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## Global Threats and Strategic Assessments: Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade An Evolving Terrorism Force

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# **Global Threats and Strategic Assessments**

## **Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade An Evolving Terrorism Force**

**Kaydee Penn**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this report is to present a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designated by the Secretary of State that poses as a threat to U.S. national interests. This report contains an analysis of current research on the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade's past, present, and foreseeable status. An investigation into AAMB's past attacks is imminent to thwarting future attacks. This report will provide a method of analysis to identify gaps and trends in Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade's past attacks. The findings from the analysis will pave the way for further research to benefit national security.

## History

The Israeli-Palestinian opposition goes as far back as the late 19th century to the early 20th centuries when Jews and Arabs were experiencing national movements. When their shared objective for sovereignty collided in the 1920s the competition to attain sovereignty escalated into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of 1947.

By 1995, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remained evident. Since Palestine and Israel are vulnerable to conflicts between each other and influenced by additional outside factors, both actors are sensitive to settlement negotiations, as well as how alliances with other nations may affect one another. The Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995 was a proposal to move the United States Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. During Bill Clinton's presidency the act was proposed and by 1999 he took it into careful consideration (Levitt, 2003). Due to US' alliance with Israel, Palestine had already rejected US interests out of skepticism. If the act had followed through there would be significant concern for US foreign policy and US national security.

Since the location of Jerusalem remains a factor in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it is recognized to be in Palestinian territory by many and recognized to be in Israel territory by others. If Jerusalem were to be in Palestinian territory, the implication of the Jerusalem Embassy Act would be political in Zionism and viewed as a statement of war on Palestinian holy sites. Ramadan Abdullah, a Palestinian general, quoted, "The United States administration is fully responsible for the consequences of such an act of aggression and should expect a response from the Palestinian people at the proper time and place" (Levitt, 2003).

The following year, the Camp David Summit was held as a meeting between former President Clinton, former Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Barak, and former Palestinian Authority chairman Yasser Arafat (Shyovitz, 2000). The summit was of foreign policy interest to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Proposed negotiations covered topics of territory, Jerusalem, and the Temple Mount (as referred to by Jews, but referred to as "noble sanctuary" by Arabs), refugees, security, and settlement disputes. The objective of the meeting ultimately failed, and without a proposal from himself, Yasser Arafat rejected any negotiations from the United States and Israel upon returning to Palestine.

Arafat returned from the summit vocal over anti-Americanism. He rejected the negotiations at Camp David because he felt that the proposals were of American and Israeli self interests, as well as an, "American-Zionist plot", to salvage the, "Zionist enemy" [Israel].

## Background

In September of 2000, former Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, took a controversial walk atop the holy site of the "noble sanctuary", where the al-Aqsa Mosque is located. Muslims believed that the Al-Aqsa mosque was the location where prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven and because Palestinians established the site on top of the former Temple Mount (as referred to by Jews) non-Muslims are restricted from entry. Ariel Sharon's walk through the "noble sanctuary" was viewed as a political statement to provoke and challenge the Palestinian Authority. Ariel Sharon, who allegedly used the stunt to

remind Palestine that they are subordinate to Israel and that Palestine will not be at peace in the Jerusalem holy site, ultimately denounced the Muslim tradition of Palestine's "noble sanctuary". Prime Minister Sharon's visit provoked animosity, a trigger leading to the Second Intifada, also known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000.

## **Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade**

Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade (AAMB) emerged as a network of militias at the onset of the Second Intifada in 2000. They were decentralized autonomous cells without a unifying leadership, but they operated under loyalty to Fatah (The Institute, 2015). AAMB's basis for action was to create an independent Palestinian state. Their name comes of reference to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in the noble sanctuary in Jerusalem. AAMB grew as a driving force behind the Second Intifada. They were located and operated out of the West Bank and Gaza.

## **Second Intifada (Al-Aqsa Intifada)**

At the beginning of the second intifada in 2000, HAMAS (Islamic Resistance Movement) and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) carried out joint attacks with the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade as a linked coalition of militias (TRADOC, 2007). The militias engaged in arm conflict with Israel Defense Forces and settlers. The hostile environment intensified leading AMMB to eventually shift their tactics to rocket attacks as a method to expel Israeli soldiers and settlers from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

AAMB's primary objective was to fight to defend and strengthen Palestinian nationalism. However, their tactics shifted from shootings, rocket attacks, knifings, and bombings, to a notorious suicide bombing campaign as the Intifada intensified in 2002 (The Institute, 2015). Suicide bombings became their primary form of attack. AAMB claims that they used suicide bombings as their favored counter-terrorism measure in response to accusations of the Israeli Defense Forces' (IDF) "targeted killings".

By the time the suicide bombing campaign was in full swing, AAMB shifted their sole purpose to defend and promote Palestinian nationalism as the primary objective, into violent killings of innocent Israeli citizens. The targeted killings and suicide bombings intensified as the Second Intifada progressed as the death tolls increased by the thousands. The Second Intifada became a series of counter-attacks riddled with trigger mechanisms.

## **Funding**

Since the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade is a decentralized group of autonomous cells, they lack leadership and structure (TRADOC, 2007). AAMB could not sufficiently support themselves and they are not self-funded. Their suicide campaign gave them a name, and Hezbollah noticed this. Hezbollah and Palestine alike are at odds with Israel, so Hezbollah demonstrated their willingness to support any terrorist organization operating to harm Israel. In addition to finances, Hezbollah provides logistic and material support to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade through their facilitators within Palestine (Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2014).

## **Designation as an FTO**

In 2002, AAMB collaborated with HAMAS and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad to carry out joint attacks against Israeli citizens, adding continuity to the suicide bombing campaign. These actions prompted the U.S. State Department to designate them as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, joining Israel, the European Union, Canada, Japan, and New Zealand. Since AAMB's declaration as a terrorist organization, Washington abandoned efforts in dealing with and negotiating with Yasser Arafat, no longer viewing him as a viable partner in peace negotiations. The United States faced threats to national interests in light of the designation and abandonment of Arafat, in response, Fatah encouraged a boycott on all American products prompting international sanctions placed on the Palestinian Authority.

## **Fatah**

Fatah is a left wing and secular political party, being the largest faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The founder and leader of Fatah, Yasser Arafat acknowledged AAMB as a military wing of Fatah during the Second Intifada (TRADOC, 2007). AAMB emerged under Fatah's ideological roots to promote Palestinian nationalism while holding anti-American ideologies. Although the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade does not have a unifying leader, their loyalty and allegiance is to Fatah and Arafat.

## **Threat Assessment**

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade essentially decreased towards the end of the Second Intifada in 2005, however, in 2014 AAMB re-established themselves as an operating terrorist organization and re-emerged under Operation Protective Edge with HAMAS (The Institute, 2015). AAMB announced threats of an "open war against Israel" upon their come back. Their re-emergence is an alarm to a future undertaking of force because their re-establishment was spontaneous and arose out of violence. The threat of a Third Intifada is possible but avoidable under careful monitoring. AAMB poses as a limited threat to the United States but they have the capability to sabotage U.S. interests abroad.

The threat of AAMB attacks deserves an analysis of previous attacks to thwart future ones. Elements of previous attacks from indoctrination to the imminent attack can be broken down into strategic phases. An analysis of AAMB's suicide bombing campaign can yield information on the involvement of key players, targets, financing, weapons procurement, logistic preparations, and explosives construction. After analyzing case studies into phases of pre-attack activities, the search for consistencies and trends can improve preparedness and awareness of the emergence of any terrorist factions.

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