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Hezbollah Handled a Palestinian Squad in Tulkarm, Which Planned Terrorist Attacks



Muhammad Zaghoul



Muhammad Masarwa



Ahmed Abu Aluz



Mahmoud Zaghoul



Rabah Labadi

The operatives of the Palestinian terrorist squad handled by Hezbollah in Tulkarm (Israel Security Agency, January 21, 2016).

Overview¹

1. The Israeli security forces recently exposed a five-man **terrorist squad in Tulkarm that planned to carry out terrorist attacks in Israel, including a shooting attack**. The squad was headed by **Muhammad Zaghoul**, a Palestinian from Tulkarm, and **handled by Hezbollah in Lebanon**. During the past year, the operatives were involved in throwing and Molotov cocktails at Israeli security forces. None of them belonged to a Palestinian terrorist organization. Two of them also served sentences in Israeli jails.

2. Interrogation revealed they had been handled by Hezbollah's Unit 133, a Hezbollah unit which has tried to establish terrorist networks among the Palestinians, but so far without success. The head of the squad, Muhammad Zaghoul, was recruited via the Internet by Jawad Nasrallah, the son of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and handled by a Hezbollah operative in Lebanon aka Fadi. Muhammad Zaghoul was

¹ Most of the information about the exposure of the terrorist squad is based on the Israel Security Agency website with additions from Ynet, January 21, 2016.

asked to open an email account and the two used it to communicate. He was also asked to recruit other operatives for a squad and gather information about various targets in preparation for terrorist attacks.

3. The squad asked Hezbollah for money and weapons for attacks. **Hezbollah sent them \$5,000** via a forex company (\$5,000 of the \$25,000 authorized by Hezbollah). When the money arrived, two of the operatives bought a sub-machine gun and a full magazine and planned to carry out a shooting attack targeting IDF soldiers. Apparently the plan was ready for execution because when the two were detained they had the gun with them. A court handed down indictments for all five (For the squad's modus operandi see Appendix A).

4. The exposure of the squad was another **illustration how the social networks are used to recruit and handle terrorist operatives from a distance**. Hezbollah, like other terrorist organizations, including ISIS, adopted the Internet and social networks to recruit terrorist squads. Thus Hezbollah can overcome the distance between handlers in Lebanon and terrorist squads recruited in the Palestinian Authority (PA) and handle them covertly, keeping a low signature.

5. In the past Hezbollah also tried to recruit and handle Palestinian terrorist squads. During the second intifada, for example, Hezbollah handled dozens of terrorist squads. The current affair illustrates that despite Hezbollah's involvement in the fighting in Syria, and despite the constraints placed on its operations along the Lebanon-Israel border, **it is nevertheless active in recruiting Palestinian terrorists to attack Israel**. To the best of our knowledge, the Hezbollah squad exposed in Tulkarm was the **first Hezbollah attempt during the current terrorist campaign to handle a Palestinian terrorist squad**. It was aimed at upgrading the Palestinian terrorist campaign, as did Hamas, by increasing its military dimension at the expense of its popular nature. It can be assumed that Hezbollah will continue making similar attempts.

6. **Hezbollah's terrorist activities in Israel, Judea and Samaria are part of Iran's overall policy towards Israel**. To implement its policy, Iran uses proxies, such as Hezbollah and the Palestinian terrorist organizations. During the second intifada Iran and Hezbollah made efforts to recruit and handle terrorist squads in Judea and Samaria. After it ended they transferred their efforts to the Gaza Strip (see Appendix B). Thus, the exposure of the squad in Tulkarm, and previous attempts made by Hezbollah's Unit 133 to carry out terrorist attacks, show that **Iran continues sponsoring terrorism and initiates Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israel**.

7. For additional information about the terrorist squad in Tulkarm, see **Appendix A**. For an overview of Hezbollah's previous attempts to initiate terrorist attacks in Israel, Judea and Samaria, see **Appendix B**.

Appendix A

The Terrorist Squad in Tulkarm and Its Modus Operandi

1. The operatives of the squad detained were:
 - a. **Muhammad Zaghoul** – Headed the squad. Born in 1983, lived in the village of Zeita, north of Tulkarm. Between 2001 and 2005 he was imprisoned in Israel. He initiated the contact with Jawad Nasrallah, and was later handled by a Hezbollah operative known as Fadi.
 - b. Rabah Labadi – Born in 19897, lived in the village of Zeita. Was imprisoned in Israel between 2002 and 2007, and 2008 and 2011.
 - c. Mahmoud Zaghoul – Born in 1996, lived in the village of Zeita.
 - d. Muhammad Masarwa – Born in 1996, lived in Tulkarm. Planned to carry out a shooting attack.
 - e. Ahmed Abu Aluz – Born in 1996, lived in Tulkarm. Planned to carry out a shooting attack.



Jawad Nasrallah (Al-Nahar, March 29, 2015)

The Squad's Modus Operandi

2. In August 2015 (before the beginning of the terrorist campaign) Jawad Nasrallah conducted seemingly innocent correspondence on his Facebook page with Muhammad Zaghoul. Zaghoul asked him for contact with Hezbollah. A few days later

Jawad Nasrallah answered, requesting patience. Some time after that a man calling himself Fadi sent him an email containing an encoding program and instructions for using it. After that the communications between the two were encrypted. Zaghoul asked for money to finance a terrorist attack. He was informed he would receive money only after he was better known [to his handler] (Ynet, January 21, 2016).

3. Over the next few weeks Zaghoul received 16 encrypted emails. They contained instructions including for carrying out suicide bombing attacks and requests for intelligence about IDF training bases. Muhammad Zaghoul sent Hezbollah his plan for a terrorist attack and asked for authorization. He also sent the name of a Gaza Strip resident who could transfer the funds from Hezbollah to the squad in Tulkarm (Ynet, January 21, 2016).

4. On one occasion Muhammad Zaghoul sent his handler a proposal to kill an IDF officer. The proposal included personal information about the officer and a picture. According to Zaghoul, he and the other squad operatives had conducted surveillance of the officer. Muhammad Zaghoul asked his handlers for \$30,000 to buy weapons to kill the officer. Rabah Labadi suggested not to ask for exaggerated sums of money in order to prove to Hezbollah he was reliable (Ynet, January 21, 2016).

5. Several days later Hezbollah answered it would send \$25,000. However, the Israel Security Agency prevented the funds from being transferred to the squad, and the operatives in Tulkarm received only \$5,000. They used the money to buy a gun and bullets. The money was transferred by a forex company to Judea and Samaria. The gun was bought and hidden in the house of one of the operatives (Ynet, January 21, 2016). The gun was probably a Karl Gustav sub-machine gun, and was turned over during the interrogation (Israel Security Agency website). That might be an indication that their plan was in its final stages and about to be carried out.

The Role of Jawad Nasrallah

6. During the interrogation of the operatives, Jawad Nasrallah, the son of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, was mentioned as having enlisted squad head Muhammad Zaghoul. Jawad Nasrallah is Hassan Nasrallah's second son. His eldest son, Hadi, was an operative in Hezbollah's special force and killed in south Lebanon by the IDF on September 12, 1997 (his body was exchanged for the body of IDF soldier Itamar Ilyah).

7. Jawad Nasrallah uses the social networks to create his image as a writer and poet (see pictures). He is very active on the Internet, especially on Twitter. In the past he

has put music to a number of songs for Hezbollah (Sawt al-Jabel website, January 11, 2016). As far as is known, so far his name has not been mentioned in a terrorist-activity context, thus his involvement in enlisting Muhammad Zaghoul was exceptional.

8. Jawad Nasrallah's involvement may have been limited to locating and enlisting Zaghoul through his Internet activity (handling him was turned over to Fadi). However, the involvement of a son of Hassan Nasrallah in the recruiting of a Palestinian terrorist squad is significant, despite the quasi-humorous tone of his Twitter account.² In ITIC assessment, the involvement of Nasrallah's son, in this case, might indicate that well-known figures in Hezbollah not only are aware of its terrorist policy towards Israel, but also support its implementation when they have the occasion (without hiding their identities).

Jawad Nasrallah, Selected Pictures



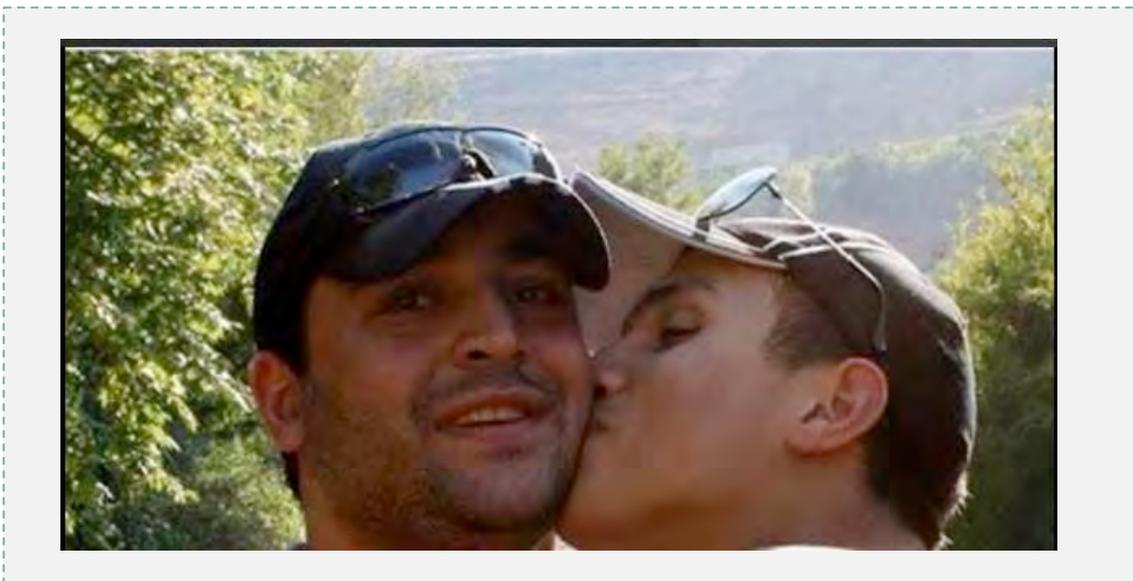
Left: Jawad Nasrallah the writer, on the authors page of the Ahl al-Bayt website³ (Authors of Ahl al-Bayt, January 24, 2016). Right: Picture of Jawad Nasrallah posted by his Internet supporters as part of a support campaign held in the wake of his media confrontation with Lebanese Al-Jadeed TV (Al-Jadeed Al-Arabi, March 30, 2015).

² In response to the media coverage of the exposure of the terrorist squad in Tulkarm, Jawad Nasrallah asked his Twitter followers, "How do you wake a sleeper cell?" After receiving answers he wrote, "According to [the number of] your cells, you will receive payment [from Allah]." He continued poetically, "It is harder to enlist your heart than a thousand cells..." (Twitter account of Jawad Nasrallah, January 22, 2016).

³ **Ahl al-Bayt**, an organization subordinate to the office of Iran's supreme leader, it deals with spreading Shi'ite ideology and propaganda around the globe.



Left: A scene from a video whose song was put to music by Jawad Nasrallah. It was produced by Al-Manar TV (YouTube, February 17, 2014). Right: Jawad Nasrallah and his father, Hassan Nasrallah (Al-Hadath News, April 1, 2015).



Jihad Mughnieh, the son of terrorist Imad Mughnieh, killed in Kuneitra, Syria, on January 18, 2015, kisses Jawad Nasrallah (Twitter account of Nawras Ibrahim, February 3, 2015).

Appendix B

Previous Hezbollah Support of Palestinian Terrorism – Overview

1. Hezbollah's efforts to initiate terrorist activities in Israel, Judea and Samaria are part of **Iran's comprehensive policy against Israel, and Hezbollah is one of its tools**. In the past the policy was implemented by handling Palestinian terrorist networks in Judea and Samaria, directing Israeli Arabs for terrorist purposes and dispatching terrorist operatives from abroad (usually of Lebanese origin) to carry out terrorist activities in Israel.

2. In the 1990s and at the turn of the century Hezbollah was behind a **series of attempted terrorist attacks** in Israel. It sent Lebanese operatives with foreign passports (real or counterfeit) to Israel from Europe. The activity was aimed at giving backing to the attacks carried out by the Palestinian terrorist organizations, especially Hamas, to sabotage the Oslo Accords and harm the PA. That was carried out by Hezbollah's "Unit for Overseas Operations," its overseas terrorist attack mechanism, in coordination with and directed by Iran. That modus operandi was unsuccessful, and Hezbollah operatives sent to Israel were exposed and detained by the Israeli security forces.⁴

3. **During the second intifada and afterwards, Hezbollah, in coordination with Iran, played a major role in encouraging Palestinian terrorism, including suicide bombing attacks**. Between 2002 and 2007 the Iran's **IRGC and Hezbollah handled several dozen Palestinian terrorist networks** (in 2006, there were 85 networks). Most of them belonged to **Fatah's Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades**. The most lethal attack was a **double suicide bombing attack at the central bus station in Tel Aviv** On January 5, 2003 (which killed 23 and wounded 106). The attack was orchestrated by a Fatah terrorist squad in Nablus, which was **handled and financed by the IRGC in Lebanon**.

⁴ For further information about Hezbollah's efforts to encourage terrorist attacks in Israel during the 1990s see the November 29, 2012 bulletin "Hezbollah: Portrait of a Terrorist Organization." An example was **Haj Fawzi Mustafa Muhammad Ayoub**, a Lebanese with Canadian citizenship, belonged to Hezbollah's "Unit for Overseas Operations." He was sent on a terrorist mission in Israel by Hezbollah, apprehended, sentenced to prison and released in 2002 in a prisoner exchange deal. On May 26, 2014, Hezbollah announced his death "while fulfilling his duty of jihad" during the fighting in Syria, apparently in Aleppo (according to another version, in the southern Golan Heights).



Two Fatah-Tanzim operatives in Ramallah carry a picture of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. During the second intifada he was perceived by many terrorist operatives in Judea and Samaria as a leader and role model. The picture was in an album found during Operation Defensive Shield.

4. At the end of the second intifada there was a significant reduction in the extent of support Iran gave to Hezbollah for Palestinian terrorist squads in Judea and Samaria, and **the focus of Iran's support for Palestinian terrorism was transferred to the Gaza Strip**. The exposure of the squad in Tulkarm, which was about to carry out a terrorist attack, might indicate that **Hezbollah is renewing its attempts to establish and handle terrorist squads in Judea and Samaria**. That might indicate an attempt to **escalate the current terrorist campaign and change it from "popular terrorism" to a military-style intifada that would include shooting and suicide bombing attacks**.⁵

⁵ Hamas has already made such attempts. For further information see the January 6, 2016 bulletin, "The exposure of a terrorist infrastructure in Abu Dis and Bethlehem directed by Hamas in the Gaza Strip shows Hamas' effort to escalate the current terrorist campaign at the expense of its popular character."