

Israeli-Arab terrorist branch of Hizballah behind failed Haifa massacre

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the Free Galilee Brigades

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DEBKAFfile Special Report

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By a fluke, the Free Galilee Brigades failed to bring off a multiple-casualty bomb attack on the Saturday night crowds at the Haifa Lev Mifratz shopping mall on March 21. But DEBKAFfile's military sources report that security officials fear that the shadowy group, based in northern Israeli Arab villages and Jerusalem, is spreading its wings after killing 12 Israelis in a string of attacks since 2003.

The small blast which alerted the Haifa mall's security guards to a white Subaru parked outside the building was rigged to detonate 1,000 kilos of explosives with ball bearings in several packets hidden in the trunk in a chain reaction. By good fortune, the mechanism failed and no-one was hurt. Had it worked, the casualty count would have run to scores. The mall's shops and cinemas were cleared in seconds. Lacking an advance tip-off, Israel's counter-terror agencies were caught off-guard.

The focus on blocking Palestinian terrorist activity from the West Bank has led to their neglecting the danger from within, despite the spreading influence of radical elements in the Israeli-Arab community and the Lebanese Hizballah's clandestine penetration.

Police, combing the multi-storied mall for clues, have blacked out the Haifa mall investigation except for the fact that the bomb car is registered to a woman in Jerusalem.

DEBKAFfile's counter-terror sources confirm that the Free Galilee Brigades has its headquarters in two large Arab villages in the North - Sakhnin and Deir Hanna. They recruit hit teams in local villages, such as Deir al Assad, Salameh and Maghar.

The Shin Bet's investigation of its first known operation, the murder of the Israeli soldier Oleg Shaikhat in 2003, exposed the source of the Galilee group's operational orders as Hizballah agents who had infiltrated Galilee and the West Bank to act as controllers.

Israeli authorities have tried hard to keep this connection and the Galilee group's lethality quiet in order not to ruffle the problematical relations with the Israeli Arab minority (one-fifth of the population, represented by 10 Knesset members).

The result has been to brush the threat posed by the Free Galilee Brigades under the official awareness carpet despite its lethal attacks.

On March 2, 2008, its members went on a shooting rampage on the Mercaz Harav yeshiva in Jerusalem leaving 8 Israelis dead.

Less than a year ago, on July 11, 2008, the group shot dead two Israeli Border Guard officers posted at the Old City's Lions' Gate. The police insisted it was the work of a lone killer although it was similar to the murder of an Israeli security guard in an Old City alley in August 2007.

The guard's partner shot back and killed the terrorist, who was identified as Ahmad Hatib, from the Galilee village of Kafr Mandeb and a member of the Free Galilee Brigades.

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