

CTC-ICT Focus on Israel: In Word and Deed? Global Jihad and the Threat to Israel and the Jewish Community

By Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, Eitan Azani, Michael Barak, and Assaf Moghadam

Since the emergence of the global jihad movement, global jihadis have expressed their enmity to “Zionists”—jihadi code for Israel and the Jewish community worldwide—through ideological declarations and operations on the ground. Examining the correlation between global jihadi rhetoric and operational activities against Israel and the Jewish community, the present study explores the degree to which the “Zionist cause” is important for global jihadis. In the process, it contributes to understanding why, how, and when extremist language is translated into violence. The study finds that the Palestinian issue and specific “trigger events” related to the Arab-Israeli conflict tend to generate favorable declarations on the part of both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, but that jihadi rhetoric is rarely translated into violent attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets. Of the two main jihadi organizations, the Islamic State has the better track record of striking Jewish and Israeli targets, although the Islamic State’s “anti-Zionist” campaign can hardly be deemed a success. The relative dearth of successful operations, however, has not deterred global jihadi organizations from regularly leveraging the Palestinian issue for political gain, and in order to reinforce their stature as powerful actors in the Middle Eastern and global arenas. Despite jihadi lip service to the Palestinian cause, support for global jihad among Arab Israelis and Palestinians has remained relatively low. Physical and ideological barriers erected by Israel and the Jewish community have so far limited the capacity of global jihadi actors to operate against Israel and the Jewish community.

From its early development in the 1980s to the present, the global jihad movement has exhibited a deep antagonism toward Jews and Israel. Global jihadis have expressed their enmity to “Zionists”—jihadi shorthand for the State of Israel and the Jewish community writ large—both in their ideological pronouncements and in operations on the ground.¹ While the anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli stance of global jihadis in both word and deed is well documented, the relationship between verbal denunciation of Israel and Jews and violent anti-Jewish and anti-Israel actions is less understood.

To address this gap, this article traces the correlation between “anti-Zionist” rhetoric on the part of global jihadis and their operations against Israeli and Jewish targets. Understanding the links between jihadi words and deeds in this context has important implications for policy: Not only can such insights help

practitioners better assess the threat of jihad against Israel and the Jewish community, but they can provide scholars with a better understanding of why, how, and when extremist language translates into physical violence, thereby shedding greater light on the drivers of terrorist violence more broadly.

To explore this question, the authors reviewed official publications of the two leading jihadi organizations, the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida. The analysis covers the period from 2014 to July 2023 in the case of the Islamic State, and from 1988 to July 2023 for al-Qa`ida. The authors reviewed published texts in four major jihadi outlets: the first two, As-Sahab Media and Al-Malahim Media Outlet, are affiliated with al-Qa`ida leadership and al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), respectively. The other two, Al-Furqan media outlet and Al Naba weekly magazine, are affiliated with the Islamic State. As official mouthpieces of the two leading global jihadi organizations today, these sources serve as an

Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky is Deputy Director of Research at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) and a Lecturer at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at Reichman University, Herzliya, Israel.

Dr. Eitan Azani is Director of Research at the ICT and a Lecturer at the Lauder School.

Dr. Michael Barak is Senior Researcher at the ICT, where he also serves as Team Leader of the Global Jihad & Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group. He is also a Lecturer at the Lauder School.

Prof. Assaf Moghadam is the Dean of the Lauder School and holds fellowships at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, the ICT, and the Center on National Security at Fordham Law School. He is co-editor of the newly published Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars (Routledge, 2023). X: @assafmoghadam

Authors’ Note: The authors dedicate this article to the memory of Shabtai Shavit, former director of the Mossad (1989-1996) and chairman of the board of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (1996-2023). Mr. Shavit passed away on September 5, 2023.

Editor’s Note: This article is the fourth in a series of articles and interviews examining the terrorist threat landscape in Israel and the lessons other countries can learn from Israel’s counterterrorism efforts. The series is a joint effort between the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC) and the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University in Israel.

© 2023 Atiyas-Lvovsky, Azani, Barak, Moghadam

authoritative guide to global jihadi followers. These outlets help shape the policies of al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, their affiliates and associates, and those of other jihadi entities. All four are also known to have prominently covered Jewish, Israeli, and Palestinian issues. Specifically, the authors compared the timing of the publication of relevant articles and statements with the timing and impact of global jihadi attacks in Israel, as well as attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets outside of Israel. The study also examines the impact of global jihadi attacks on statements of the organization's senior officials. The authors applied a timespan of six months since the date of the publication in order to assess the possible mutual effects between jihadi pronouncements and operations against Jewish and Israeli targets.

As far as the operational activities of the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida are concerned, this study examines various levels of militant activities, from recruitment and emigration to jihadi theaters to training. The examined operational activities also include the initiation of specific attacks and the planning and execution of attacks by jihadi operatives, including lone attackers inspired by these groups. Notably, the authors include both successful and unsuccessful attacks as well as thwarted plots in this empirical study. The study also covers arrests on Israeli soil of terrorist operatives, such as those who established a terrorist cell and planned attacks, and of individuals who have expressed support for global jihad, as they may harbor information that can be useful in generating a more complete picture of terrorist motivations and capabilities.^a For the purpose of this study, no differentiation is made between these different levels of involvement, despite the fact that they can represent different levels of organizational and operational capabilities and threats.

The study also examines the impact of key political and security-related events in Israel on the jihadi ideological climate and operations on the ground. Examples include the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005) and major military operations launched by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) against militant Palestinian groups. These include Operations Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009), Pillar of Defense (November 2012), Protective Edge (July-August 2014), and Guardian of the Walls (May 2021). Additional major events covered in the study are the wave of knife attacks in Israel, sometimes referred to as the "Knives Intifada" (2015-2016); the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital

of Israel in December 2017, and the subsequent move of the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (May 2018); the so-called "Deal of the Century" and the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel and several Arab and Muslim states (2020); and other important dates, for example Israel's Independence Day (referred to by Palestinians as "al-Nakba," or "The Catastrophe") and anniversaries of major peace agreements.

This article begins with some observations on the gaps between jihadi pronouncements and violent actions with respect to Israel and the Jewish community. This will be followed by an in-depth analysis of al-Qa`ida's statements and operational activities, divided into three main periods: the foundational period (1988-2000); the "second decade" from the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000 to the 'Arab Spring' revolutions in 2011; and the post-Arab Spring period from 2011 to July 2023. The authors then conduct a similar analysis for the Islamic State, divided into two periods: an early period that spans the declaration of the Islamic Caliphate in 2014 to its collapse in 2017; and a later, post-Caliphate phase spanning the years from 2018 to July 2023. The final section presents the authors' conclusions.

Israel and the Jews First?

The global jihad and its constituent organizations such as al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State are no strangers to criticism for their apparent failure to prioritize Israel in their broader struggle against the 'unbelievers.' Both organizations tend to respond to these accusations apologetically, explaining that the Palestinian issue and the jihad against Israel have not been forgotten, but merely postponed to a later stage in the jihadi struggle. In March 2009, Usama bin Ladin explained that due to peace agreements in place between Israel and several of its Arab neighbors, Israeli borders have been difficult for the mujahideen to penetrate. Consequently, according to bin Ladin the jihadis were prioritizing the toppling of local regimes so that they could establish a staging ground for future attacks against Israel.² The idea to postpone the fight against Israel was also reflected in the "Seven Stage Plan" devised by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his cohort, initially published by Jordanian journalist Fuad Hussein in 2005. Envisioned by al-Qa`ida as a strategy to establish an Islamic caliphate, the Seven Stage Plan made numerous references to the struggle against Israel. In the third and fourth stages, for example, the plan referred to both direct operations against the State of Israel, as well as plans to strike at Israel indirectly, namely by harming the U.S. economy (i.e., striking Israel via its key ally).³

The Islamic State has felt similarly compelled to explain to the broader jihadi community its failure to stage high-profile attacks against its Zionist archenemy thus far. In a 2016 article posted by Al-Wafa, an Islamic State-supporting media outlet, the group cited two main reasons: First, difficulties penetrating Israeli territory due to a "defensive envelope" provided by the Syrian, Jordanian, Saudi, and Egyptian militaries, and even by the Lebanese Shi`a militia Hezbollah. The second excuse given by the Islamic State was its preoccupation with the fight against coalition forces, mainly in Iraq and Syria, which diverted resources away from the fight against the Jewish state. As a result, the Islamic State insinuated that it would be best to wait for it to build up a foothold on the ruins of the "near enemy" in order to be better prepared for the attack on Israel, even if this would take more than a decade.⁴

a This article covers successful attacks as well as unsuccessful attacks (i.e., attacks that were executed but that did not cause harm). It also covers cases where the attacker was unable to use his weapon, in which case the attack can be considered a failed attack. In addition, this article also includes attempted attacks (i.e., attacks that were thwarted before the execution). Based only on open-sources intelligence acknowledged by the Israeli government or in serious press accounts, the authors were able to gather data on such attacks by access to information about the arrest of a terrorist/cell that planned an attack. These attacks have not reached the final stage of execution and are therefore considered an attempt to carry out an attack (but not an actual attack that took place). Arrests on Israeli soil of individuals for activities linked to global jihad (i.e., al-Qa`ida- and Islamic State-related activity) reported by Israeli authorities were also included. There may be additional thwarted plots and arrests not included in this article. On the importance of including failed attacks in studies of terrorism, see, for example, Petter Nesser, "Introducing the Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset (JPED)," *Journal of Peace Research*, January 31, 2023. See also Erik J. Dahl, "The Plots that Failed: Intelligence Lessons Learned from Unsuccessful Terrorist Attacks Against the United States," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34:8 (2011).

Al-Qa`ida

Al-Qa`ida in its First Decade: From its Formation (1988) until the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000)

In the period between al-Qa`ida's 1988 formation up to the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the al-Qa`ida leadership touched upon the Israeli and Palestinian issues on several occasions. Generally speaking, the leadership highlighted the importance of waging jihad against Israel and liberating Palestine and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. It also criticized the establishment of ties between Israel and Arab countries (December 1994,⁵ January 1995,⁶ August 1998,⁷ November 1998).⁸ Bin Ladin's February 23, 1998, announcement of the formation of a "World Islamic front for jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders" is one of the more prominent examples of this expression.^{9b}

Prior to 9/11, activists who evidently agreed with these messages made relatively few attempts to conduct attacks on Israeli territory, and these were foiled by successful intelligence and counter terrorism activities. In 1997, for example, five young Jordanians of Palestinian descent were arrested for planning to enter Israel and perpetrate attacks on its soil.¹⁰ In 2000, several arrests were recorded, including those of three young men who, separately from one another, planned attacks on Israeli territory. All three had trained in jihadi training camps in Afghanistan.¹¹ The first decade after al-Qa`ida's formation also witnessed a number of attempts to

target Israeli and Jewish targets outside of Israel, including plots to target the Israeli embassy in Bangkok (March 1994), a synagogue (1994) and a Jewish school (1995) in France, and Israeli tourist destinations in Jordan (1995, 1999) and Egypt (1996), among others.¹²

Notwithstanding the occasional references to Israel and to Jews in general, the first period under review featured relatively few announcements directed specifically against the "Zionist enemy" when compared to later periods in al-Qa`ida's timeline. This relative dearth of attention to the Jewish and Israeli issue was most likely a result of the group's efforts to establish itself in Afghanistan and its decision to focus its activities on the United States. Furthermore, in the period before 9/11, al-Qa`ida decided to allocate resources for international attacks toward the establishment of terrorist cells in other countries and in the West. Another likely factor is that throughout most of the pre-9/11 period, Israel was engaged in the early stages of a peace process with the Palestinians, during which time there were relatively few significant security events that al-Qa`ida could exploit to benefit its brand. This would change with the Al-Aqsa Intifada that erupted in October 2000.

Al-Qa`ida in its Second Decade: From the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000) to the Arab Spring (2011)

Between 2000 and 2011, a period roughly corresponding to al-Qa`ida's second decade of existence, the group's propaganda continued to be directed in part at Israel and the Jews. More often than during the founding period, these messages seemed to relate to important events associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

b It should be noted that in August 1996, bin Ladin declared jihad against the United States.

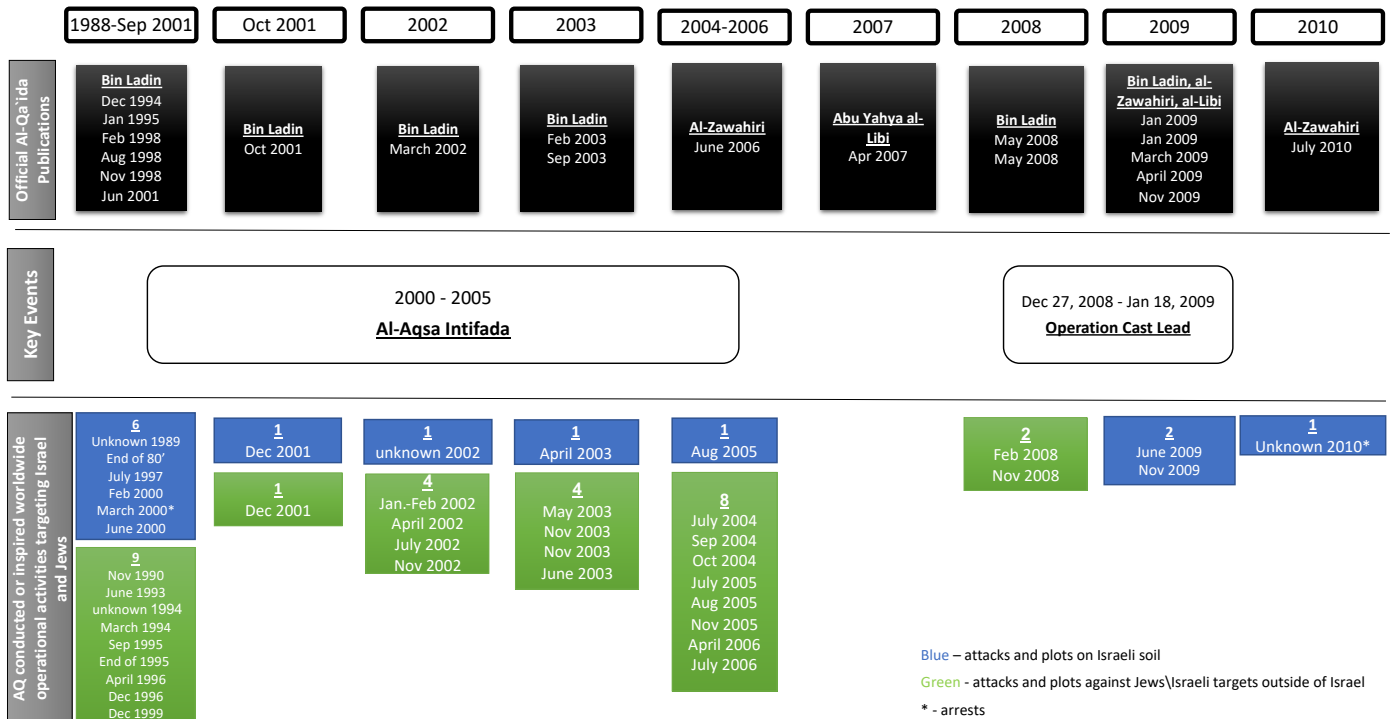


Figure 1: Al-Qa`ida's Words and Deeds Against Israel and the Jewish Community in its First Two Decades: For the period between al-Qa`ida's founding in 1988 and 2010, this graphic shows the dates of al-Qa`ida's official publications with relevance to Israel and the Jews (row 1), key relevant events such as the Al-Aqsa Intifada (row 2), and the dates of al-Qa`ida-conducted or -inspired worldwide operational activities targeting Israel and Jews (row 3). This last row encompasses (i) attacks and attempted attacks on Israeli soil; (ii) attacks and attempted attacks against Jews/Israeli targets outside of Israel; and (iii) arrests of operatives on Israeli soil for al-Qa`ida-related activity. Note: "Unknown" refers to arrests in which cases the authors were not able to identify a specific date.

Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005)

Al-Qa`ida exploited the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005) as an opportunity to portray itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause. In October 2001, for example, bin Ladin pushed for the continuation of the intifada and clarified that jihad against Israel was a religious obligation for every Muslim.¹³ In March 2002¹⁴ and February 2003,¹⁵ he again praised the intifada and called for the deaths of Jews and Americans. On September 3, 2003, a few days before the second anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, his then-second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, addressed the importance of the Palestinian struggle and the jihad against Israel in a tape published by Al-Jazeera.¹⁶

However, the Palestinian issue, while prominent, was hardly the sole, or even the main, focus for the group in this period. Nevertheless, in the 2000s the group conducted more attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets than before, and in more diverse theaters. In December 2001, Richard Reid attempted to blow up an American Airlines plane (Flight 63 from Paris to Miami) using explosives that were placed in his shoes. The investigation revealed that Reid visited Israel on an al-Qa`ida casing mission intended to gather intelligence on potential targets.¹⁷ In January 2002, Jewish-American *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl was kidnapped by militants in Pakistan while investigating the Reid case. Pearl was beheaded on February 1, likely by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.¹⁸ In April 2002, a suicide attack was carried out near the Old Synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia. Another major suicide attack occurred in November 2002, when a car bomb exploded near Mombasa, Kenya, while other operatives attempted to shoot down an Israeli Arkia airliner using two surface-to-air missiles. Jihadi actors also tried striking inside Israel but were thwarted by Israeli, Jordanian, and Egyptian security services.¹⁹ Not all of these attacks were carried out directly by al-Qa`ida, but attacks were clearly inspired by the group. The July 2004 suicide bombings against the Israeli and American embassies in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, exemplify this point.²⁰

In the summer of 2006, the Second Lebanon War gave al-Qa`ida another reason to voice its opposition to Israel. Al-Zawahiri used the opportunity of Israel's confrontation with Hezbollah to condemn what he called "Israeli aggression" against Lebanon and the Palestinians and called on Muslims to attack Jewish targets around the world.²¹ Al-Qa`ida also inserted itself into the growing Palestinian rift between Fatah and Hamas, which led to Hamas' forceful rule of Gaza and rising tensions between the group and Israeli/Jewish interests. On April 27, 2007, Abu Yahya al-Libi, a senior al-Qa`ida member, reprimanded Hamas leadership for being a nationalist movement and called upon it to cling to its Islamic identity, to implement sharia law, and to wage jihad against Israel.²² Less than a year later, in March 2008, bin Ladin issued a call to break the siege that Israel had imposed on Gaza and clarified that the liberation of Iraq from the American occupation would help bring about the liberation of Palestine.²³ In May 2008, on the 60th anniversary of Israel's independence, bin Ladin called again to remove the siege from Gaza and stressed the need to defend Jerusalem, liberate Palestine from the Jews through jihad, and preserve unity within the Muslim ranks.²⁴

Following Operation Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009), in January and April 2009 bin Ladin and Abu Yahya al-Libi condemned the Israeli attacks in Gaza and re-emphasized the need for a continued jihad against Israel.²⁵ In March 2009, some two months after the conclusion of Operation Cast Lead, bin Ladin

posted a strategic plan for the liberation of Palestine and the holy Islamic sites.²⁶ In July 2010, al-Zawahiri cautioned that Jerusalem was on its way to becoming Jewish. He further berated Israelis for allegedly scheming to destroy the al-Aqsa Mosque, criticized the Arab and Muslim regimes for remaining silent in the face of this supposed plot, and called upon Palestinian and other jihadis to actively counteract it.²⁷

Al-Qa`ida also commented on significant historic events related to Israel. In April 2009, on the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement, al-Zawahiri renounced any agreement between Arab countries and Israel and called for the toppling of the Egyptian regime and the continuation of jihad against Israel. In November of the same year, on the anniversary of the famed Balfour Declaration, al-Zawahiri labeled Israel an illegitimate entity against which every Muslim has a religious duty to wage individual jihad.²⁸

Despite the repeated calls for a holy war against Israel, al-Qa`ida's attempts to stoke the flames did not translate into large-scale "anti-Zionist" activity, save for a few exceptions. One such exception was an attack in Israel in November 2009, when a small cell of Arab Israelis who identified with al-Qa`ida's ideology murdered Israeli citizen Yafim Weinstein and planned additional attacks.²⁹ Similarly, there were only a few, and largely non-lethal, attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets overseas. In February 2008, for example, three jihadis attacked the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania, wounding three local residents in the process but failing to injure any embassy personnel.³⁰ By far the most gruesome attack against a Jewish target was carried out by another jihadi group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, which stormed the Chabad House in Mumbai as part of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, massacring a Jewish couple along with several other hostages.³¹

Al-Qa`ida in its Third Decade: From the Arab Spring to Present (2011- July 2023)

The third decade of al-Qa`ida's existence was accompanied by a rise in the number of statements by its leadership regarding Israel and the Jewish community. The period also coincided with a number of key events.

The "Arab Spring"

The dramatic events initially referred to as the "Arab Spring" prompted continued calls on the part of the al-Qa`ida leadership in support of the Palestinian cause. Upon his appointment as the leader of al-Qa`ida in July 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri called for renewed efforts aimed at liberating Palestine. In February 2012, he encouraged jihadi attacks on the Israeli-Egyptian gas pipeline in the Sinai. In the same statement, he also called for the annulment of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement and the waging of jihad against the Jewish state—a call that he repeated in June 2012.³² On September 13, 2012, in a statement timed to coincide with the 11th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, al-Zawahiri demanded that the United States stop supporting Israel, decried the Jewish settlement in Palestine and the destruction of the al-Aqsa Mosque, and called upon all jihadis to collaborate in the liberation of Palestine.³³ A month later, the al-Qa`ida leadership again called on Muslims around the globe to act against the United States and Israel,³⁴ followed by another statement in late October 2012, in which al-Zawahiri stressed that the liberation of Palestine and the return to Jerusalem leads through the gates of Cairo and Damascus.³⁵

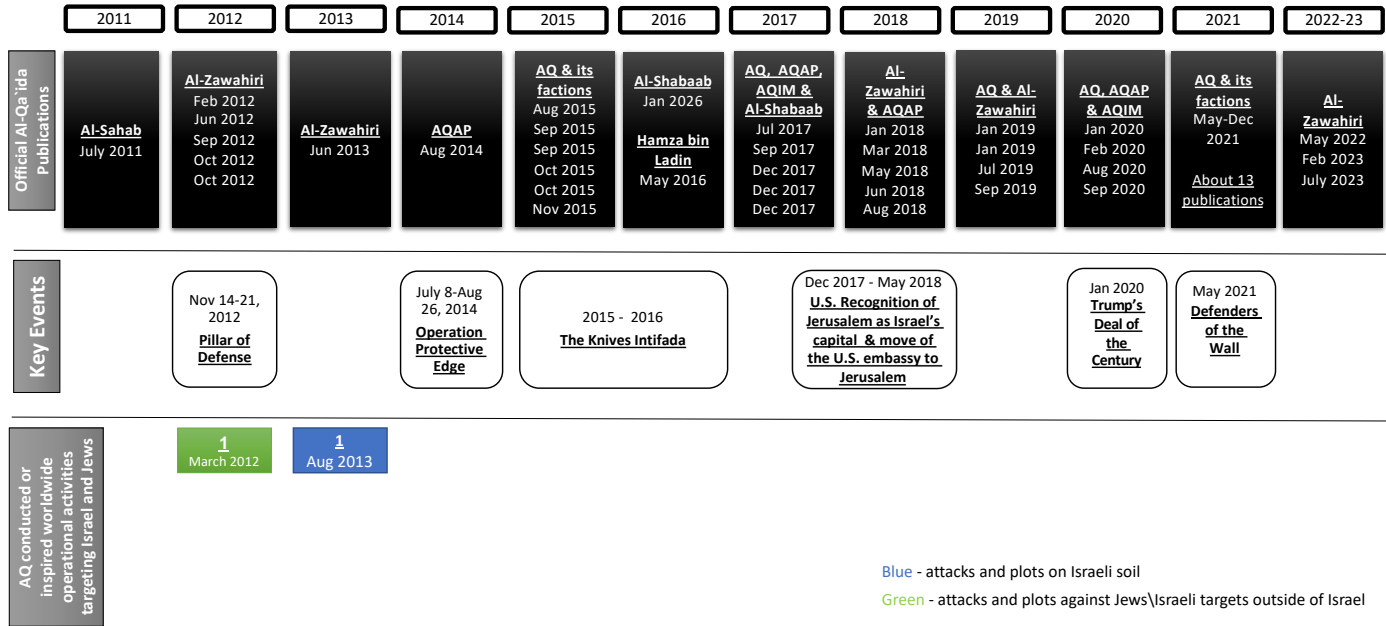


Figure 2: Al-Qa`ida's Words and Deeds Against Israel and the Jewish Community in its Third Decade: For the period between the 2011 and July 2023, this graphic shows the dates of al-Qa`ida's official publications with relevance to Israel and the Jews (row 1), key relevant events such as the Knives Intifada (row 2), and the dates of al-Qa`ida-conducted or -inspired worldwide operational activities targeting Israel and Jews (row 3). This last row encompasses (i) attacks and attempted attacks on Israeli soil; (ii) attacks and attempted attacks against Jews/Israeli targets outside of Israel; and (iii) arrests of operatives on Israeli soil for al-Qa`ida-related activity. Note that there were no such arrests during this period.

Al-Zawahiri reappeared in another message timed to coincide with Israel's 65th Independence Day, in which he advocated the construction of a jihadi military base on Syrian territory to assist in the destruction of the Jewish state.³⁶ In October 2015, AQAP's Sheikh Hamed al-Othman al-Tamimi stated that the conditions to attain the liberation of Palestine had not been fulfilled yet because the priority was to act against the Arab regimes.³⁷ In November of that year, al-Zawahiri stressed that the liberation of Palestine and al-Aqsa were conditional upon the success of the jihad in Syria, adding that the formation of an 'Islamic' regime in Syria would enable moving to the next step, (i.e., confronting Israel).³⁸ In the same year, Hamza bin Ladin, son of Usama bin Ladin, echoed the call to focus on the jihad in Syria and encouraged lone-wolf attacks on Israeli soil and the West, describing jihad as a useful platform for the liberation of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa.³⁹

During the Arab Spring, al-Qa`ida leaders failed to successfully translate their frequent calls for action into assaults against Israel and the Jewish community, with the exception of one fatal terrorist attack carried out in March 2012. In a shooting spree in Toulouse, France, Mohammed Merah attacked a Jewish school and killed seven people, including three Jewish schoolchildren and a rabbi.⁴⁰

Israeli Military Operations in Gaza

Operation Pillar of Defense (November 2012)^c did not generate

any comments in prominent official jihadi publications. On July 17, 2014, against the backdrop of Operation Protective Edge (July 8-August 26, 2014),^d AQAP voiced its solidarity with the inhabitants of Gaza and called upon Muslims to assist the Palestinians in their war against the Jewish state.⁴¹ On August 16, 2014, AQAP's Al-Malahim Media Outlet published a special English-language publication titled "Palestine" that included a condemnation of Israel's policy concerning the Palestinians and the alliance of Arab countries with Israel and culminated in a call to wage jihad against the Jewish state. The AQAP propagandists also used the platform to argue that jihadi operatives could not join the fight against Israel due to the American and Arab regimes' involvement in Palestine. It would be best to focus on fighting the United States, the AQAP propagandists opined, and take the fight to Israel only once the opportunity arose.⁴²

In August 2015, Hamza bin Ladin called upon Muslims around the world to strike at Jews in all countries in order to assist their Palestinian brothers in the struggle against Israel.⁴³ During this period and despite these calls, no attacks or attempted attacks were carried out directly by al-Qa`ida against Israel or Jews, with the exception of several rockets launched on northern Israel by the al-Qa`ida-affiliated "Abdullah Azzam Brigades" in August 22, 2013. These rockets, however, were not launched in the context of IDF military operations in Gaza.⁴⁴

c On November 14, 2012, the IDF launched Operation Pillar of Defense, beginning with the elimination of Ahmed Jabari, head of the Hamas military branch in the Gaza Strip. More than 1,500 rockets were fired at Israel by Gazan terrorists, with over 400 rockets intercepted by the Iron Dome Aerial Defense System. During the eight-day operation, six Israeli civilians were killed and 240 others were injured (civilians and soldiers). "Operation Pillar of Defense," Israel Defense Forces, October 30, 2017.

d On July 8, 2014, the IDF launched Operation Protective Edge with fighting that lasted nearly 50 days on land and in the air. Over 4,500 rockets were fired at Israel; 692 rockets were intercepted by the Iron Dome Aerial Defense System. Six civilians were killed, and over 1,600 civilians were injured. "Operation Protective Edge," Israel Defense Forces, October 30, 2017; "The 2014 Gaza Conflict: Factual and Legal Aspects," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.

Security Escalations Inside Israel and Political Events Concerning Jerusalem

The Knives Intifada (2015-2016): During the 2015-2016 period, Israel faced a wave of apparent “lone wolf” attacks that became known as the “Knives Intifada.” In its wake, al-Qa`ida published a relatively large number of publications referring to the Palestinian issue. On November 1, 2015, for example, al-Zawahiri called for defending the sanctity of al-Aqsa from Jewish aggression. The liberation of Palestine and al-Aqsa, he stated, would be made possible after the fulfillment of three main conditions: (1) striking Western, and especially U.S., interests and territories around the world; (2) establishing an ‘Islamic’ state in Egypt and the Levant; and (3) uniting the ranks of the *mujahideen*.⁴⁵ Several al-Qa`ida affiliates voiced their opinions in a similar vein. In September 2015, for example, senior AQAP member Khalid Batarfi called upon Palestinians to continue their jihad against Israel, warned Muslims about a supposed Israeli scheme to settle Palestine with Jews, and called upon the *umma* to assist the Palestinians.⁴⁶ In May 2016, AQAP continued to voice its support for the Palestinian knife attacks on Israelis.⁴⁷ Similarly, in October 2015, al-Shabaab, al-Qa`ida’s affiliate in Somalia, called upon Muslims to rise up, seize the initiative, and act to liberate al-Aqsa and other occupied territories in Palestine through an armed jihad against the Jews in Israel and around the world. On January 25, 2016, al-Shabaab again encouraged Palestinian attacks in Israel and called on Muslims to target Jews living in Israel.⁴⁸

The Temple Mount Events of 2017: In July 2017, the Israeli government temporarily closed the entrance to the Temple Mount to Muslims and made Muslim entry onto the Plaza conditional upon all visitors undergoing a scan with a metal detector. In the aftermath of that decision, violent anti-Jewish riots by Israeli Arabs erupted, with a noticeable impact on al-Qa`ida discourse on Israel. In his criticism of the closure of the al-Aqsa compound to Muslims, senior AQAP official Batarfi accused Arab regimes of encouraging Israel’s oppressive policy by remaining silent on the subject and encouraged Palestinians to keep attacking Jews either with knives, by car-ramming attacks, or by other means.⁴⁹

The December 2017 U.S. Recognition of Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel leading through to the May 2018 move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem: The Trump administration’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel in December 2017 greatly affected the discourse of al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. The latter used this opportunity to reinforce the narrative that Israel’s aggressive policy against the Palestinians was enabled in large part by American support, which underscored the need to fight a jihad against both countries.

In March 2018, AQAP stressed that “one must not forget the role of the U.S., the head of the snake, that protects the Jews, as manifested by the American determination to make Jerusalem the capital of the Jews.”⁵⁰ It argued that to foil the U.S.-Israeli scheme, the killing spree against Jews, as had been recently exemplified by the killing of an Israeli rabbi by a Palestinian squad in January 2018, should continue.⁵¹ In April 2018, it was al-Shabaab leader Abu Ubaidah’s turn to address the Palestinians. Abu Ubaidah called upon the enemies of Israel to keep attacking the Jewish strongholds in Jerusalem and the Golan Heights.⁵² On May 13, 2018, al-Zawahiri stressed that Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are part of the Muslim lands, and therefore Muslims must act to liberate them.⁵³ On June 6, 2018, al-Shabaab emir Abu Ubaidah again encouraged Palestinians to

resist Israel and the Jews by perpetrating attacks in both Israel and around the world.⁵⁴ He made a similar call in December 2018 against the backdrop of the warming relationship between Israel and the Saudi government⁵⁵ and again in September 2019 on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. In a September 2019 statement, al-Zawahiri called for attacks against Israelis worldwide and on Israeli and American embassies and interests.⁵⁶

In January 2019, al-Qa`ida’s leadership launched a propaganda campaign titled “Jerusalem will Never be Jewish,” which was accompanied by some military operations by several al-Qa`ida affiliates. For example, when commenting on an attack perpetrated by al-Shabaab against a U.S. military base in Manda Bay, Kenya, on January 20, 2020, al-Qa`ida’s Somali affiliate said that the attack had been perpetrated partially in response to the American recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights.⁵⁷

The “Deal of the Century:” In May 2018 and February 2019, the United States published a partial draft for a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians that the Trump Administration later referred to as the “Deal of the Century,” the complete draft of which was published in January 2020. Reacting to the U.S.-led initiative and the promotion of the “deal” by the Trump Administration, al-Qa`ida’s leadership and its affiliates issued a number of releases. These included calls for armed struggle against American and Israeli interests as well as appeals to Muslims to embark on a jihad against Israel in order to foil the Deal of the Century and liberate Palestine from the grip of the Jews.⁵⁸ For example, in May 2020, in its magazine al-Umma al-Wahida,⁵⁹ which is mostly dedicated to the topics of Jerusalem and Palestine, the al-Qa`ida leadership called for a global Muslim uprising against the “Deal of the Century” and a tenacious struggle against Israel and its allies.

The Normalization between Israel and Arab Regimes: Beginning around 2015, several Arab and Muslim countries warmed their relationship with Israel. The normalization process culminated in the ceremonial signing of the so-called Abraham Accords in September 2020 and the execution of peace agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. Unsurprisingly, the process was condemned by al-Qa`ida, which issued various statements denouncing these agreements.⁶⁰ In August 2020, Ibrahim al-Qusi, a senior AQAP member, called upon Muslims to assassinate the UAE’s then de-facto leader Mohammed bin Zayed and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for allowing a thaw in their respective countries’ relationships with Israel.⁶¹

Operation Guardian of the Walls^f (May 2021): Similar to other Israeli military operations, Operation Guardian of the Walls, which began in May 2021, led to a dramatic increase in the number of statements by al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. For example, during May and June 2021, the leadership of al-Qa`ida, AQAP, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and al-Shabaab posted multiple posts regarding their support of the Palestinians’ struggle against

e The attack perpetrated by al-Shabaab on January 15, 2019, against the Riverside Drive business complex in Nairobi, Kenya, was also dedicated to the above campaign. “The Blesses Manda Bay Raid,” Al-Kataib, January 29, 2021.

f Operation Guardian of the Walls started with rockets fired from the Gaza Strip toward Jerusalem on May 10, 2021. The operation lasted 12 days, in which the Gazan Terrorist organizations launched almost 4,400 rockets at Israel. “Operation Guardian of the Walls,” Israel Defense Forces, June 14, 2021.

Israel and called for a continued jihad against it.⁶² On September 11, 2021, al-Zawahiri posted a video on the Palestinian issue, in which he expressed support for a jihad against Israel and called for the preservation of the Islamic identity of al-Aqsa.⁶³ On November 23, 2021, he condemned what he viewed as U.N. support of Israeli crimes against Palestinians. He claimed that the United Nations exhibited partiality toward Israel by acknowledging its sovereignty while simultaneously legitimizing its occupation of Palestine. He further contended that the United Nations' military forces acted as a buffer zone between Israel and the *mujahideen* within the borders with Israel. This statement reflected his perspective on the role of the United Nations in the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Al-Qa`ida continued to issue statements against Israel into 2023, a time of heightened tension that saw an increase in attacks by Palestinian militants against an Israel governed by an outspokenly right-wing government coalition. In January 23, 2023, a posthumous call by al-Zawahiri was published calling on Muslims to inflict pain on Israel and its allies and defend the holy sites in Palestine.⁶⁴ Al-Qa`ida's most recent speech on the subject was published in July 2023 by Sheikh Ibrahim al-Qusi, a senior member of AQAP, supporting what he viewed as the struggle of the Palestinians against the Jews, including the settlers. In the video, he encouraged the continuation of suicide attacks until the liberation of all Palestine and expressed criticism of Muslims for not helping the Palestinians and even normalizing relations with Israel. He portrayed the struggle of the Palestinians against the Jews as part of global efforts by jihadis to change the secular world order.⁶⁵

In sum, al-Qa`ida's statements and publications on the importance of jihad against Jews, Israel, and the liberation of

Palestine have in recent times been a regular item on its agenda, and they largely correspond with security escalations and key political developments. Such statements reflect an attempt by al-Qa`ida to maintain awareness of the Palestinian issue and to 'ride the wave' of attacks in Israel so as to position the organization as an actor supporting the Palestinians' struggle. The statements tend to emphasize the need for jihadis to provide support to Palestinians by attacking Israel, but at the same time tend to stress that at present, the conditions for a full-blown attack on Israel, or even a strategic focus on Israel, are not met.

The Islamic State

The authors' review of information posted by the Islamic State on the topic of Israel suggests that the Palestinian issue has not featured prominently in its propaganda, even though Israel and Jewish communities are mentioned regularly among the list of the group's enemies. Most Islamic State efforts to expand the caliphate concentrated on other theaters—particularly Syria and Iraq, and later Africa, likely because of the need to establish control within the caliphate's territory and the difficulties in carrying out attacks within Israel's borders. As explained in an article published by Al-Wafa Institute, an Islamic State-supporting media outlet, in many cases Islamic State statements corresponded with events that took place in Israel (e.g., the Knives Intifada). The authors' analysis suggests that in some cases, these statements seemed to be translated into attacks against specific targets in Israel, as well as Jewish targets abroad.

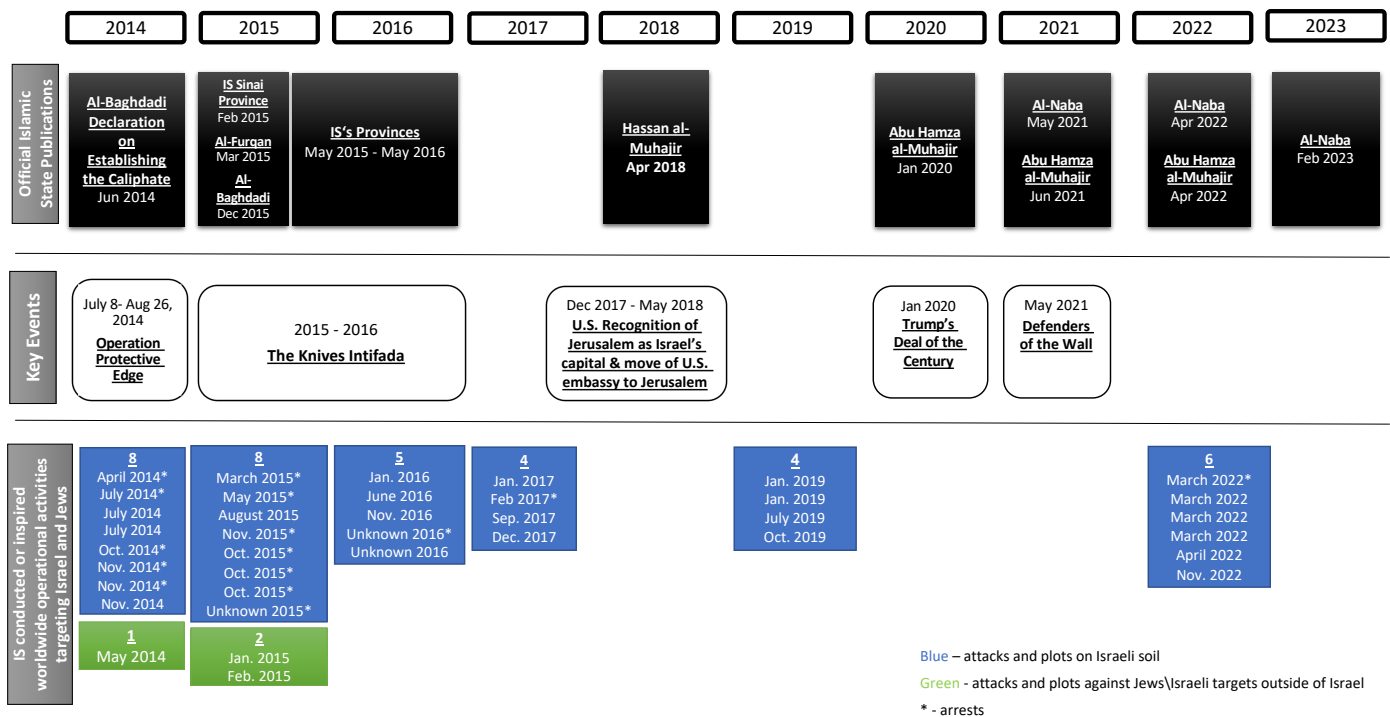


Figure 3: The Islamic State's Words and Deeds Against Israel and the Jewish Community: For the period between the 2014 and July 2023, this graphic shows the dates of Islamic State official publications with relevance to Israel and the Jews (row 1), key relevant events such as the Knives Intifada (row 2), and the dates of Islamic State-conducted or -inspired worldwide operational activities targeting Israel and Jews (row 3). This last row encompasses (i) attacks and attempted attacks on Israeli soil; (ii) attacks and attempted attacks against Jews/Israeli targets outside of Israel; and (iii) arrests of operatives on Israeli soil for Islamic State-related activity. Note: "Unknown" refers to arrests that the authors were not able to locate their specific date.

From the Announcement of the Establishment of the Caliphate (2014) until its Fall (2017)

The announcement of the establishment of the caliphate in June 2014 and the group's call to Muslims around the world to flock to jihadi "theaters of operations"⁶⁶ sparked a wave of immigration to Syria and Iraq that included tens of thousands of foreign fighters. Among these volunteers for jihad were dozens of Arab Israelis who made attempts to emigrate to active combat zones involving the Islamic State, although their number was small in comparison to the response rate from other Arab and Muslim communities. Still, by one assessment, some 40 Arab-Israelis went to fight in Syria in 2014 alone. Some were killed, and as far as is known, those who returned to Israel were arrested.⁶⁷ Supporters of global jihad acted against Israeli and Jewish targets prior to the establishment of the caliphate, with the May 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels being the most prominent example.⁶⁸ The caliphate announcement created an atmosphere that significantly increased the number of attacks and attempted attacks on Israel and Jews.

After the announcement of the establishment of the caliphate in June 2014, there was a noticeable increase in anti-Israel activity on the part of Islamic State supporters in Sinai and Gaza. For example, the Gazan group Jamaat Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Bait al-Maqdis took responsibility for a number of rockets launched from Gaza into civilian populations in Sderot, Beersheba, and Ashkelon at the beginning of July 2014.⁶⁹ Islamic State Sinai Province (formerly Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, or Supporters of Jerusalem)^g also launched rockets into Israel.⁷⁰ In February 2015, the organization posted a video showing the execution and beheading of more than 10 Sinai residents who were accused of espionage on behalf of Israel's national intelligence agency, Mossad, and the Egyptian army.⁷¹ A similar video was posted by Al-Furqan media outlet in March 2015, which serves as a platform for official messages by the Islamic State. That video focused on an alleged Arab Israeli "spy" working for Mossad. One of the operatives appearing in the video declared in French that the Islamic State managed to hit a Jewish stronghold in France (a reference to the attack on the kosher "Hyper Cacher" supermarket in Paris in January 2015)⁷² and promised that the group would liberate al-Aqsa and Jerusalem from the hands of the Jews.⁷³ In terms of the Islamic State record of anti-Israel attacks in 2015, the group's Sinai Province was second to none.⁷⁴ Its messages portrayed Sinai as the gateway to Jerusalem.

Alongside the above, Arab Israelis attempted to emigrate to various jihadi theaters and also planned attacks against Israel from within the country while disseminating Islamic State propaganda.⁷⁵

Security Escalations Inside Israel and Political Events Concerning Jerusalem

The Knives Intifada (2015-2016): From the mid-2010s, the Islamic State emphasized a *modus operandi* of recruiting local Westerners to perpetrate attacks in their countries of origin, while providing the required planning and logistics infrastructure. With the establishment of the Islamic State, the call for lone-wolf attacks intensified, and the Islamic State dedicated multiple magazine

articles to discussing and advocating for the use of this tactic. During that period, and against the backdrop of the eruption of the wave of knife attacks in Israel in September 2015, there was a marked uptick of Islamic State statements relating to Israel. For example, the group posted videos calling for lone-wolf attacks against Jews and Israelis, as it did in October 2015, when the Islamic State posted a video in Hebrew calling for the slaughter of Jews and the abolition of the Sykes-Picot border between Israel and Jordan, among other threats.⁷⁶ These messages culminated in December 2015, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called "to turn Palestine into a graveyard for its Jewish residents."⁷⁷ The speech may have inspired the first Islamic State attack of an Arab Israeli operative within Israel when, in January 2016, Nashat Melhem opened fire on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street, killing two and injuring six others.⁷⁸

In May 2016, the threats of attacks on Israel and Jews continued. For example, the Islamic State's then-top spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, warned: "Beware Jews. Every time when you recovered, got stronger and acted tyrannically and promiscuously, Allah struck you when you didn't expect it, and God's slaves served you bitter anguish. That is what Allah promised us and he is not one to break his promises."⁷⁹ The following month, in light of successful attacks on Jewish targets outside Israel (e.g., the May 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels and the January 2015 attack in the Hyper Cacher kosher supermarket in Paris) the Islamic State released a video warning that these attacks were the harbinger of further strikes against the enemies of the caliphate.^h In the following months, two lethal attacks were perpetrated inside Israel: The first took place in June 2016 in the Sarona area of Tel Aviv,⁸⁰ and the second occurred in the Armon Hanatziv neighborhood of Jerusalem in January 2017.⁸¹ The same period, from 2015 to 2017, also saw continuing arrests of Arab Israelis interested in joining the Islamic State in various jihadi arenas and of others who planned attacks, purchased weapons, or spread jihadi propaganda.⁸²

The Islamic State's Posture Against Israel and the Jews in the Post-Caliphate Era to the Present (2018-July 2023)

The second, post-caliphate period of the Islamic State has been marked by a decrease in the volume of Islamic State statements concerning Israel and the Jews. Nevertheless, geopolitical events related to Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict kept these issues on the group's ideological agenda and contributed to isolated operational activities.

Security Escalations Inside Israel and Political Events Concerning Jerusalem

The December 2017 U.S. Recognition of Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel Leading Through to the May 2018 Move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem: In April 2018, Islamic State spokesperson Hassan al-Muhajir sought to boost his comrades' fighting morale when he condemned the Trump administration's decision to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He promised that the Islamic State intended to liberate

g When it was first established at the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Egyptian jihadi organization pledged allegiance to al-Qa'ida, but in November 2014, it pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State and its then leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. See Borzou Daragahi, "Sinai Jihadi Group Emerges at Forefront of Egypt Violence," *Financial Times*, January 31, 2014.

h It should be noted that this video does not address the shooting attack on a Copenhagen synagogue in February 2015, conducted by an Islamic State supporter. "2015 Annual Summary - Terrorism and CT Activity Data and Trends" (in Hebrew), Shabak, n.d.

Palestine only after defeating the local, corrupted Muslim regimes. He further called upon Islamic State supporters to target Jews wherever they are. Yet, in light of the Islamic State's difficult strategic position from 2017, there were no Islamic State-related attacks or plots in 2018 (see Figure 3). However, 2019 saw an uptick in Islamic State-related operational activity within Israel, including two attacks carried out by an Islamic State supporter in January 2019 in Jerusalem (see also figure 3).⁸³

The “Deal of the Century:” On January 27, 2020, after the Trump administration floated the “Deal of the Century,” then-Islamic State spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Muhajir announced a new phase of the jihad against Israel, which would now include efforts to derail the deal. Al-Muhajir called upon Islamic State provinces in Syria and Sinai as well as Palestinians to attack Israeli and Jewish settlements in Israel and overseas by every means possible, including with chemical weapons.ⁱ Similar statements by an Islamic State spokesperson were posted in October 2020 and June 2021.⁸⁴

Operation Guardian of the Walls (May 2021): In May 2021, the Islamic State stressed that the liberation of Jerusalem would be made possible with the fall of the regimes bordering Israel, and only through jihad.⁸⁵ On June 22, 2021, for example, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, a spokesperson for the Islamic State, expounded on the Palestinian protest against Israel, asserting that it signified the betrayal of the Palestinian people by Gulf countries that have normalized relations with the State of Israel. Consequently, he accused the regimes of Egypt and Jordan of safeguarding Israel's borders, while Turkey and Iraq displayed indifference to the Palestinian issue. Al-Muhajir urged the Palestinians to comprehend and embrace the fact that deliverance from their predicament would not emanate from Arab regimes or Hamas' collaboration with the Shi`a, but rather through a steadfast commitment to jihad against the Zionists.⁸⁶ The continuously high motivation to attack the Jewish state expressed during 2020-2021, however, was not translated into operational capabilities or actions on the ground, perhaps as a result of different Islamic State priorities.

The spring of 2022 saw a significant increase in the number and lethality of attacks in Israel.⁸⁷ On March 22, an Israeli Bedouin carried out an attack in Beersheba.⁸⁸ Five days later, two cousins, Arab Israelis from Umm al-Fahm, perpetrated a shooting attack in Hadera, for which the Islamic State formally claimed responsibility.⁸⁹ In light of the increase in attacks, the Islamic State posted an article on April 1, 2022, titled “Our Campaign Against the Jews Is Pure Islamic [Campaign]!” In the article, the group explained that it had never abandoned its campaign against Israel and the Jews and would continue to focus on the “Zionist enemy.”⁹⁰ On April 17, 2022, Islamic State spokesman Abu Umar al-Muhajir praised the attacks on Israel and encouraged followers to continue in this direction.⁹¹

In November 2022, a terrorist detonated two explosive devices in Jerusalem. The perpetrator subscribed to and acted according to salafi-jihadi ideology. He was identified with the Islamic State and

consumed its online content, although he was not directly activated by the group. The double attack in which two bombs were placed in two different bus stops in Jerusalem,⁹² led to a wave of arrests of terrorism suspects linked to the Islamic State, further attesting to the group's motivation and operational capabilities.

The most recent Islamic State address directed at Jews was posted on February 2, 2023, in its *Al Naba* magazine. It amounted to a call to Muslims worldwide to perpetrate terror attacks against Jews in synagogues, homes, and neighborhoods using all possible means. The publication stressed that the war against the Jews was not national or political in character, but rather religious. The calls were backed up by purported “evidence” from the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic theological interpretation as to why the Jews are considered untrustworthy infidels and why a holy war should be waged against them. The *Al Naba* article stated that any Muslim nation that executes an agreement or strikes an alliance with Israel, as Chad had recently done, was as vile as Israel. In the article, the Islamic State praised Islam Mafroukeh, the perpetrator of the November 2022 Jerusalem double explosive attack, and stressed that the Jews were afraid of a repeat of such attacks. Lastly the Islamic State article implored Muslims around the world to perpetrate terror attacks against Jews in their synagogues and neighborhoods in Europe and elsewhere using all possible means.⁹³

Conclusion

Despite numerous verbal attacks and threats by global jihadis against Israel and the Jewish community and their consistent rhetorical support of the Palestinian cause, this study has identified a noticeable gap between the jihadis' verbal declarations against their so-called “Zionist” enemy and their military and terrorist activities against “Zionist” targets on the ground. To be sure, global jihadi organizations have managed to carry out several acts of wanton violence, but these attacks have hardly amounted to a sustained or effective campaign. Of the successful operations, most have taken the form of terrorist attacks against Jewish communities outside Israel. The track record of global jihadi attacks against targets associated with the State of Israel is poor; it is even less impressive when global jihadi actors attempted to stage attacks in Israel proper.

It is evident that one reason for the variance between jihadi verbal expressions to strike at Israeli and Jewish targets and their ability to do so is the physical difficulty—one acknowledged by jihadi leaders themselves—in establishing control in Middle Eastern and North African theaters in the vicinity of Israel. Jihadi leaders willingly admit that establishing a foothold in countries that are neighboring the Jewish state, such as Syria, Jordan, or Egypt, is a prerequisite for striking the Jewish state proper.

Nevertheless, global jihadi organizations did have a modicum of success by inspiring several individuals to perpetrate terrorist attacks (or attempted attacks) against “Zionist” targets. In this respect, the Islamic State appears to have had a greater influence on Arab Israelis than al-Qa`ida—at least when judged by the higher number of attacks/thwarted attacks inside Israel conducted or inspired by the Islamic State, when compared to attacks carried out or inspired by al-Qa`ida. (See Figure 4.)

Another reason for the disparity between jihadi motivations and capabilities to strike at the “Zionist” enemy can be found in the tense strategic relationship between Hamas and global jihadi groups. Part of this tension is due to the fact that the Palestinian cause has not

i It should be noted that carrying out attacks on overseas targets (as opposed to attacking within Israel) is easier for global jihadi organizations. Eitan Azani, Michael Barak, and Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, “The Focus – The ISIS Threat to Israel – threat Assessment in Light of Its Spokesperson Call to Fail the Deal of the Century and Attack Israel,” International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, May 2020.

	AQ	IS
Attacks and plots on Israeli soil	12	20
Attacks and plots against Jews/Israeli targets outside of Israel	29	3
Arrests	2	15

Figure 4: Al-Qa`ida-related and Islamic State-related operational activities against Israel and Jews based on the data in Figures 1-3, spanning 1988 to July 2023. The data shows that individuals linked to or inspired by the Islamic State have carried out more operational activity within Israel than those linked to al-Qa`ida. The data also shows that al-Qa`ida-linked/inspired individuals have mainly acted against Israel and the Jews outside Israel.

played a central role in the global jihadi narrative, where the dream of the liberation of Palestine competes with several other causes.⁹⁴ The jihadi movement has been criticized extensively and repeatedly by Palestinian nationalists and mainstream Islamists for what they believe is insufficient involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Hamas, for its part, has been at the receiving end of jihadi criticism for its lack of global jihadi credentials.⁹⁵

Moreover, support for global jihad among Arab Israelis and Palestinians is relatively low in part because of the relative popularity of established local organizations that are already promoting anti-Israel resistance. In a poll conducted by Pew Research Center, as of spring 2015, 91 percent of Israeli Arabs expressed unfavorable opinions of the Islamic state. In addition, 84 percent of Palestinians (92 percent in the Gaza Strip and 79 percent in the West Bank) had a negative view of the Islamic State.⁹⁶

In sum, global jihadis appear to have failed to systematically translate their substantial “anti-Zionist” rhetoric to military operations on the ground. This disconnect between jihadi words and deeds is due to a combination of factors. First, global jihadis have contended with physical barriers, including defensive and offensive countermeasures by Israeli Security services as well as those of their partners. These measures prevented jihadi operatives from penetrating Israeli and Jewish targets. Second, these actors also face ideological barriers, such as the predominance of local Palestinian causes and groups that have prevented global jihadi actors from effectively inserting themselves into the Palestinian space. As a result of the global jihad’s difficulties to establish itself more prominently as a tangible and consequential actor engaged in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, global jihadi activities have been limited mostly to propaganda and influence campaigns, inspiration, and recruitment.

A comparison of Figure 2 and Figure 3 further reveals a low number of al-Qa`ida-linked attacks in Israel since the Arab Spring when compared to those linked to the Islamic State. A possible explanation for this is al-Qa`ida’s lowered profile during the years when the Islamic State, its powerful jihadi rival, was on the march. During these years, al-Qa`ida focused on survival, strengthening its African and Middle East affiliates, and working on establishing new partners in the Indian subcontinent. Interestingly, however, during the same period the number of al-Qa`ida statements on the Palestinian issue increased significantly, suggesting that the group utilized the Palestinian issue in order to stay relevant.

Ultimately, trigger events have impacted al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State in different ways. In the case of the Islamic State, key events such as the Knives Intifada or the move of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem caused an uptick in propaganda and were also followed with operations on the ground. Such events also had

a strong impact on the ideological pronouncements of al-Qa`ida in regard to Israel and the Palestinian issue. In contrast to the Islamic State, in the case of al-Qa`ida such verbal proclamations translated far less frequently into a connection to consequential actions on the ground.

The Islamic State’s “superiority” over al-Qa`ida in terms of its ability to strike at Israel has less to do with tactical acumen. Instead, it appears to be rooted in the Islamic State’s success in branding itself a caliphate (and subsequently a caliphate under attack) whose exhortations to violence needed to be obeyed by “true” Muslims. The group’s successful self-portrayal as a caliphate was itself predicated on its extraordinary initial territorial expansion, making a significant number of Muslims around the world feel like the group must have divine backing and inspiring tens of thousands to join its ranks in Syria and Iraq. Arab Israelis and Palestinians have been just as attracted by the group’s branding prowess as have jihadis in other theaters. The Islamic State’s savviness on the social media front contrasted with al-Qa`ida’s somewhat more outdated mode of social media operations. Moreover, the Islamic State’s ultra-violent ethos and the brutality it put on display against its enemies resonated with and inspired a larger cohort of young Muslims than al-Qa`ida’s more cerebral and long-winded calls for jihad.

A second reason for the Islamic State’s outperformance of its jihadi counterpart with respect to violent operations against Israel is more technical. Once the Islamic State made a strategic decision to claim attacks by inspired jihadis as its own—even in cases where the group did not direct such attacks itself—it lowered the barrier of entry for participation in jihadi violent extremism, enabling a broader set of individuals to connect to the jihadi cause. By making itself more accessible to a broader pool of people attracted to the jihadi mindset, the group was able to present itself as far more dangerous and consequential than it truly was.

The authors’ analysis offers a number of implications for policy. First, the analysis underscores the importance of physical defenses when contending with persistent global jihadi threats. Standard counterterrorism measures such as intelligence collection and border security, however, are easier to plan and implement at the state level. Jewish communities that are geographically distributed and lack the resources afforded to states will be more difficult to defend, and hence face more sustained vulnerabilities.⁹⁷ This helps explain why al-Qa`ida has been connected to more attacks and plots against Jews outside of Israel than inside Israel (see Figure 4). It is noteworthy that the Islamic State, instead, has been mostly linked to attacks and plots inside Israel rather than attacks targeting Jews outside Israel, as reflected in Figure 4.

Secondly, this study implies that global jihadi organizations have underperformed when it comes to attacks against Israel because

of their inability to gain an ideological and operational foothold in a space where other, established actors are predominant. In the case of global jihadi actors, these problems are even more acute given how firmly entrenched existing militant competitors are in the Palestinian arena. Hamas, for example, is firmly in control in the Gaza Strip, tolerating little to no dissent, while benefiting from generous funding by external states.⁹⁸

Third, this study has underscored the importance of “trigger events” which, at least in the Israeli-Palestinian context, have been reliably followed by an increase in verbal condemnations and threats directed at the Jewish state. While such threats have been accompanied by physical violence in only a relatively small number

of cases, it is not unreasonable to posit that more intensive “trigger events” in the future could result in new levels of radicalization among Palestinians, including a broader adoption of global jihadi agendas. The current constitution of Israel’s government—the most right-wing government in the Jewish state’s history—has already sparked acute tensions between Jewish Israelis and their Arab counterparts, as well as their Palestinian neighbors. With Jews and Muslims seemingly on a collision course once again, global jihadi actors might sense a renewed opportunity to succeed where they have previously mostly failed—to translate their impassioned anti-“Zionist” words into deeds. **CTC**

Citations

- 1 Assaf Moghadam, “The Jihadi Threat,” *Jerusalem Report*, July 14, 2014.
- 2 Usama bin Ladin, “Practical steps for the Liberation of Palestine” (video), Al-Sahab Media, March 2009.
- 3 For more on the Seven Stage Plan, see Brian H. Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).
- 4 Abu Anas al-Nabulsi, “Why the Islamic State is not Fighting in Palestine” (in Arabic), Al-Wafa, 2016.
- 5 Usama bin Ladin, “An Open Message to Bin Baz to abolish the Fatwa on the Reconciliation with the Jews (Dec 1994)” (in Arabic) in *Nukhbat al-'Ilam al-Jihadi, Messages and instructions of Sheikh Osama bin Laden*, pp. 144-150.
- 6 Usama bin Ladin, “Our duty towards Palestine” (in Arabic), January 1995 in *Nukhbat al-'Ilam al-Jihadi, Messages and instructions of Sheikh Osama bin Laden*, pp. 40-46.
- 7 “Bin Ladin Calls For ‘Jihad’ Against Jews, Americans,” August 21, 1998, in *Compilation of Usama Bin Ladin Statements*, FBIS Report, pp. 74-75.
- 8 “Bin Ladin: Expel Jews, Christians from Holy Places,” November 18, 1998, in *Compilation of Usama Bin Ladin Statements*, FBIS Report, January 2004, p. 78.
- 9 Usama bin Ladin, “International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders’ Statement” (in Arabic), February 1998, in *Nukhbat al-'Ilam al-Jihadi, Messages and instructions of Sheikh Osama bin Laden*, pp. 279-281.
- 10 Asaf Maliach and Shaul Shay, *From Kabul to Jerusalem: Al-Qa’ida, the Worldwide Islamic Jihad and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (in Hebrew) (Bnei Brak, Israel: Matar Publishing House, 2009).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Usama bin Ladin, “A Meeting with Taysir Alouni for al-Jazeera Channel” (in Arabic), October 2001, in *Nukhbat al-'Ilam al-Jihadi, Messages and instructions of Sheikh Osama bin Laden*, pp. 423-437.
- 14 Usama bin Ladin, “Abdallah’s initiative... and the Great Treason” (in Arabic), March 2002, in *Nukhbat al-'Ilam al-Jihadi, Messages and instructions of Sheikh Osama bin Laden*, pp. 460-463.
- 15 Usama bin Ladin, “Recruitment” (in Arabic), February 2003, in *Nukhbat al-'Ilam al-Jihadi, Messages and instructions of Sheikh Osama bin Laden*, pp. 487-501.
- 16 “Al-Jazirah Airs Bin Ladin, Al-Zawahiri Tape on Anniversary,” September 10, 2003, in *Compilation of Usama Bin Ladin Statements*, FBIS Report, January 2004, pp. 261-262.
- 17 Maliach and Shay.
- 18 Spencer Ackerman, “Qaeda Killer’s Veins Implicate Him in Journalist’s Murder,” *Wired*, January 20, 2011.
- 19 Maliach and Shay.
- 20 “Major Terror Attacks against Israeli Embassies and Representatives Abroad,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, updated April 12, 2021; Gulnoza Saidzimova, “Germany: Authorities Say Uzbekistan-Based Group Behind Terrorist Plot,” *Radio Free Europe*, September 6, 2007.
- 21 Ayman al-Zawahiri, “The Zionist Crusader aggression on Gaza and Lebanon” (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, July 27, 2006.
- 22 Abu Yahya al-Libi, “Palestine, an Alarming Scream and a Warning Cry” (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, April 27, 2007.
- 23 Usama bin Ladin, “The Road to Liberate Palestine” (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, March 2008.
- 24 Usama bin Ladin, “To the Muslim Nation” (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, May 2008.
- 25 Usama bin Ladin, “A Call to Jihad for Stopping the Aggression against Gaza” (in Arabic), January 2009, in *Nukhbat al-'Ilam al-Jihadi, Messages and instructions of Sheikh Osama bin Laden*, pp. 675-681; Abu Yahya al-Libi, “Palestine is a Warning Cry” (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, April 29, 2007.
- 26 Usama bin Ladin, “Practical Steps for the Liberation of Palestine” (in Arabic), March 2009, in *Nukhbat al-'Ilam al-Jihadi, Messages and instructions of Sheikh Osama bin Laden*, pp. 682-690.
- 27 Ayman al-Zawahiri “Jerusalem Will Never Be Jewish” (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, July 20, 2010.
- 28 Ayman al-Zawahiri, “The Truth About the Fight Between Islam and Heresy” (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, November 2, 2009.
- 29 Jonas Feltes, “Terrorist Group: Al Qaeda Weapons Use,” *Counter Terrorism Ethics (CTE)*, n.d.
- 30 “Major Terror Attacks against Israeli Embassies and Representatives Abroad,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021.
- 31 Maliach and Shay; “Lessons from The Mumbai Terrorist Attacks - Parts I and II,” U.S. Senate Hearing, January 8 and 28, 2009.
- 32 Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Messages of Hope and Good News to our People in Egypt – Part 9” (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, February 29, 2012; Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Messages of Hope and Good News to our People in Egypt – Part 10” (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, June 17, 2012.
- 33 Ayman al-Zawahiri, “The Sun of Victory Rising over the Victorious Nation and the Defeated Crusader” (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, September 13, 2012.
- 34 Ayman al-Zawahiri, “The Messenger’s Victory” (in Arabic), Al-Shahab, October 13, 2012.
- 35 Ayman al-Zawahiri, “The Sun of Victory Rising over the Victorious Nation and the Defeated Crusader – Part 11” (in Arabic), Al-Shahab, October 25, 2012.
- 36 Ayman al-Zawahiri, “65 Years for the Establishment of the Israeli Occupier” (in Arabic), Al-Shahab, June 6, 2013.
- 37 Hamad bin Hamoud al Uthman al-Tamimi, “Words on the Liberation of al-Aqsa” (in Arabic), Al-Malahim, October 2015.
- 38 Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Let’s Unite to Liberate Jerusalem” (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, November 1, 2015.
- 39 Hamza bin Ladin, “Greetings of Peace to the People of Islam” (in Arabic), Global Islamic Media Front, August 14, 2015.
- 40 “Mohammed Merah - Lone Wolf or Al-Qa’ida Operative?” *RUSI*, March 23, 2012.
- 41 Harith bin Ghazi al-Nazari, “The Aggression against Gaza” (in Arabic), Al-Malahim, July 17, 2014.
- 42 “Palestine: Betrayal of the Guilty Conscience,” Al-Malahim, August 16, 2014.

- 43 Hamza bin Ladin, "Greetings of Peace to the People of Islam" (in Arabic), Global Islamic Media Front, August 14, 2015.
- 44 RAND, GTD Database.
- 45 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Let's Unite to Liberate Jerusalem," Al-Sahab, November 1, 2015.
- 46 Khalid Batarfi, "Assist al-Aqsa," Al-Malahim, September 28, 2015.
- 47 Inspire 15, May 14, 2016.
- 48 "Support al-Aqsa Mosque" (in Arabic), Al-Kataib, October 10, 2015; "Hakuna Hifadhi: No Protection Except by Belief of Covenant of Security," Al-Kataib, January 25, 2016.
- 49 Khalid Batarfi, "For you al-Aqsa" (in Arabic), Al-Malahim, July 27, 2017. See also "Joint Call by AQAP and AQIM," Al-Malahim, July 16, 2017; "I Pledge My Allegiance to You Ya al-Aqsa," Al-Bashair media outlet, July 20, 2017; and Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, "The Path to Victory and the Defeat of the US," Al-Sahab, September 2, 2017.
- 50 *Madad* (in Arabic) 1, March 13, 2018.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Abu Ubeida Ahmad Umar, "Sham is the Home of the Believers" (in Arabic), Al-Kataib, April 23, 2018.
- 53 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Short Messages to a Victorious Nation: Tel Aviv is also the Muslims' Land (Part 9)," (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, May 15, 2018.
- 54 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "From the Naksa & the Nakba to Renaissance and Glory" (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, June 6, 2018.
- 55 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "The Arabic Peninsula's Zionists" (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, December 23, 2018.
- 56 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "They are still Fighting You" (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, September 11, 2019.
- 57 "The Blesses Manda Bay Raid," Al-Kataib, January 29, 2021.
- 58 See "Jerusalem Unites the Muslims: a Message on Convening the Treason Workshop in Bahrain to Sell Palestine," Al-Kataib, July 6, 2019.
- 59 *Al-Umma al-Wahida* 4, May 2020.
- 60 "Jerusalem will never be Judaized," Al-Zallaqa, January 20, 2019.
- 61 Ibrahim al-Qusi, "Who's for Bin Zayed? He has wronged Allah & his Prophet" (in Arabic), Al-Malahim, August 28, 2020.
- 62 See, for example, "From Sayf al-Quds Battle to the Mosques Battle," Al-Nafir (Al-Sahab) 35, June 3, 2021.
- 63 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Jerusalem will not be Judaized: Arab Zionists from Faysal to Bin Zayd (Part1)," Al-Sahab, September 11, 2021. See also Ayman al-Zawahiri, "An Advice for the United Ummah Concerning the Reality of the United Nations" (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, November 23, 2021.
- 64 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "How We Will Support Palestine" (in Arabic), Al-Sahab, January 12, 2023.
- 65 Ibarhim al-Qusi, "Congratulations and Support" (in Arabic), Al-Malahim, July 1, 2023.
- 66 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan," Al-Furqan Media Foundation, June 29, 2014.
- 67 Eitan Azani, Yoni Fighel, and Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, "The Focus - The ISIS Threat to Israel – Challenges and Ways to Contend with Them," International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, January 2016; "The terrorist from the Jewish Museum in Brussels tortured us in Syria" (in Hebrew), Ynet, February 7, 2019.
- 68 "Mehdi Nemmouche stayed in Brussels for nearly two months before the Jewish Museum attack," *Brussels Times*, January 11, 2019.
- 69 "The 'Israeli' war machine is ramping up on Gaza with American support" (in Arabic), al-Khaleej, July 11, 2014.
- 70 "A History of Terrorism in Egypt's Sinai," Middle East Institute, November 6, 2014.
- 71 "Documenting the Crimes of the Alliance of the Jews and Army of Apostasy against our People in the Sinai - 4" (in Arabic), Sinai Province Media Foundation, February 9, 2015.
- 72 "2015 Annual summary - Terrorism and CT Activity Data and Trends" (in Hebrew), Shabak, n.d.
- 73 "And Wretched is the Witch they Purchased" (in Arabic), Al-Furqan, March 10, 2015.
- 74 See, for example, "Messages of Firmness to the Land of Soliloquy" (in Arabic), Salah al-Din Province, May 5, 2016.
- 75 See, for example, "2015 Annual summary - Terrorism and CT Activity Data and Trends" and "2014 Annual summary - Terrorism and CT Activity Data and Trends" (in Hebrew), Shabak, n.d.
- 76 "Breaking the Borders and Slaughtering the Jews" (in Arabic), Damascus Province Media Foundation, October 22, 2015.
- 77 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "So Wait, Indeed We, Along with You, are Waiting" (in Arabic), Al-Furqan Media Foundation, December 26, 2015.
- 78 Yael Fridson, "The Supreme Court increased the punishment of an aide to a terrorist from the Dizengoff attack" (in Hebrew), Ynet, February 11, 2020.
- 79 Azani, Figel, and Atiyas-Lvovsky; Eitan Azani, Michael Barak, and Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, "The Focus – The ISIS Threat to Israel – Threat Assessment in Light of Its Spokesperson Call to Fail the Deal of the Century and Attack Israel," International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, May 2020; Eitan Azani, Daniel Haberfeld, Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, and Michael Barak, "The Threat From Within – Global Jihad in Israel," International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, April 2022.
- 80 "The IDF destroyed the homes of the terrorists who carried out the attack in Sharon" (in Hebrew), *Israel Hayom*, August 4, 2016; "Terror in the heart of Tel Aviv: 4 killed in an attack in the Sharona complex" (in Hebrew), *Israel Hayom*, June 8, 2016.
- 81 "The attack in Jerusalem: the names of the murdered were published" (in Hebrew), N12, January 8, 2017; Avi Issacharoff, "The terrorist's family from Jerusalem: 'ISIS? We didn't know about anything'" (in Hebrew), Walla, January 10, 2017.
- 82 For example, "2015 Annual summary - Terrorism and CT Activity Data and Trends," Hassan Shaalan and Ilana Curiel, "Family of Negev teachers charged with spreading ISIS dogma reject accusations," Ynet, July 7, 2015; "A squad of ISIS supporters was arrested, whose members are Israelis living in Tayba" (in Hebrew), Shabak, October 12, 2016.
- 83 Haim Golditch, "The murder of the Kaduri couple - an attack; The terrorist was arrested after murdering a Moldovan laborer last month" (in Hebrew), Ynet, April 14, 2022.
- 84 Abu Hamza al-Qurayshi, "So Relate the Stories That Perhaps They Will Give Thought" (in Arabic), Al-Furqan, October 18, 2020; Abu Hamza al-Qurayshi, "You Are Most Exalted If You Are [True] Believers" (in Arabic), Al-Furqan, June 22, 2021.
- 85 "The Road to Jerusalem" (in Arabic), Al Naba 287, May 20, 2021, p. 3.
- 86 Abu Hamza al-Qurayshi, "You Are Most Exalted If You Are [True] Believers" (in Arabic), Al-Furqan, June 22, 2021.
- 87 Boaz Ganor, "CTC-ICT Focus on Israel: What Can We Learn from the Spring 2022 Terror Wave in Israel," *CTC Sentinel* 15:6 (2022).
- 88 Elior Levy, Matan Tzuri, and Liran Levy, "The terrorist from the attack in Be'er Sheva: a teacher supporting ISIS who tried to travel to Syria" (in Hebrew), Ynet, March 22, 2022.
- 89 Ynet, "Those killed in the shooting attack in Hadera - a male and female from the Israel Border Police (MAGAV), ISIS took responsibility" (in Hebrew), Calcalist, March 28, 2022; Azani, Haberfeld, Atiyas-Lvovsky, and Barak.
- 90 "Our Campaign Against the Jews Is Pure Islamic [Campaign]!" (in Arabic), Al Naba, April 2022.
- 91 Abu Umar al-Muhajer, "Fight Them, God will Punish them by your Hands" (in Arabic), Al-Furqan, April 17, 2022.
- 92 "Shin Bet arrests east Jerusalem Arab for bus-stop bombings that killed two Israelis," *Jerusalem Post*, December 27, 2022.
- 93 "Kill the Jews" (in Arabic), Al Naba 376, February 2, 2023, p. 2.
- 94 Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, "Introduction: Jihadi 'Endogenous' Problems," in Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, eds., *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- 95 For an overview of this debate, see Reuven Paz, "Jihadists and Nationalist Islamists: Al-Qa'ida and Hamas," in *Fault Lines in Global Jihad*.
- 96 Jacob Poushter, "In Nations with Significant Muslim Populations, much Disdain for ISIS," Pew Research Center, November 17, 2015.
- 97 For an analysis of the threat against Jewish communities in Europe and the United States, see Mitchell D. Silber, "Terrorist Attacks Against Jewish Targets in the West (2012-2019): The Atlantic Divide Between European and American Attackers," *CTC Sentinel* 12:5 (2019).
- 98 See, for example, Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).