

## Assad's dogs of war

Hafez al-Assad has been the primary protector of three terrorist legends: Abu Nidal, George Habash, and Ahmad Jibril. The record of carefully timed blind-terrorist acts and targeted assassinations by these three well-heeled and well-shielded terrorists, is a history of the provocations that have worked to keep the region in a maelstrom over the last two decades. In the case of Abu Nidal and Habash, protection has also been extended from London and Paris.

### Abu Nidal—Treks to London

Abu Nidal, *nom de guerre* of Sabri al-Banna, is the leader of the Syrian-based Revolutionary Council, which has been responsible for some of the most spectacular terrorist incidents concerning the Middle East.

Born in 1937 to one of the richest Palestinian landlord families, Abu Nidal became a Palestinian activist as a youth. He emerged as the head of the Iraqi section of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and was elected to the 15-member inner council of the Fatah, Arafat's group and the most important group within the PLO coalition.

Abu Nidal broke with the PLO during Black September in 1970, accusing Arafat of being soft on Jordan's King Hussein. He was expelled from the PLO after his unannounced 1974 attack on the Saudi embassy in Paris. The PLO soon condemned him to death *in absentia*, after he was caught organizing an assassination plot against Arafat.

Since his break with the PLO, Abu Nidal has emerged as the most famous, and dangerous, Syrian-backed Palestinian terrorist. His targets have often been PLO leaders, especially those advocating a comprehensive peace with Israel, and Jewish civilians, especially during the midst of Mideast peace negotiations. In 1978, his group murdered Said Hammami, the first PLO leader to advocate recognition of Israel. In 1983, his group murdered PLO leader Isam Sartawi, when he attempted to secretly negotiate with Israeli representatives in Portugal.

Sartawi had told the Paris daily *Le Monde* a year earlier that Abu Nidal was not really "a maximalist of the Rejection Front, but a traitor who is working for the Israeli services. . . . Whose interest is it to discredit the Palestinian resistance by committing anti-Semitic crimes? We do not even ask ourselves these questions anymore, since members of the Abu Nidal group that we are detaining in Beirut are known to have been recruited by the Mossad."

Three weeks after Arafat paid a 1981 visit to Pope John

Paul II, and was received by the Italian President and foreign minister, in a major PLO diplomatic success, Abu Nidal's followers attacked a Rome synagogue, killing 3 people, and wounding 30. In June 1982, Abu Nidal's group attempted to assassinate Israeli diplomat Shlomo Argov in London—the incident that became the pretext for Ariel Sharon's decision for Israel to invade Lebanon the next day. The invasion succeeded in expelling the PLO from Lebanon.

On Jan. 14, 1991, Abu Nidal's group assassinated Abu Iyad, the head of PLO intelligence, in Tunis, on the eve of the Gulf War against Iraq. The PLO was then supporting Iraq.

Details about Abu Nidal's own curious ties with Israel emerged in an April 6, 1984 *Jerusalem Post* interview with his brother, Mohammed Khalil al-Banna of Nablus. Despite his brother's notoriety, Mohammed Khalil al-Banna was, the paper wrote, "the biggest fruit wholesaler in the West Bank," with extensive business ties to Israeli kibbutzim. "My father, Haj Khalil, was the wealthiest man in Palestine," he explained. "He used to market 10% of all the Palestinian produce to Europe." Part of the reason for the family wealth was its friendly ties with the Zionist movement. "My father was friendly with Avraham Shapira [the founder of the first Zionist terrorist organization, Hashomer] and with Chaim Weitzmann [later the first President of Israel]."

Although Syria is Abu Nidal's primary sponsor, his banking operations are tracked—naturally—to London. According to the London *Times* of July 21, 1991, Abu Nidal financed his terror campaign through the London branch of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI), the bank that Bush and Thatcher had used to funnel arms to Iran, and to arm the Afghan mujahideen.

According to the statements of BCCI London official Ghassan Qassem to the Associated Press on Aug. 2, 1991, Abu Nidal opened an account at the bank in 1981. Qassem added that Abu Nidal visited London regularly, and that bank officials accompanied the terrorist on his shopping tours, and also arranged phony export licenses to allow arms to be sent to his group. According to the BCCI official, Britain's MI-5 intelligence service knew all about Abu Nidal's presence in London, and his arms purchases there, but took no action against it.

According to the London *Times*, Ben Banerjee, a London-based arms trafficker, was Abu Nidal's key intermediary for weapons transactions. Banerjee has been identified by the Iran-Contra hearings before the U.S. Congress as a business partner of Oliver North. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* of Oct. 7, 1991, further reported that the East German arms network run by East German Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski, which supplied North with arms for the Contras in 1986, also supplied Abu Nidal, and that the BCCI was the mediator in those deals.

In the aftermath of the scandal, the British government ordered an investigation, under the direction of Lord Justice Bingham. "Having made detailed enquiry of all the intelli-

gence agencies,” the Lord Justice reported, “the inquiry has found no evidence to suggest that the management of BCCI at any level above that of bank manager knowingly held or handled accounts of the Abu Nidal Organization or its front companies.”

### **George Habash—In Paris for health reasons**

George Habash is the leader of the Syrian-based Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which was formed in December 1967, with the intent of creating a Marxist “revolutionary party.” Habash had been a Palestinian leader since the 1950s.

Upon its inception, the PFLP embarked on a terror spree that successfully wedded the image of “Palestinian” with “terrorist” in public opinion. In 1968, the group carried out the first modern air hijacking, when it took over an Israeli El Al plane flying from Rome, and forced it to Algiers. The group also pushed for a Palestinian confrontation with Jordan, coining the slogan, “The road to the liberation of Palestine goes through Amman.” The group’s hijacking antics in September 1970, gave Kissinger the pretext to order a Jordanian bloody crackdown on the PLO—known as Black September—even though the PLO had expelled the PFLP from its ranks.

In 1974, the PFLP established the Syrian-based Rejection Front, which attempted to stop PLO participation in any negotiated settlement, particularly through the Geneva Conference.

In order to discredit negotiations, the PFLP, like Abu Nidal, targeted Israeli civilians for violence. In May 1972, it launched a machine-gun and grenade attack at Israel’s Lod Airport, employing Japanese gunmen, who killed 26 people, and wounded 76. In June 1976, the PFLP hijacked an Air France jetliner to Entebbe, Uganda, which provided a pretext for Israel’s commando raid there. In May 1978, it carried out a machine-gun attack on passengers at Israel’s El Al airlines at Orly Airport in Paris, killing five people.

The PFLP has also worked with other terrorist outfits. In 1988, it held a joint press conference with the Kurdish Workers Party and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, in Sidon, Lebanon, to announce a common front. Both groups had been particularly active in France.

Evidence of French and Israeli patronage of Habash, emerged publicly on Jan. 30, 1992, when it was revealed that Habash had entered France that day, with a valid visa, to obtain a medical checkup. According to press accounts, Habash had suffered a stroke two days before. “Habash’s transfer to Paris for medical treatment followed an official and political agreement with the French government, which involved the Foreign and Interior ministries, as well as the Elysée [Presidential] Palace,” Abdel-Rahim Malluh, a PFLP official, told Reuters.

Although French President François Mitterrand expressed “shock” over his government’s decision to allow Habash into the country, and fired three senior officials, no

attempt was made to arrest and try Habash, despite the fact that he was formally wanted for dozens of murders on French soil.

Nor did Israel demand Habash’s extradition to Israel, for the numerous murders the PFLP had carried out there. “I am not making this a personal issue,” Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir told the French daily *Le Figaro*. “George Habash is a sick man, physically speaking. I think the French will find a solution to this misunderstanding. It is not a major problem.”

The Bush administration showed similar sympathy. “France’s decision to admit Mr. Habash was its own decision. We don’t have any comment on that,” State Department spokesman Joe Snyder told the press.

Habash returned to Damascus later that month, where he continued to mobilize against the PLO. He predictably denounced the PLO for striking a comprehensive peace deal with Israel at the Oslo talks in the summer of 1993. The Palestinian people, Habash told Reuters on Sept. 8, 1993, “will realize in the medium and long run that the agreement was a sell-out of the Palestinian cause, and a betrayal of the bloodshed to advance this cause.” He pledged that, despite the agreement, the fight against Israel would continue “unrelentlessly through the Intifada, and armed struggle, until we achieve all our goals.”

### **Ahmad Jibril and Pan Am 103**

Former Syrian Army Capt. Ahmad Jibril is the founder and leader of the Syrian-based Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). The group was created as a splitoff from the PFLP, a few months after Jibril joined it in 1968. It has operated as a wing of the PFLP, nonetheless, ever since.

The group began suicide operations against Israel in 1974-75. It overtly supported Syrian operations in Lebanon in 1975-76. It has worked closely with Hezbollah, which was created by Syria and Iran in Lebanon in 1982, and has aided Hezbollah clashes with the Israeli Army.

Jibril’s group was accused by ABC News in the United States of assisting Syrian arms- and drug-trafficker Monzer al-Kassar, in placing a bomb aboard a Pan Am jet that exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland on Dec. 21, 1988. The plane carried on board several CIA officials based in Lebanon, who were returning to the United States with specific information on Bush’s ties to al-Kassar’s narcotics trafficking out of Germany.

The PFLP-GC, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas also played a prominent role in an October 1991 Teheran conference, whose purpose was to organize a common front against the Madrid Israeli-Palestinian peace conference which began later that month, and which culminated in the Oslo accords between Israel and the PLO. Terrorist operations by the four groups played an instrumental role in electing Benjamin Netanyahu prime minister of Israel in May 1996.