

Hamas Plots in Europe: A Shift Toward External Operations?

By Matthew Levitt

Hamas has never carried out a successful terrorist attack outside of Israel, the West Bank, or Gaza—but not for lack of plotting. Over the years, the group came close to carrying out attacks abroad several times, but these were either thwarted or aborted before execution. Now, recent criminal cases in Germany and Denmark reveal that Hamas set in motion contingency planning for possible attacks in Europe several years before the October 7 massacre, including stashing small arms in weapons caches in multiple European countries. In the context of planning for the October 7 attacks, Hamas planned to make these weapons available to operatives in Europe, according to German authorities. Following the October 7 attacks, leaders of Hamas' Qassam Brigades based in Lebanon sent operatives to find these weapons, while others in Denmark were tasked to work with a European organized crime group to procure drones and plot attacks in Denmark or Sweden. With Hamas' operational capabilities in Gaza decimated, and the group looking to find other ways to carry out attacks, European and Israeli officials fear that Hamas has taken the decision to go global and carry out plots abroad, marking a significant departure from the group's prior *modus operandi*.

Two years ago, Hamas caught Israel and the world by surprise when the group's specially trained Nukba forces (followed by Hamas rank and file, then other militant groups and individuals) stormed across the Gaza border and attacked Israeli civilian communities, military bases, and a dance festival, killing about 1,200 civilians and taking 251 hostage into Gaza.¹ But after two years of devastating war, Hamas' operational capabilities in Gaza are severely degraded. Now, European and Israeli officials assess Hamas' next operational surprise—originally envisioned as contingency planning but then put into play in the lead up to the October 7 attacks—could come in the form of international terrorist operations targeting Israeli or Jewish interests around the world.

Since the October 7 attacks, a string of arrests of Hamas operatives and, in some cases, their organized crime co-conspirators, across Europe have spurred authorities to warn not only of the possibility of terrorist attacks inspired by or in solidarity with Hamas, but of the possibility that Hamas itself may conduct terrorist attacks abroad—something the group has considered in the past but never before successfully carried out. However now, with its operational capabilities in Gaza badly damaged, and having crossed the threshold of carrying out a spectacular terrorist attack already, Hamas terrorist leadership—especially those based in

Lebanon, where the group has set up an operational headquarters over the past several years—appears to be leaning toward taking the group in a new strategic direction at a time when popular support for the Palestinian cause is running high and Israel's standing is falling. Israeli authorities also assess that Hamas sees potential tactical benefit to external operations as well, providing leverage for ceasefire negotiations by raising the costs for Israel of continuing the war against Hamas in Gaza.²

Israeli authorities were sufficiently concerned about the threat of Hamas attacks abroad that they issued an updated terrorist threat assessment this year in advance of the Jewish High Holidays, when many Israelis travel abroad. The threat assessment, issued by the Israeli National Security Council, warned Israeli travelers of terrorist threats, “led predominantly by Iran and Hamas,” targeting Israeli and Jewish targets, adding that “dozens of attacks have already been prevented.”³ Beyond the threats from Iran, the Israeli NSC specifically warned that “Hamas is also expanding its own activities beyond the war in Gaza to establish terrorist infrastructure and carry out terrorist attacks against Jews and Israelis abroad.”⁴ Two major Hamas cases had already been disrupted in Germany and Denmark, but within days of this new warning, another Hamas terrorist plot would be disrupted in Europe.

On October 1, 2025, the eve of the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, German authorities arrested three suspected Hamas operatives on suspicion of plotting a terrorist attack in Germany. According to prosecutors, the accused were “foreign operators for the terrorist organization Hamas” who procured firearms and ammunition to be used in “assassination attacks” on Israeli or Jewish institutions in Germany. According to German authorities, the suspects had been working on behalf of Hamas since the summer of 2025 and were charged with both

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“membership in a foreign terrorist organization and preparation of a serious act of violence endangering the state.”⁵ The weapons seized in Germany reportedly originated in Scandinavia, where Hamas ties to organized criminals had already been established.⁶

Law enforcement agencies had been following the suspects for some time, according to the Federal Interior Minister, noting that several months earlier, a “known terror suspect with Hamas contacts entered Germany” and that they had been “commissioned by Hamas” to procure and store weapons in Germany for attacks. Security forces watched as the suspects met in Berlin to receive the weapons, which included an AK-47 assault rifle, a Glock pistol, and several hundred rounds of ammunition, and then arrested the suspects and seized the weapons. Additional searches were conducted in Leipzig shortly after the Berlin raid and arrests.⁷ While authorities reportedly conducted surveillance of the suspects and wiretapped their phones, they moved to arrest them for fear they planned attacks timed to the October 7 anniversary.⁸

This latest plot, coming on the heels of the widely publicized arrests of other Hamas operatives in Europe, underscores the urgency Hamas leadership has attached to its decision—at least in the moment—to break with past precedent and begin carrying out terrorist attacks abroad. And unlike the few historical cases where Hamas considered or tried to carry out attacks abroad, this new wave of plots is being directed by senior Hamas leadership. Whether this decision becomes the new normal or reflects an anomalous moment in the context of the Gaza war remains to be seen.

And the stakes grew higher still in the wake of the September 9th Israeli strike against Hamas leaders in Doha, Qatar. While the prospect of Hamas carrying out attacks abroad was probably a matter of some debate within Hamas leadership circles before, Israeli officials fear Hamas may now see attacks targeting Israelis or Jews around the world as a reciprocal and proportional response to Israel’s attack in Qatar.⁹

Weapons Caches in Europe

In April 2019, more than four years before the October 7 attack, an accused Hamas operative based in Germany, Ibrahim Elrassatmi, flew to Lebanon where “he received orders from the Qassam Brigades to set up an arms depot for Hamas in Bulgaria near the city of Plovdiv,” according to German court documents.¹⁰ A month later, Elrassatmi traveled to Bulgaria, via Italy where his brother lived, and buried a box of small arms including four handguns, a Kalashnikov rifle, a silencer, and ammunition in a roadside cache. Elrassatmi took photos of the arms cache’s location on his smartphone and marked its geolocation coordinates, which he then shared with Qassam Brigades leaders via WhatsApp and later in person when he returned to meet his Hamas handlers in Lebanon in June 2019.¹¹ There, Qassam Brigades officials instructed Elrassatmi to next travel to Denmark to retrieve weapons from a cache established there sometime earlier and provided him a PowerPoint presentation on a USB memory stick entitled “Address Denmark,” which was also later found on his computer hard drive.¹²

Within weeks, Elrassatmi traveled by coach bus from Germany to Denmark, accompanied by another person who would later serve as a witness for German prosecutors. They rented a car, drove to the site of the weapons cache in Orbaek, and compared the site to pictures sent to Elrassatmi by his Hamas handlers, which were taken, according to Germany prosecutors, by a Hamas operative named Mohamad Dibaje (aka Mohamad Al Haj Kassem) who

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owned the property and originally buried the weapons there. They returned to Germany with the weapons, but after that German authorities do not know what they did with the weapons.¹³

Elrassatmi’s relationship with a key senior Hamas official based in Lebanon who oversaw this operation, Khalil al-Kharraz, dates back to at least 2015, when he hosted al-Kharraz in his home, German authorities report. At the time, he also reportedly hosted Nazih Rustom, another accused Hamas operative arrested in this case, who was visiting from the Netherlands.¹⁴ The direct involvement of Khalil al-Kharraz, the then-deputy commander of Hamas Qassam Brigades in Lebanon, underscores that this was no rogue operation, but one overseen by senior Hamas leadership.

The Hamas operation to store small caches of weapons across Europe in 2019 seems to have been an exercise in contingency planning at the time. Nearly four years later, in May 2023, Hamas sent operatives to collect weapons buried in arms caches across Europe, including in Poland and Bulgaria. According to German authorities, this sudden surge in Hamas activity focused on its years-old weapons caches was carried out “in the context of preparations for the terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023.” Hamas’ European weapons caches, they assess, “were to be made available in order to be able to emphasize the organization’s aims in other European countries, if necessary through attacks.”¹⁵

And so, starting in June 2023, five months before the October 7 attack, four operatives began the search to locate the weapons cache in Poland.¹⁶ Prosecutors assert that between June 2023 and December 2023, Nazih Rustom, Ibrahim Elrassatmi, Mohammed Bassiouny, and Abdelhamim al-Ali traveled to Poland on five different occasions to locate the weapons cache. During each of the searches conducted, the operatives maintained close contact with al-Kharraz, at times taking photographic evidence of the searches so he could keep up to speed on the status of their searches.¹⁷

Working separately at first, by October 2023 all four suspects were working in tandem to locate the weapons depot in Poland. After receiving encrypted GPS coordinates, Rustom and Bassiouny conduct two searches for the arms depot, one on October 6, 2023, and another on October 7, 2023.¹⁸ A week later, al-Ali and Bassiouny conducted another search for the depot, meeting with Elrassatmi in Berlin just before their drive into Poland. While unsuccessful, the two were stopped and detained by police on their way back into Berlin, and German police reported finding mud-covered clothes and tools on the suspects.¹⁹

One month later, in November 2023, al-Ali flew from Beirut to

Berlin intending to conduct another search for the weapons depot in Poland. However, he quickly turned around and flew back to Lebanon after learning that al-Kharraz, his handler and the deputy commander of Hamas' military wing in Lebanon, had been killed in an Israeli airstrike.²⁰ Following the funeral, al-Ali maintained contact with Assad al-Kharraz, Khalil al-Kharraz's son, providing him with updates on the status of the weapons search.²¹

According to German prosecutors, al-Ali was tasked with working "with other foreign Hamas supporters in Europe, under orders from Qassam Brigades leaders in Lebanon, on projects such as 'building up military capacity by maintaining weapons depots' in Europe."²² Not only was al-Ali in "constant contact" with "high ranking officials" such as al-Kharraz, but he "participated in representative meetings of HAMAS leadership cadres."²³ Al-Ali returned to Berlin to move forward with the search following al-Kharraz's funeral, but he was arrested along with Bassiouny and Elrassatmi in Berlin on December 14, 2023.²⁴

According to the federal prosecutor's press release, the three men "had been working as foreign operators for Hamas for years," holding key positions within the group and maintaining "direct ties to senior officials in the military wing" of Hamas. As Hamas prepared for the October 7 attacks, they added, Hamas "was keen to make deposited weapons available again." These weapons caches, they underscored, were maintained in Europe over time in order "to keep them ready for possible attacks against Jewish institutions in Europe."²⁵

The weapons, German officials concluded, "were intended to expand Hamas' activities in Europe." As the investigation progressed, German authorities determined—based on materials found on one of the defendants' USB storage devices—that the Hamas operatives were considering specific targets in Germany, including the Israeli embassy in Berlin, the U.S. Ramstein air base in Rhineland-Palatinate, and the area around Berlin's Tempelhof airport.²⁶ Israeli intelligence issued a rare public statement a few weeks later in January 2024 saying that another Hamas operative, this one operating out of Sweden, had been planning an attack targeting the Israeli embassy in Sweden as well.²⁷

Just two days before the December arrests, Denmark's National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security announced that the authorities had raised its terrorist threat level to 'substantial' "due to the fact that jihadist organisations were preparing to carry out terrorist attacks in Europe."²⁸ Earlier that month, Denmark had deployed troops to guard Jewish and Israeli sites, including the Israeli embassy and a synagogue in Copenhagen due to an increase in threats.²⁹

In addition to the arrests made in Germany, Danish officials arrested three additional suspects on related terrorism charges that same day—December 14, 2023.³⁰ According to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET), the Hamas operatives in Denmark worked together with the Loyal to Familia (LtF) organized crime

group.^{31 a} Following the arrests, Israel's Prime Minister's Office issued a statement revealing that "the Hamas terrorist organization has been working relentlessly and exhaustively to expand its lethal operations to Europe, and thereby constitutes a threat to the domestic security of these countries."³² At first, Danish authorities said nothing about ties to Hamas, but a few weeks later Danish prosecutor Anders Larsson confirmed the case "has links to Hamas."³³ The three suspects are believed to have been planning an attack on Jewish or Israeli targets.³⁴

Within weeks of the arrests in Germany and Denmark, a fourth Hamas suspect in the weapons cache case—Nazih Rustom—was arrested in Rotterdam, Netherlands, on February 28, 2024.³⁵

Danish Drone Plot

Even before the December 2023 arrests, a threat assessment conducted by Danish intelligence (PET) in the wake of the October 7 attacks warned that the ongoing conflict in the Middle East could spill over into Denmark in unexpected ways. The Hamas attack and the war that followed, PET assessed, "can introduce threat actors that have not previously been relevant in a Danish terrorist context, including the Palestinian Hamas."³⁶ The warning was prescient, and there was still more to come: Not only would Hamas threats come to Denmark, but operational necessity would draw together strange bedfellows.

One of the individuals arrested in absentia in December 2023, a 28-year-old Danish citizen affiliated with the organized criminal organization Loyal to Familia (LtF), was out of the country when authorities issued a warrant for his arrest. He was later extradited to Denmark from Lebanon—where he apparently met with Hamas leaders—but on completely separate charges related to a double homicide in Kalundborg, Denmark.³⁷ Then, on May 19, 2025, he was indicted on terrorism charges that authorities linked to both organized crime and Hamas.³⁸

According to Danish authorities, the suspect had conspired with others back in November and December 2023—just prior to the original arrests—to purchase several Chinese DJI quadcopter drones online for Hamas to use in attacks in Denmark or elsewhere in Europe. Israeli reports indicate Hamas and LtF operatives planned a drone attack targeting the Israeli embassy in Sweden.³⁹

Other members of the conspiracy picked up the drones at a store on November 7, exactly one month after the October 7 attacks, but the plot was disrupted by the December 2023 arrests.⁴⁰ "This individual," PET noted in a press statement, "purchased drones intended for use by Hamas in a terrorist attack at an unknown

a Loyal to Familia is a Danish street gang that was banned by Danish police in 2018. The ban was upheld by the Danish Supreme Court in 2021, which declared the gang an unlawful association. Founded in Copenhagen in 2012, the gang includes members with dual nationality. In 2018, an LtF member described as a stateless Palestinian from Lebanon was deported based on the fact that he had been convicted 14 times for various crimes. Some gang members have orchestrated violent crimes in Denmark while hiding out in Middle Eastern countries, according to Danish authorities. The fact that some LtF members are from the Middle East likely contributed to their willingness to cooperate with Hamas, as did the fact that some LtF members involved in the plots had ties to Lebanon, where Hamas leaders overseeing the plot were based. See Stephen Gadd, "LtF Gang-Member to be Deported after Hight Court Ruling," Copenhagen Post, May 24, 2018; "Denmark and Sweden Vow to Hunt Down Gang Leaders Who Hire Minors to Kill from Abroad," Associated Press, August 21, 2024; and Zdravko Ljubas, "Danish Court Bans a Street Gang," Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, September 6, 2021.

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location in Denmark or abroad ... PET and the Prosecution Service believe that the individual is a leading figure in a prohibited gang and has ties to Hamas.”⁴¹

According to Israeli authorities, the Hamas arms cache and drone plots are just the tip of the iceberg. Beyond these cases, “dozens of attacks have already been prevented,” part of an organized Hamas effort to expand the battlefield beyond Gaza, where it has suffered significant losses, “to establish terrorist infrastructure and carry out terrorist attacks against Jews and Israel abroad.”⁴² Hamas plotting has focused on Europe, where the group has worked “relentlessly and exhaustively to expand its lethal operations,” according to Israeli intelligence services, but they note that since the October 7 attacks, “Hamas has striven to expand its operational capabilities around the world.”⁴³

Hamas External Operations in Context

Even before October 7, Hamas leaders periodically threatened to carry out attacks abroad. In 2019, for example, Hamas leader Fathi Hammad called on Hamas supporters around the world—who he claimed had been “warming up” to be able to carry out attacks around the world—to target Jews abroad. “All of you 7 million Palestinians abroad, enough of warming up. You have got Jews everywhere and we must attack every Jew on the globe by way of slaughter and killing.”⁴⁴ Earlier still, in 2003, Hamas leader Abdelaziz al-Rantisi published an article entitled “Why Shouldn’t We Attack the United States?” in which he argued such action was not only “a moral and national duty—but, above all, a religious one.”⁴⁵

That same year, Hamas came closer than ever before to carrying out a terrorist attack abroad. In November 2003, Israeli authorities arrested Jamal Akal, a Gazan who had emigrated to Canada four years earlier, as he prepared to fly back to Canada after a visit to the West Bank. While the trip was made to seem like a social visit, Akal later revealed to Israeli authorities that he received small arms, explosive production, and assault rifle training by Hamas operatives during his trip. Akal was tasked with surveilling and assassinating a senior Israeli official in the United States, as well as with attacking members of the U.S. and Canadian Jewish communities. He was to carry out these attacks using his Canadian passport and by raising money from Hamas sympathizers in Canada. According to Israeli authorities, Akal’s Hamas trainer told him that “New York is an easy place to find Jews.”⁴⁶

Years passed, and Hamas stuck to its established *modus operandi* of limiting its attacks to Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. Even the Hamas operational component in Lebanon was focused on firing rockets into Israel or infiltrating operatives across the border into Israel. But in the years leading up to the October

7 attacks, Hamas began plotting attacks abroad. The foundation for the plots in Europe was set in place over a period of years, with operatives seeking to establish residency in Germany, for example, by at least 2020.⁴⁷

Shortly thereafter, authorities started picking up the trail of Hamas plots not in Europe but in Asia. In 2021, Singapore’s Internal Security Department detained Amirull Ali, a radicalized Singaporean citizen who planned to carry out a knife attack at a local synagogue. Ali also had plans to travel to Gaza to join Hamas’ military wing. After a couple of years in a rehabilitation program, Ali was released under supervision.⁴⁸ Just before his release, Singaporean authorities detained another citizen who planned to travel to Gaza under the guise of humanitarian aid activity to join Hamas’ Qassam Brigades hoping to also serve as a Hamas spokesman and recruiter.⁴⁹ Though Khairul did not appear to plan an attack in Singapore, authorities there warned that he “was willing to abide by any instructions given by Hamas, including armed combat, kidnapping, and even executing prisoners of war.”⁵⁰

Other Hamas cases did involve plots abroad. In February 2022, Philippine National Police reported that an intelligence investigation thwarted a Hamas plot to recruit locals to carry out attacks against Israelis and Jews in the country. According to police, Fares al-Shikli, a Hamas operative acting within the group’s “foreign liaison section” who was known to people in the Philippines as “Bashir,” pledged financial support to local extremists to carry out the attacks. A police source reported traveling to Malaysia several times starting in 2016 to meet “Bashir” to further the plot, which also included paying people to hold anti-Israel rallies and produce anti-Israel propaganda videos.⁵¹

The increased Hamas terrorist activity abroad correlates to the establishment of a Hamas operational component in Lebanon driven by senior Hamas leaders. Now, court documents in the Hamas weapons cache in Germany provide the most vivid detail to date about this network and its proactive efforts to pivot Hamas toward international terrorism.

Driven by Hamas Leadership in Lebanon ...

Despite the overwhelming evidence from investigations in multiple countries, Hamas quickly rejected the notion that the group operates in Europe. “We deny there are members of Hamas detained in Denmark, Germany, or any other European country,” Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri told Reuters the day after the December 2023 arrests.⁵² But European authorities had already definitively tied Hamas operational leadership in Lebanon to plots in Europe. For example, a February 2024 report by Germany’s Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution highlighted several Hamas officials in Lebanon who had been in touch with Hamas suspects in Germany.⁵³

The Hamas external operations node in Lebanon developed over time, as senior Hamas leaders left Turkey and Qatar and later made their way to Lebanon. Hamas deputy secretary general Salah al-Arouri first cut his teeth as a Hamas operative in the West Bank before being deported to Jordan, starting a journey of hopping from one Hamas external base to another. While in Turkey, al-Arouri oversaw the 2014 kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers, which led to a rocket war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.⁵⁴ Within months, he was quietly pushed out of Turkey and went to Qatar in 2015, and moved to Lebanon two years later. Soon after al-Arouri’s arrival in Lebanon, Israeli authorities

publicly warned that Hamas was setting up a base of operations, not just a political office, in the country. The idea, the head of Israel's domestic intelligence service explained, was to complement Hamas operational capabilities in Gaza.⁵⁵

As early as 2017, around the time al-Arouri moved to Lebanon from Turkey, Israeli authorities noted with alarm that Hamas had begun setting up an operational headquarters in Lebanon to oversee attacks. According to German prosecutors, "The Qassam Brigades have maintained a base in Lebanon since 2017. The units stationed in Lebanon, in particular, received increasing support from the terrorist organization Hezbollah, which is affiliated with Hamas. Starting in 2021, the Qassam Brigades in Lebanon, under the leadership of their then-commander Salah al-Arouri, began firing rockets at Israel from there and directing activities in the West Bank."⁵⁶ In September 2017, Nadav Argaman, then-head of Israel's Shin Bet security service, warned that Hamas was establishing a base in Lebanon with Iranian assistance. Four months later, Israel's then-Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman reaffirmed Hamas' presence in Lebanon: "It must be understood that Hamas, which finds it hard to carry out attacks from the Gaza Strip, is currently trying to launch attack from the West Bank and is also trying – in new arenas, first of all in southern Lebanon – to threaten the State of Israel."⁵⁷

Then, in January 2018, Hamas official Mohamed Hamdan survived an assassination attempt after his car exploded in western Lebanon. According to Western intelligence sources, Hamdan was then the man behind "Hamas' northern front" plan.⁵⁸ He was reportedly attempting to assemble a significant number of rockets to fire at Israel in a future war. Hezbollah did not take lightly to Hamas' effort to build its own rocket arsenal in Lebanon, and over time, the concept for a Hamas operational component in Lebanon shifted from one solely focused on carrying out attacks from Lebanon toward one of command and control for Hamas attacks in the West Bank and, potentially, abroad.⁵⁹

As mentioned earlier, just six weeks after October 7, on November 21, 2023, Khalil al-Kharraz, the main organizer behind the weapons caches in Europe, was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Lebanon. According to court documents, al-Kharraz served "as deputy commander of the Qassam Brigades in Lebanon" and was "responsible for foreign operations and, together with senior members Samir Fandi and Azzam al-Aqra, for recruiting fighters and suicide bombers."⁶⁰ Between 2011 to 2013, prior to his time as deputy commander of the Qassam Brigades, al-Kharraz fought in Iraq and "later in Syria, where he initially joined Aknaf Bayt al Maqdis,"⁶¹ a Palestinian group allied with Syrian rebels whose establishment was supported by Hamas.⁶² According to court documents, senior Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, the former secretary-general of Hamas, provided al-Kharraz financial support from 2011 until his death in 2023.⁶³

Al-Kharraz not only led the Hamas plot to cache weapons in Europe, which he did at the command of still more senior Hamas commanders in Lebanon, but he also maintained close personal ties to the four Hamas operatives involved in the case. In addition to being related to Nazih Rustom by marriage, al-Kharraz maintained a close relationship with Ibrahim Elrassatmi since at least 2015. According to court documents, Elrassatmi visited al-Kharraz during his trips to Lebanon and even hosted al-Kharraz and his family at his apartment in Germany after helping them enter the country.⁶⁴ Prosecutors described the relationship between al-Kharraz and

another member of the plot in Germany, al-Ali (aka Abu Omar), as "particularly trusting," with al-Ali living in al-Kharraz's house in Lebanon for an unspecified amount of time.⁶⁵

Speaking to both the strong association between al-Ali and Hamas leadership in Lebanon, as well as his close relationship to al-Kharraz, "the accused was already informed of the deputy commander's death and the health of his fellow travelers on the day of the airstrike." Not only that, but "he personally communicated with al-Kharraz's surviving companions, also high-ranking members of Hamas, regarding their health, had access to up-to-date information at all times, and was authorized to pass this information on in the organization's name."⁶⁶ After landing in Berlin to conduct another search for the weapons depot in Poland, al-Ali immediately flew back to Lebanon to attend al-Kharraz's funeral at the Rashidiya refugee camp, and served as a pallbearer there, sitting "in the front row alongside uniformed Qassam Brigades fighters."⁶⁷ Following his death, the Qassam Brigades released a statement that "the martyred leader assisted the Resistance in Palestine and abroad with operations and logistics, leaving behind a legacy for the Resistance."⁶⁸

Israeli authorities were aware of Hamas' operational activities in Lebanon well before the October 7 attacks, and quickly focused their attention on Hamas leadership in Lebanon, in addition to Hezbollah, in the weeks following the October 7 attacks. On January 2, 2024, an Israeli rocket attack in the Dahiya, the southern Beirut neighborhood dominated by Hezbollah, killed Salah al-Arouri. Israeli leaders made clear their intention to target Hamas leaders responsible for the October 7 massacre, and Israel's Mossad intelligence agency was instructed "to act against the heads of Hamas wherever they are."⁶⁹

But while al-Arouri's death received plenty of attention, little was paid to the other two Hamas commanders killed alongside him: Azzam al-Aqra and Samir Fandi. In fact, al-Aqra and Fandi were senior members of Hamas' military wing in Lebanon and directly under the command of al-Arouri and his immediate deputy, Zaher Jabarin.⁷⁰ According to Israeli authorities, al-Kharraz oversaw Hamas operations abroad under the command of Fandi and al-Aqra.⁷¹ This network—from the boss, al-Arouri, through Fandi, Aqra, and al-Kharraz—represented "the Hamas apparatus in the operation of terrorism abroad."⁷²

Not only were the weapons depots set up across Europe tied to Hamas leadership in Lebanon but so too were the additional December 2023 and May 2025 arrests in Denmark, as well as the planned attack on the Israeli embassy in Sweden. As announced by Danish authorities, "A 28-year-old man was remanded in custody today in connection with a terrorism case that began with a series of arrests in 2023. The case has links to both Hamas and criminal gangs in Denmark."⁷³ In January 2024, Israel's Prime Minister's Office, in a joint announcement by the Israel's internal and external intelligence services, released an organizational chart of the Hamas apparatus overseeing the group's international operations and its links up to Hamas deputy secretary general Salah al-Arouri and the Hamas commanders overseeing these operations under his command, namely Azzam al-Asqra, Samir Fandi, and Khalil al-Kharraz. The chart tracks down from them to a dozen named operatives in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands. The announcement explains, "Orders from the organization leadership, acquisition of UAVs and use of criminal elements: This is how Hamas terrorist organization senior operatives advanced

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attacks against innocents around the world.”⁷⁴

Meanwhile, the Hamas leadership in Lebanon appears to be looking to operate elsewhere in the Levant as well. In March 2025, Jordanian authorities foiled an arms smuggling plot that authorities there tied to the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. According to a figure tied to the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, the arrested cell members—who reportedly trained in Lebanon—had been recruited by Hamas senior leader Salah al-Arouri.⁷⁵ And in June 2025, Israeli authorities targeted Hamas operatives in Syria who were believed to be tied to the group’s leaders in Lebanon, with an IDF airstrike targeting Hamas operatives in Syria on June 8 and a nighttime raid a few days later led to the arrest of several more and the confiscation of weapons.⁷⁶

... But Hamas Decision-Making on External Operations Are Still Opaque

Unlike past cases, the string of recent Hamas plots abroad is directly tied to senior Hamas leadership. These are no rogue operations, but it remains unclear how decisions about such operations are made and if this includes input and approval from a broad range of Hamas leadership or just a select few. In the past, it was never entirely clear if the few cases of external operations tied to Hamas were directed by senior Hamas leadership or if they were the work of small cells taking advantage of opportunities that presented themselves—like Jamal Akal’s return from Canada to visit relatives in 2003. For a long time, as an Israeli official explained to this author in 2005, the biggest concern Israeli officials had in this regard was “about rogue cells and Hamas individuals close to al-Qaeda” carrying out attacks on their own, independent of Hamas as a group.⁷⁷ Twenty years later, Israeli officials are again concerned that in the highly radicalized environment post-October 7, individuals tied to Hamas may be radicalized to carry out lone offender attacks or to act together with more traditionally global jihadi groups, but they are equally concerned that these recent cases—and others they say have yet to be made public—may represent a break with past Hamas *modus operandi* and a shift toward complementing the group’s traditional attacks in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza with an international terrorist operations component.⁷⁸

On the one hand, Israeli experts consider the possibility that recent plots were more opportunistic in nature—intended to complement the October 7 attacks and then to put external pressure on Israel in the context of the Gaza war—than a strategic shift. Having attacked Israel from Gaza at all costs, Hamas officials

may assess, why not attack abroad as well? As for concerns that international attacks could undermine Hamas’ perceived legitimacy as a ‘resistance’ organization, if the extreme violence and brutality of October 7 did not undermine its standing, the group may well assess that international attacks will not either—especially at a time when attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets are more frequent and have been normalized by a broader segment of society angry over the devastating war in Gaza.⁷⁹ Today, the threat of Hamas attacks abroad is very real, especially within the larger context of mobilization to violence since October 7 and the war that followed. In April 2025, in the wake of Hamas plots foiled in Germany and Denmark, Denmark’s PET intelligence service issued an updated threat assessment warning that the Israel-Hamas war “holds considerable potential for mobilization that may prompt a number of spontaneous or premeditated reactions, including terrorist attacks, from various unknown threat actors.” The conflict, PET added, has already been the cause of “several attacks and foiled attacks in the West, aimed particularly at Jewish and Israeli interests.”⁸⁰

The September 2025 Israeli attack on Hamas leadership in Qatar, Israeli officials concede, likely increased Hamas’ motivation for revenge and may paint Hamas attacks abroad as proportionate and reciprocal in the minds of Hamas decision makers.⁸¹ This may already have proven to be the case after the July 2024 assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in an IRGC guest house in Tehran. It was just four months later that German and Danish authorities arrested Hamas operatives and their criminal associates in the plots discussed above.⁸²

Moreover, it is unclear how Hamas leadership losses over the past two years have impacted Hamas decision-making on external operations. Key leaders driving these operations, especially among the group’s operational leadership in Lebanon, have been eliminated. But does the decentralization of senior Hamas decision-making undermine the group’s longstanding restraint when it comes to attacks abroad? Are today’s Hamas leaders so vying for power, or perhaps unable to communicate as effectively as before, such that decisions on external operations may be siloed and represent the consensus of only some leaders and not others? Israeli authorities assess that in the current environment, “each Hamas boss wants to be the one to save the organization, to exact revenge, to show that Hamas is still standing and relevant and capable.”⁸³ Does that make it more likely for some Hamas leaders, say those in Lebanon, to make decisions about international operations on their own?^b

As Israeli authorities grapple with these questions, they assess that one factor that could drive Hamas toward a more holistic position on carrying out attacks abroad is also the one thing that could quickly make Hamas plots abroad more dangerous: cooperation with Iran and Hezbollah. Having suffered severe blows from Israeli attacks, both Iran and Hezbollah are assessed to have significant interest in attacks targeting Israelis abroad. To that end, Israeli intelligence officials report, the two created a joint unit—Unit 3900—in which Quds Force and Hezbollah operatives work together to provide logistics for or carry out plots abroad.

b Tensions between Hamas leaders are not new, and have grown since October 7, 2023. See, for example, Matthew Levitt and Ehud Yaari, “Growing Internal Tensions between Hamas Leaders,” PolicyWatch 3825, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 21, 2023.

In July 2024, a Unit 3900 plot was reportedly thwarted in Sierra Leone, where a large shipment of 15 tons of explosives was seized by authorities.⁸⁴ Hamas operatives in Lebanon now appear to be participating in Unit 3900 as well, which perhaps should not surprise given that Hamas officials like the late Salah al-Arouri and current Hamas operations head in Lebanon, Zaher Jabarin, have both played key intermediary roles for Hamas with Hezbollah and Iran.⁸⁵ In February 2025, an Israeli airstrike killed Muhammad Shaheen near Sidon, Lebanon. Shaheen, the Israelis reported, had taken over the Hamas Operations Department in Lebanon and had been planning terrorist attacks “directed and funded by Iran.”⁸⁶ Within weeks, another Israeli airstrike killed Hezbollah operative Hassan Ali Mahmoud Bdeir. Bdeir, the Israelis revealed, worked in Unit 3900 with Hezbollah and the Quds Force as he “directed Hamas terrorists and assisted them in planning and advancing a significant and imminent terrorist attack against Israeli civilians.”⁸⁷ Israeli authorities say Bdeir was targeted to disrupt a specific plot he was involved in, adding that under Quds Force direction, this Hezbollah-led unit “does a lot of collaboration with Hamas.”⁸⁸

Trendlines for Hamas External Operations

Two key tactical trends emerge from close observation of Hamas external operations plotting. First, following a trend more commonly associated with Iran’s Quds Force,⁸⁹ Hamas operatives abroad are working closely with European organized crime groups to secure weapons and carry out attacks. And second, long before the October 7 attacks, Hamas decided to establish a network that could facilitate operations abroad, should the group decide to do so. As part of that long game, Hamas proactively sought to secure residency status for trusted operatives in Europe, doggedly trying and trying again when at first they did not succeed.⁹⁰

Ties to Transnational Criminal Organizations

German security officials say that the most recent arrests in early October, on the eve of the Yom Kippur holiday, underscore the extent to which “recruiting experienced criminals is part of Hamas’ new strategy.”⁹¹ In this case, suspected arms smugglers tied to “Turkish-Lebanese organized crime” were found to be acting on behalf of Hamas under the direction of Hamas “foreign operatives,” who function as liaisons between Hamas leadership in Lebanon and criminal networks in Europe.⁹² Both the drone plot in Denmark and the arm cache plot that spanned several countries including Germany, Bulgaria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Poland involved transnational organized criminal groups as well, especially members of Loyal to Familia (LtF). Several of these LtF criminals were reportedly working out of Lebanon, where they were able to connect with Hamas leaders.⁹³ Indeed, the LtF gang member taken into custody by Danish authorities in May 2025 had been in Lebanon when a warrant was issued for his arrest. Israel had previously described the man as “part of a Hamas network with connections in several countries, including Lebanon.”⁹⁴

Even before the cases expressly tied to Hamas, Danish authorities linked LtF to what they describe as an act of terrorist violence in the case of a May 2024 arson attack targeting a Jewish person. Declining to go into more details so as not to compromise the investigation, Danish authorities did say that “if a person in Denmark becomes a terrorist target because of their Jewish background, it is a serious issue. It is also worrying that we are once again dealing with a terrorist case with links to LtF.”⁹⁵

“Two key tactical trends emerge from close observation of Hamas external operations plotting. First, following a trend more commonly associated with Iran’s Quds Force, Hamas operatives abroad are working closely with European organized crime groups to secure weapons and carry out attacks. And second, long before the October 7 attacks, Hamas decided to establish a network that could facilitate operations abroad, should the group decide to do so.”

In the cases that followed, Hamas proactively developed ties with LtF members. According to a statement from the German Federal Intelligence Service (BND), as part of his Hamas duties Khalil al-Kharraz maintained close contacts in Turkey and was involved in arms deals.⁹⁶ And it was al-Kharraz who is believed to have been the lynchpin between Hamas leaders in Lebanon, Hamas “foreign operators” in Europe, and European gang members.⁹⁷

Israeli security officials point to the fact that the Gaza war has served as a “driver of Islamist violence,” by no means limited to Hamas, and has helped create a “large well of potential supporters and operatives” willing to carry out operations or just provide some level of support of logistics. This has opened a door for many different types of cooperation between individuals who are not themselves Hamas members but are radicalized to the point of mobilization to violence by the Gaza war.⁹⁸ Within this operational milieu, it should not surprise that organized criminal groups—in particular those with members with familial, national, or religious ties to the Middle East—would be willing to partner with Hamas to carry out attacks.

Seeking Residency for Hamas Operatives

The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), Germany’s federal domestic intelligence agency, determined that “Hamas has deliberately established local operators in Europe over the course of many years,” which German prosecutors believe is confirmed by chat histories of the defendants reviewed as part of their criminal case involved the cached weapons, including plans dating back to 2020 to obtain European residency permits for Hamas operatives coming from the Middle East.⁹⁹

Though it is unclear when he first joined Hamas, Elrassatmi first came to the attention of German authorities in 2015, when he and his brother, Hassaim, were subjects of an alien smuggling investigation, which included several Hamas suspects, some of whom he employed at his Berlin restaurant. According to court documents, Elrassatmi and his brother Hassaim were responsible for assisting Hamas operatives who sought to move to Europe from Lebanon. They not only helped al-Ali immigrate to Berlin in 2020, but Elrassatmi employed Bassiouny at his restaurant that same

year.¹⁰⁰

While Elrassatmi and his brother had lived in Berlin since at least 2015, Hassaim had acquired a residence permit in Italy, and was living in Germany illegally.¹⁰¹ What was important to Hamas, however, was that he had a European residency permit. Intercepted messages between the accused Hamas operatives underscore how obtaining residency permits was part of the underlying operational plan for Hamas' so-called "foreign operators." Messages from al-Kharraz that were obtained from al-Ali's phone highlight this *modus operandi* going back as far as early 2020: "We have people in Italy," and "we will see how we can help from here."¹⁰² By this time, Hamas had operatives working in Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, and the Netherlands, among other places.

Then, when Hamas decided to dispatch operatives to maintain the group's arms caches in Europe, the group was able to call upon its "foreign operators," as German authorities described them, who "were usually individuals with European residence permits and could therefore be deployed there at short notice."¹⁰³

In a further development related to the theme of Hamas working over years to establish support networks in Europe, one of the accused, Nazih Rustom, is believed to have been affiliated with a Dutch charity—Al-Israa—which was designated as a Hamas front organization by the U.S. government in January 2025.¹⁰⁴ According to the Treasury Department, one of Al-Israa's representative officials, Amin Abu Rashed, "is a top Hamas operative in Europe" who raised funds for the group "by using sham charities as a cover."¹⁰⁵ Abu Rashed was arrested the previous year by Dutch authorities on charges of funding Hamas and has been released pending trial.¹⁰⁶

In the final assessment, German Federal Intelligence (BND) determined "that Hamas has deliberately established local operators in Europe over the course of many years," citing intercepted communications between the suspects discussing the placement of Hamas operatives in Germany and Italy years earlier "for strategic purposes."¹⁰⁷ And, it appears, at least before the October 7 attacks, that Hamas had plans for much more. According to documents Israeli forces seized from Hamas files in Gaza, Hamas planned to replicate its operational base in Lebanon with another in Turkey. In fact, the plan was much bolder still: One document lays out a three-year plan with the goal of "setting up many military cells and safe houses in many countries," which could then plan acts of "sabotage and assassination" of a range of targets to include "influential Israelis."¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Though German authorities indicated as of November 2024 that they did not know who within Hamas succeeded Khalil al-Kharraz

as commander of Hamas' external operations planning,¹⁰⁹ the Hamas plots kept coming. Nor do European authorities expect the threat to end anytime soon, with operational activity in just the cases noted here occurring in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden. Israeli authorities say dozens of attacks, mostly tied to Iran and Hamas, were prevented in recent months,¹¹⁰ and they share their European counterparts' concerns. "External operations by Hamas are no longer something we can ignore," an Israeli intelligence official recently concluded. "It's a real possibility and something we put more focus on now than ever before."¹¹¹

That focus not only aims to disrupt ongoing plots, but to determine whether the string of plots abroad represents the new normal for Hamas or if it was an operationally exceptional moment in the lead up to the October 7 attacks and in the context of the devastating war that followed. With Hamas operational capabilities in Gaza severely degraded, and the group under pressure from both Israeli and Palestinian Authority security forces in the West Bank, the group's military commanders may find that acts of international terrorism carried out by small cells—independently or working with Iranian and Hezbollah operatives through Unit 3900—may be a more central component of Hamas' attack strategy.

Hamas' early external operational activities were carried out as contingency planning, but Hamas then sent operatives to put these plans into action before the October 7 attacks. Since then, a string of Hamas plots has been thwarted, only some of which have been made public. Today, European and Israeli officials fear that Hamas has taken the decision to go global and carry out plots abroad, marking a significant departure from the group's prior *modus operandi*.

Perhaps, in the context of the ceasefire deal, Hamas reins in its external operations so as not to undermine the ceasefire and give Israel reason to resume its war against Hamas. Maybe the string of Hamas terrorist attacks abroad ends up being more of an anomalous moment in the context of the Gaza war than a strategic shift. But the fact that these plots were orchestrated by senior Hamas leaders, that the groundwork for such plots was set up years in advance, that these capabilities were put into play even before the October 7 attacks, and that Hamas continued to press for attacks even after some were very publicly exposed, have led law enforcement authorities to take the threat of continued Hamas attacks abroad very seriously. **CTC**

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