



## INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND TERRORISM RESEARCH

A Centre of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

### **Assassination in Sudan of operatives who were apparently involved in arms smuggling to Hamas**

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#### **The incident**

A tow man was killed in a strike on a car that was driven from Port Sudan airport into the town (6 April). No one has claimed responsibility for it, but Sudanese authorities blamed Israel for the attack. It is not clear whether the attack was carried out by helicopter or by aircraft or from the Red Sea.



**Figure 1: Picture of the vehicle that was targeted**

(Photo credit: Israeli channel 10)

According to Al-Arabiya TV channel, one of the men that were killed was a Sudanese and the other was Abdul Latif Ashkar a senior Hamas operative who was responsible for smuggling weapons from Iran, Syria and Lebanon to the Gaza Strip. However, Ismail Ashkar, the uncle of Ashkar, announced that his nephew survived the strike. Earlier, the Sudanese foreign minister claimed that they were “just Sudanese citizens travelling from the airport.” Israel did not comment on the attack or the accusations. But a senior Israeli military official privately confirmed the obvious to Time Magazine and added: "It's not our first time there." <sup>1 23</sup>

Reports claimed that Israel was responsible for similar attacks in Sudan in recent years. For example, in January 2009 an unknown aircraft hit a convoy of suspected arms smugglers on a remote road in north Sudan near the border with Egypt, and it was reported that the weapons was to be delivered to Hamas in Gaza (Hamas spokesman denounced that). Around 120 people were killed in that strike.<sup>4</sup>

## Impact Analysis

Sudan is a safe haven for different terror actors since the 80s: Hamas, Al Qaeda and other groups have used Sudan territory for operational and logistic purposes. This is possible because of Sudan government’s radical Islamic policy and the regime’s glaring weakness in imposing its authority on the whole country. Iran has also used Sudan territory to support Palestinian terror groups. It is important to note that Iran provided military assistance to Sudan. Hamas has all along maintained its military base in Sudan and used it as a stopover for arms deliveries to Gaza. In this context, Egyptian authorities announced (March 15) that they captured a military cargo that was on its way from Sudan to the Gaza Strip. It consisted of mortar bombs, light weapon and explosives.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, some tribes in Sudan and in Eritrea (such as the Arabic Rashida) make a living from smuggling of illegal immigrants, drugs, tobacco and arms. Sudan is located in the centre of smuggling routes that stretch from East Africa and the Indian Ocean through Egypt to Israel and Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, assuming Hamas is the end-user of the weapon convoys from Sudan this incident demonstrates Hamas’ intention to rearm itself in recent years (mainly after the end of the war with Israel in January 2009). Towards this end Hamas’s military wing acquired from Iran quality

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<sup>1</sup> “Israel assassinates Hamas weapons smuggler in Sudan,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 6 April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> “Gaza official: 'Mabhough heir' survived Sudan hit,” *Ynet News.com*, 7 April 2011. Available at, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4053554,00.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Were the Israelis Behind the 'Mystery' Air Strike in Sudan?” *Time*, 6 April 2011.

<sup>4</sup> “Two killed in mysterious air strike on Port Sudan car,” *AlArabiya.net*, 6 April 2011.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> “Hamas: no weapon in trucks that were attacked in Sudan,” *Walla News*, 26 March 2009.

weapon systems, such as rocket launchers (Fajr series) and second generation AT and AA missiles.

At the same time, If Israel is responsible for the attack, as foreign media reports suggested, it would appear to be another step in Israel's global campaign to stop Iranian arms smuggling into the region (“covert war” in intelligence terminology). In January 2010, a senior Hamas official Mahmoud al-Mabhouh who was involved in Hamas’ arms trafficking apparatus, was murdered in a Dubai hotel. Dubai police accused the Mossad of the assassination and published photos and passports of the alleged perpetrators, who Dubai claimed were traveling under fake identities. According to reports, Ashkar replaced Mabhouh in his role. Anyway, Hamas’s successful military buildup implies the limited achievements of Israeli counter activity in this respect.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “What is Sudan hiding about the air strike it blamed on Israel?” *Haaretz.com*, 7 April 2011.

# Smuggling route of Arms from Iran to Hamas through Sudan

