombs to attack governmental buildings and embassies”[2]. According to Agence France Presse, among several suspects arrested by Yemeni authorities after the September 17 attack [3] on the US Embassy in Sana’a are three members of the Islamic Jihad of Yemen, an alleged al-Qaeda affiliate that claimed responsibility for the attack.

BIZARRE ALLEGATIONS

Remarkably, the arrestees in question -Imad al-Rimi, 23, Ali al-Mahfal, 24, and Bassam al-Haidari (a.k.a. Abu al-Ghaith), 26- are being accused by Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh of working for “an Islamist terrorist cell with links to Israeli intelligence, [which] ha[s] been dismantled”[3]. On January 10, a Yemeni court heard that al-Haidari communicated with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert via email, offering to collaborate with the Israeli authorities prior to the US Embassy attack. The intercepted emails allegedly show that al-Haidari wrote to Olmert “[w]e are the Organisation of Islamic Jihad and you are Jews, but you are honest, and we are ready to do anything”[3]. Prosecutors for the Yemeni government claim that Olmert (or, more likely, someone from the Israeli intelligence services who was forwarded al-Haidari’s message) actually wrote back telling al-Haidari “[w]e are ready to support you [...] as an agent”[3].

AN INTRIGUING PRECEDENT

The allegations may seem bizarre, to say the least. However, if true, they will not signify the first time that Israeli intelligence agencies have actively supported militant Islamist groups in the Middle East. Professor Anthony H. Cordesman [4], who currently holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Washington, DC-based Center for Strategic & International Studies, has near-conclusively demonstrated Israel's systematic financial and monetary aid to Hamas, which began in the late 1970s. According to internal documents published several years ago by the Israel-based Institute for Counter Terrorism [5], in 1978 Israeli authorities allowed Hamas co-founder Sheikh Ahmed Ismail Yassin to establish the group under the early name "Islamic Center" in Israel. A few years later, during the Iran-Contra Scandal (1985-1986), Israel acted as Washington's conduit in supplying US-made weapons to Iran and then channeling the profits to the Contras paramilitary mercenaries fighting Nicaragua's Sandinista government. Israel did so in full knowledge of the fact that the Iranian government was at that time Hamas' primary military supplier. As a result, Hamas even today uses numerous US-made weapons in its operations in Israel and the Palestinian territories, channeled to it by Israel, through Iran. According to Richard Sale, Terrorism Correspondent for United Press International, who has studied the internal documents, Israel's active support for Hamas actually intensified after the militant organization's popularity began to boom in Palestine, following Iran's Islamic Revolution [5].

A RATIONAL POLICY

The reason for this bizarre alignment between Israel and Hamas was strategically rational: it reflected a conscious attempt by the Israeli intelligence services to establish a viable opposition to Yasser Arafat's Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). By the late 1970s, the secular and leftist disposition of Arafat's leadership was gradually attracting support for the Palestinian cause from far beyond the relatively narrow confines of the Arab World. Indeed, in 1988, when the PLO executive committee in Algiers declared the independence of the Nation of Palestine, nearly 100 states recognized it, including the entire Arab World, most of Africa, nearly all of Asia (including India), Cyprus, as well as the entire Socialist Bloc. Brazil, Australia and virtually all Western European nations welcomed official Palestinian Delegations on their territory. By aiding Hamas, Israel hoped that the militant group's Islamist ideology would eventually damage the near-universal appeal of the Palestinian liberation struggle. Moreover, by promoting Hamas' operational ties with the Khomeini regime in Tehran, Israel desired to associate in the eyes of Washington the Palestinian struggle with the fundamentalist ideology of the Iranian theocrats.

Which is, in fact, exactly what happened. Israel's exiling of Arafat and the PLO leadership to Lebanon and Tunisia, until 1994, allowed Hamas to roam free in the Palestinian territories, which in turn enabled the militant faction to become the most dynamic political and religious institution inside the Palestinian lands. By 2005, when Arafat died, Hamas was powerful enough to seriously threaten the PLO's traditional supremacy in Palestine. The Palestinian civil war, which followed Hamas' subsequent electoral victory, was the best possible outcome for all those—in Israel and elsewhere—who do not wish to see a unified and viable Palestinian state.

THE LAVON AFFAIR

The history of the Israeli intelligence services is also marked by at least one acknowledged case in which covert agents working for Israel bombed US and British targets abroad in order to discredit Arab and Muslim groups. This was in 1954, when Israeli intelligence officials authorized Operation Susannah, which later became known as the Lavon Affair [6]. The plan included the bombing of several US- and British-affiliated targets in Egypt, including a post office, a movie theater, and two libraries belonging to the US Information Agency. The agents who carried out the operations were reportedly recruited in the late 1940s by notorious Israeli intelligence agent Avram Dar, who had traveled to Egypt pretending to be a British tourist.

The primary aim of the operation was to place the blame for the bombings on Arab nationalists (including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the ideological parent of today's Hamas), local communists and other pro-independence Arabs. The ultimate goal was two-fold: first, to anger British colonial authorities in Egypt, thus delaying Britain's exit from the country; second, to dissuade some in the US State Department from the idea (quite prominent in US governing circles the time) that America's future interests in the Middle East lay with Egypt, not Israel.

Operation Susannah failed when the Israel-employed operatives were arrested by Egyptian and British authorities. A political scandal ensued in Jerusalem, where, after several incriminatory exchanges between the various Israeli political parties, the then Minister of Defense, Pinhas Lavon, was forced to resign (hence the term "Lavon Affair"). Six years later, in 1960, following the discovery of further incriminating evidence in internal Israeli government documents, David Ben-Gurion, who had succeeded Lavon as Minister of Defense, authorized a closed-door investigation under the supervision of a number of Israeli Supreme Court Justices. The investigation concluded that Operation Susannah had not been authorized by the Ministry of Defense, a finding that inevitably pointed to Israel's intelligence services.

Forty years later, in 2005, the Israeli state officially admitted responsibility for the bombings, when then Israeli President Moshe Katzav held a ceremony [7] to honor nine of the Egyptian Jewish agents who had carried them out. Even after details of the terrorist operation –which, as stated earlier, involved bombings of civilian targets in Egypt– were disclosed, the surviving operatives who carried them out showed no sign of remorse. One of them, Marcelle Ninio, described the recognition ceremony as "a great day for all of us". Many of the surviving terrorists and their families vowed to campaign "for a full account of their operation to be included in the [Israel's] high-school syllabus".

A HISTORY OF DECEPTION

The history of Israeli intelligence operations in the Middle East and beyond should prompt observers to think twice before dismissing Yemen's allegations that the Israeli government offered support to al-Qaeda-linked Islamist militants. Far from being an "anti-American" or an "anti-Semitic" regime, the Yemeni government has been among the Arab World's most pro-American national administrations, having dramatically increased its collaboration with Washington since 9/11. In December of 2007, the US State Department described [8] Yemen as "an important partner in the global war on terrorism, providing assistance in the military,

diplomatic, and financial arenas” and praised President Saleh for spearheading the country’s “counter-terrorism cooperation efforts with the United States, achieving significant results and improving overall security in Yemen”. Could it be that covert Israeli activities are currently directed at subverting the “improving overall security in Yemen”? As in the case of the Lavon Affair, observers may have to wait for over 50 years to find out.