

Gunmen Attack Nightclub and Israeli Embassy in Mauritania

On 1 February, gunmen opened fire on the Israeli embassy and a nearby nightclub in the Saharan country of Mauritania, in the capital city of Nouakchott. Three people were wounded - a French woman patronizing the night club and the night club's owner and his son, both Mauritians with French citizenship.¹ Guards at the Israeli embassy exchanged fire with the gunmen, who fled the scene on foot. According to one witness, there were a total of six men firing on the two buildings.²

Both the Israeli embassy, whose façade was struck with bullets, and the nightclub appeared to be targets of the attack. According to the Mauritanian government, the nightclub was attacked because it sells alcohol in spite of a national ban on liquor sales and because it is frequented by prostitutes and their clients.³

Al-Qaeda Branch Claims Responsibility

Al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM) claimed responsibility for the attack, but only mentioned the Israeli embassy as a target. The group said that the attack was executed in retaliation for Israel's "imposing unjust siege, oppression, mistreatment, killing and expulsion" upon Palestinians. The statement exaggerated the scope of the attack, claiming that grenades had been involved and that the casualties included "an unspecified number of people from among the ranks of the Jews and their guards." AQLIM claimed that the government of Mauritania covered up the embassy-related casualties.⁴ However, the timing of the attack makes it unlikely that the gunmen planned to kill embassy staff. The attack took place at 2:20 am, when the embassy was closed.⁵

AQLIM threatened more attacks on Jewish, Christian, and "apostate" targets in Mauritania. Specifically, the group threatened the life of the Israeli ambassador to Mauritania, Boaz Bismuth, and implied that the embassy attack had targeted Bismuth.⁶ The Algerian-based group has been linked to two recent attacks in Mauritania. In December, AQLIM operatives killed several Mauritanian soldiers. Shortly afterward, on Christmas Eve, four French tourists were shot dead by gunmen who received training in terrorist training camps in Mauritania run by AQLIM.⁷

¹ Flynn, Daniel. "Gunmen's Attack on Israeli Embassy in Mauritania Injures Three," The Boston Globe, 2 February 2008. http://www.boston.com/news/world/africa/articles/2008/02/02/gunmens_attack_on_israeli_embassy_in_mauritania_injures_3/

² "Three Held in Mauritania Israeli Embassy Shooting," Haaretz, 3 February 2008. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/950427.html>

³ Polgreen, Lydia. "Shooters Are Sought in Israeli Embassy Attack in Mauritania," International Herald Tribune, 2 February 2008. <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2008/02/02/africa/02mauritania.php>

⁴ Abdelwadood, Abu Musaab. "We Are Here, Gaza: A Statement Regarding the Attack of the Israeli Embassy Building in Nouakchott," Al-Fajr Media Center, 2 February 2008. Circulated on Jihadist Websites.

⁵ Polgreen, 2 February 2008.

⁶ Abdelwadood, 2 February 2008.

⁷ Polgreen, 2 February 2008. Flynn, 2 February 2008.

Radicalism in Mauritania

Mauritania is a Muslim country whose citizens traditionally have followed a tolerant and liberal interpretation of Islam. The country is one of only three Arab League nations to enjoy relations with Israel. Mauritanian-Israeli relations have been productive and friendly, but the relationship has drawn ire from political opponents of the current government and from an increasing segment of the Mauritanian population.

The Israeli embassy has been the site of frequent protests in recent years.⁸ Increasing awareness of the Palestinian situation and exposure to one-sided Arab viewpoints on the issue have fueled anti-Israeli sentiment among the population. Mauritians have been more exposed to the political viewpoints and perspectives of other Arab countries in the past couple years through satellite television carrying Middle Eastern programming, including news channels in which provocative political and religious topics are popular subjects.⁹ No longer a luxury afforded to the wealthy, satellite televisions can be found throughout the capital, including in the poor slums that lie on its outskirts.¹⁰

Mauritania's Response

The Mauritanian government was initially reluctant to admit that the Israeli embassy had been a target, insisting instead that the terrorists were targeting only the nightclub.¹¹ The government is uneasy about the perception of rising radicalism in the country, especially after the murder of four French tourists prompted French organizers to cancel the long-standing Dakar Rally, a famous trans-Saharan race traversing Mauritania.¹²

Israel praised the rapid response of Mauritanian authorities, who apprehended three suspects shortly after the shootings.¹³ But Israeli ambassador Boaz Bismuth also criticized opposition politicians' and media outlets' unfair characterizations of Israel.¹⁴ Political opponents have curried favor among the population by repeatedly hitting on the sensitive topic of Israeli-Mauritanian relations. That topic and other religious issues are the political opposition's main source of leverage against the incumbent powers.

⁸ "Fears of Rising Extremism in Tolerant Democracy," United Nations' Integrated Regional Information Networks, 3 February 2008. <http://www.worldpress.org/Africa/3060.cfm>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Polgreen, 2 February 2008.

¹² Haaretz, 3 February 2008.

¹³ "Israeli Envoy to Mauritania Reflects on Sderot after Shooting Attack," Jerusalem Post, 3 February 2008. <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1201867283639&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

¹⁴ Polgreen, 2 February 2008.