

Exposure of a Hezbollah Terrorist Network in Egypt

Summary and Characteristics

General

On April 9th, 2009, the Egyptian media reported extensively on the exposure of a 49 member terrorist network, which operated in Egypt on behalf of the Lebanese Hezbollah organization. According to the reports, the Egyptian security services have succeeded, to date, in arresting 25 members of the network, which include Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians and Sudanese. At the same time, the security services are continuing to pursue an additional 24 members, who succeeded in escaping when the network was exposed.¹

The exposure of Hezbollah's terrorist network in Egypt infuriated the Egyptians, who perceived this as a serious attack against the dignity and sovereignty of Egypt by Hezbollah and Iran. The soured relations between Egypt and Iran and the Hezbollah started long before the exposure of the cell.² The former negative peak in the Egyptian Hezbollah relationship occurred during the "Cast Lead" Operation, following Nasrallah's calls to the Egyptian nation and army, to revolt against their leaders who supported the Israeli side, and aid the Palestinians.

¹ <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=516408&issueno=11105>,
<http://www.aljarida.com/AlJarida/Article.aspx?id=105985>

² The background to the bad relations between Egypt and Iran began in 1979 with the rise of the Fundamentalist regime in Teheran, which hastened to cut diplomatic ties with Egypt in response to the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt and to the hospitality given to the exiled Shah in Cairo after he had left Iran. In the 30 years which have passed since then, there have been many attempts to renew and improve relations between the two countries, usually at Iran's initiative, but Egypt has refused until now to renew diplomatic relations with the Iranian regime, so long as they do not halt their interference in the internal affairs of other Arab nations. The strengthening of the radical Shiite sector in recent years, due to the rise of the Shiites' influence in Iraq and Lebanon, the Iranian penetration into the Palestinian arena and the strengthening of Iran's regional influence against the backdrop of the U.S. weakness, add to Egypt's displeasure and its suspicious attitude. In addition, a number of other reasons can be pointed to in recent years, which added to the tension which exists between the two countries: a) The production of an Iranian film titled: "The Execution of Pharaoh" during the second half of 2007, in which Sadat, who was considered to be the national symbol of Egypt, was depicted in a negative light, and his assassins were commended. The film aroused enraged responses within the government and the Egyptian street. In response, the Egyptians made haste in producing a film which depicts Khomeini in a negative light titled "Khomeini the bloody imam". B) During Operation "Cast Lead", Nasrallah took advantage of the developments in Gaza to call upon the Egyptian people to demonstrate against the Egyptian regime, owing to the closure of the border crossings between Rafiah and Gaza which were intended to eradicate the Hamas. Nasrallah thereby accused the Egyptian regime of being a partner to the crime and killing of the Palestinians. Nasrallah even went further in the perception of the Egyptians, when he called for the Egyptian army officers to pressurize the Egyptian politicians to open the Rafiah crossing and to assist the Hamas. However, he denied having called for a coup d'etat against the Egyptian regime.
<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/07/14/53079.html>
<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=10989&article=500700>

The existence of a terrorist network for a number of years fits well into Hezbollah's strategy to establish operational infrastructures outside Lebanon, as a base for future operations in these areas. This infrastructure, which initially was meant to assist the Palestinian terrorism activity in the Gaza Strip and against Israel, also gathered intelligence on Israeli targets in Egypt, apparently in order to perpetrate an attack in revenge for the assassination of 'Imad Mughniyye.

This modus operandi exposed in the Egyptian context, was a sort of window, enabling a glance into the way that Hezbollah establishes its terrorist networks abroad, even in countries which do not perceive Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

Hezbollah's terrorist network in Egypt – Details

Without a doubt, the terrorist network operated as an offshoot of the Lebanese Hezbollah in Egypt. This was confirmed by the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, himself. He claimed that the network's aim was to logistically support and supply military assistance to the Palestinians in their fight against Israel but, in addition, he made it clear, that there was no intention to harm Egyptian targets. Nasrallah even protested and claimed that only 10 of the men incarcerated belonged to his organization.³ The members of the network also admitted during their interrogation, that they wished to help the Palestinians, but denied any intention of harming Egyptian targets.

However, from the results of the Egyptian interrogation, it was learned that in addition to the aid which the members of the network gave to the Palestinians, they intended to carry out three large-scale simultaneous attacks against Egyptian tourist sites: Taba, Nuweiba, and Dahab, where there are many Israeli tourists. The interrogation also revealed that they also planned to attack boats in the Suez Canal, with the intention of harming the Egyptian economy.⁴ For this purpose, the members of the network rented property along the Canal as their

³ For Nasrallah's speech see:

<http://www.wa3ad.org/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=42032>

⁴ <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=89842>. The group members gathered extensive intelligence on the presence of Israeli tourists also in the city of Orgada alongside the Red Sea: <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1078793.html>, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=516408&issueno=11105>

base in preparing their attacks, which helped them gather the intelligence for the attack and carry out surveillance.⁵

Muhammad Yousef Mansour, a Lebanese Shi'ite, was the head of the network. He operated under a fictitious Sunni identity – Sami Shihab. During his interrogation, Shihab stated that he was in charge of the “Egyptian file” in the Hezbollah, which was part of a larger Hezbollah file called “The Ring Countries”, which included Egypt, Syria and Jordan. He also said that the person who directly commanded the network from afar, was a senior Hezbollah officer called Muhammad Qablan.⁶ He added that Qablan had stayed in Egypt for two years and had then given him the assignment of forming a terrorist cell in Egypt, which would be sponsored by Hezbollah.⁷ From 2005, Shihab came to Egypt on a tourist visa, which he received from the Egyptian embassy in Beirut, and stayed in various houses for different periods of time. One of his main tasks was to smuggle Palestinian fighters and explosives into Gaza. However, when 'Imad Mughniyye was assassinated, Muhammad Qablan ordered him to carry out surveillance and intelligence gathering on the tourists' movements in the Sinai Peninsula, in order to perpetrate a revenge attack for the death of Mughniyye, “but the Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, ordered this attack cancelled”.⁸



Muhammad Qablan

⁵ Al-Yaum Al-Sabi', issue 27, April 21 2009, page 9.

⁶ Muhammad Qablan is known as one of the central members in Hezbollah serving as head of the “Israel Surround Department” in Unit 1800 of the Hezbollah.

⁷ 8 detainees stated that they have met with Qablan.

⁸ <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=92399>

<http://www.aljarida.com/AlJarida/Article.aspx?id=106007>,

<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=514963&issueno=11094>

Shihab stated that he had introduced himself to the members of the network whom he had recruited, as a Palestinian living in Syria. Nasser Jibril, one of the detained members of the network, stated that he had met Shihab through Nasser Khalil Abu 'Amra, of Palestinian origin⁹, one of the network members who had recruited him. At that meeting, Shihab had introduced himself as a Palestinian, and proposed that he join another group which was committed to aiding the Palestinians.¹⁰

Whilst establishing the network, Shihab purchased apartments along the Nile next to the Egyptian border, apparently to serve as a meeting place for the members of the network, as well as observation posts etc. One of the detained, Nimr Fahmi Al-Tawil, an Egyptian, told his interrogators that he had helped to purchase the apartments near the Egyptian-Palestinian border.¹¹ Others related that Shihab told them to purchase a fish shop and land.¹²

Shihab told his interrogators that the members of the network had supplied him with logistic aid, such as the purchase of explosives at Suq Al-'Atba, which is well known in Cairo. The explosives were transferred to Sinai and from there were smuggled into the Gaza Strip and Israel and, in his own words: "they smuggled Palestinian fighters from Egypt deep into Israel, as well as into Gaza, as well as explosives".¹³ Nasser Khalil Abu Amra, mentioned above, was apparently in charge of purchasing and smuggling the explosives. He told his interrogators that he had smuggled arms from Sudan into Egypt. For example, he paid smugglers a sum of 25,000 guineas which went up to 100,000 guineas due to the higher security risk.¹⁴

Abu Amra told his interrogators that Shihab had instructed him to purchase 200 kgs of TNT. He added that he had succeeded in obtaining only 50 kgs in Egypt.¹⁵ According to him, Abu Amra was supposed to transfer these explosives into the

⁹ Nasser Khalil Abu 'Amra told in his interrogation that he was recruited by someone of Lebanese origin. According to him, he met with Shihab in El-Arish, Cairo and Al-Jazeera. He planned on executing a terrorist attack in Taba.

<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=516408&issueno=11105>

¹⁰ Nasser Jibril and Khalil Abu 'Amra met at the beginning of 2005. Nasser Jibril was an activist at the "Muslim Brotherhood" movement in El-Arish, in northern Sinai, but in 2005 he left it following Abu 'Amra's suggestion to join the founding core of the new group.

¹¹ Al-Jumhuriyah (Cairo), April 16, 2009.

¹² <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=91834>.

¹³ <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=514963&issueno=11094>

¹⁴ <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=207895>

¹⁵ Al-hayat, April 17 2009, p.10 (Saudi Arabia - Saudi edition).

Gaza Strip with the help of Palestinians, via the tunnels, so that they could be used in attacks against Israelis.¹⁶

Another Palestinian detainee, Nasser Jibril, told his interrogators that he was told to procure 25 weapons for the network.¹⁷ Another detainee called Hani Sayyid Mutlaq also stated that he had been told to transfer arms to entities, who were supposed to perpetrate suicide attacks in Israel.¹⁸ Other detainees, who belonged to the "Al-Aqsa Shahid Brigades", confessed that they also smuggled arms to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.¹⁹

Five activists, former members of the Muslim Brotherhood, related that they had helped in collecting the arms and handing it over to Shihab.²⁰ The latter confessed that that the network members had explosives belts, a large supply of explosives such as C4 and TNT, as well as gunpowder.²¹

Other members of the network dealt with fundraising and financing. For example, Hani Sayyed Mutlaq related that he met with Nasser Khalil Abu Amra in Sinai in the middle of 2007 and was asked to collect donations for the Palestinian uprising.²²

¹⁶ Al-hayat, April 17 2009, p.10 (Saudi Arabia - Saudi edition).

<http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=89842>

¹⁷ During his interrogation he confessed to belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, but he left in 2005 after meeting Nasser Khalil Abu Amra through two men named Said and Asad. Al-Hayat, 17 April 2009, page 10 (Saudi Arabia - Saudi edition).

¹⁸ <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=207332&IssueID=1377>

¹⁹ <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=207895>,

<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=516025&issueno=11102>

²⁰ They claimed to have stopped their activities in the Muslim Brotherhood since 2005 because they believed the group was not serious in achieving its goals and because of their desire to fight the Jews, to attack Israelis and to help the Palestinians by smuggling arms, they claimed they did not know how the arms were smuggled. <http://www.almasry>

²¹ C4 explosives are very powerful and are produced in military factories.

Due to this fact, the Egyptian newspaper Al-Yaum Al-Sabi' states that there is a reasonable suspicion that the material was transferred by a foreign country to Hezbollah. The paper hints that Iran is responsible for this owing to a similar smuggling attempt which occurred in 1986, when the Saudi Arabia security system thwarted an Iranian attempt to smuggle 51 kgs of C4 explosives to Mecca via Iranian pilgrims in order to perpetrate attacks inside the Kingdom. One of the Egyptian generals in the security system also believes that Iran is behind this dangerous smuggling of explosives into Egypt. Al-Yaum Al-Sabi', edition 27, April 21 2009, p.9.

²² Al-Jumhuriyah (Cairo), June 16 2009.



**In the photographs, from left to right:
Sami Shihab, Nimr Fahmi, Hani Abu Mutlaq and Nasser Khalil**

The Egyptian interrogation also established that in 2008, two members of the Palestinian Fatah joined the network after meeting with Shihab, following the breach of the Egyptian-Gaza border. They were supposed to continue to Sudan and then to Lebanon and Syria, in order to receive their instructions regarding a terrorist attack in Israel.²³

From all the data gathered, they learned that the network was divided into four different cells, with only one of them being responsible for perpetrating the attack. There was a certain level of compartmentalization between the cells, with none of them knowing of the existence of the others.²⁴

Hereunder is a summary of how the network was set up and its modus operandi:

- a. The network's Shi'ite operators' extensive stay in the target country, apparently to learn the lay of the land, identify sources for the purchase of transportation, explosives etc., and to forge ties with the local population, in

²³ This relates to Muhammad Ramadan 'Abd Al-Fatah Baraka and Nidal Fath Al-Hasan. They infiltrated into Sinai from the Gaza Strip through one of the tunnels and stayed in El-Arish with Abu Amar, who smuggled groups of Africans into Israel.

<http://www.alssiyasi.com/?browser=view&EgyxpID=24700>, <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=207307>.

Dr. Barkat Al-Izz, a senior member of Fatah in Cairo, discovered that Lebanese Hezbollah activists had penetrated the movement particularly in the Gaza Strip and added that Hezbollah has been trying to recruit Palestinians for years. This is not new and the interrogations exposed the truth.

<http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=207438>

<http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/878/106.html>

²⁴ <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/878/106.html>

order to recruit personnel for the network. Muhammad Qablan and Sami Shihab, the network's operators, stayed in Egypt for an extensive period.

- b. Camouflaging the true identity of the network's operators in the target country, by using forged passports and identity cards, with Sunni names, in order to avoid arousing the security officials' suspicions. For example, the name Sami Shihab, was used to cover Muhammad Youssef Mansour's Shi'ite identity. Hezbollah used the identity of a Lebanese from a Sunni family in the Al-Bashura region in Beirut, called Sami Shihab, who had died before he reached the age of one, as a cover.²⁵ One can see Hezbollah's considerable capability here to produce forged documents and its access to Lebanon's population registry data bases.
- c. Keeping the true identity of the network operators' from its members, in order to make recruiting easier and win sympathy. The leader of the network, Sami Shihab, for example, presented himself to most of the network members as a Palestinian, and did not reveal the real sponsor behind the network, so as not to arouse the antagonism of the local population, which was their recruiting source.
- d. A trend can be discerned to present the Lebanese Hezbollah network as a group which sought to assist the Islamic nation's hardships. In the Egyptian case, Shihab sought to paint the network as a group seeking to aid the Palestinian struggle in Israel. As a result, a number of Fatah members from the Al Aqsa Shahids Brigades and former activists from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement, joined the network.
- e. Dividing the network into a number of sub-cells, with none of them being aware of the others. This serves a number of aims: (1) Efficiency and each sub-cell focusing on the job assigned to it, such as gathering intelligence, acquiring arms and ammunition etc.; (2) In the event of one of the sub-cells being exposed, the network's operations are not harmed and it can continue its ongoing activities.
- f. Building a real-estate infrastructure by purchasing land, houses and shops. The aim was to give the network's members a convenient place to meet, to store arms, for intelligence activities, as well as easy access to food.

²⁵ <http://alshiraa.com/alshiraa/details.asp?iss=1387&cat=2&art=1&id=15287>

- g. Setting up an economic infrastructure, which would assist in the purchase and smuggling of arms, financing the members' activities, purchasing transportation, giving bribes etc. One of the detained related that Sihab requested him to purchase a vehicle worth 3.5 million guineas.²⁶
- h. Relying on and receiving the help of the local population. In the above case, the network was assisted by Bedouin tribes and former Muslim Brotherhood activists in smuggling arms.
- i. Dispatching the network members for training in neighboring countries such as Libya or Sudan, in order to prepare them for the operation. A number of detainees admitted that they had been trained in countries such as Libya, Sudan and Lebanon.²⁷
- j. Recruitment in order to increase the network membership in Egypt. The interrogations revealed that Nasser Khalil Abu Amra acted as a go-between to recruit Egyptian members.²⁸
- k. Intelligence gathering and carrying out surveillance of targets for attack. Hasan Al-Manakhili, one of the detained, was accused of carrying out intelligence surveillance of ships in Port Said and of tracking a group of tourists in Nuweiba in South Sinai. However, he denied the accusations.²⁹ The Egyptian security system also pointed an accusing finger at the Iranian satellite broadcasting channels in Egypt, which they claimed was used as a base for intelligence gathering for the network members in Egypt. Three employees of the Iranian "Al-Alam" channel were arrested by the Egyptian security system.³⁰
- l. Execution of attack upon receipt of sign from operators.

²⁶ <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=92399>

²⁷ <http://www.alssiyasi.com/?browser=view&EgyxpID=24700>, <http://www.almasyry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=207307>

²⁸ <http://www.algomhuria.net.eg/algomhuria/today/fpage/detail01.asp>

²⁹ <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=92399>

³⁰ <http://www.alalam.ir> The channel belongs to the Iranian government and was formed in 2003.

Appendix – Partial list of detained members of the network:

1. Sami Shihab – real name Muhammad Yousef Mansur – head of network, Lebanese Shiite;
2. Nasser Khalil Abu 'Amra – In charge of acquiring arms and smuggling arms from Sudan into Palestinian areas.
3. Nasar Jibril – Egyptian, formerd member of the Muslim Brotherhood, left in 2005.
4. Nimr Fahmi Al-Tawil
5. Hani Al-Sayyid Al-Mutlaq – fundraiser
6. 'Adl Salman – Palestinian. Lived in El-Arish on Gaza border. Confirmed that he belonged to "Al-Aqsa Shahid Brigades", but Fatah denied this.³¹
7. Ihab Al-Sayyid
8. Ihab Ahmad
9. Ibrahim 'Isam
10. 'Isam 'Abd Al-Fatah
11. Iman Mustafa
12. Hasan Al-Manakhli – gathered intelligence on targets to be attacked
13. Abd Al-Latif Al-Manakhli (Egyptian)
14. Ihab Al-Qalbubi (Egyptian)
15. Sami Kamel
16. Muhammad Ramadan 'Abd Al-Fatah Baraka – member of Fatah
17. Nidal Fath Al-Hassan – member of Fatah

³¹ <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=516025&issueno=11102>