Shin Bet foils Hamas plot to kidnap Israelis in West Bank

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A Hamas plan to kidnap Israelis in the West Bank during the Hannukah holiday was thwarted by Israeli security forces, the Shin Bet said Wednesday.

A joint operation by the Shin Bet, IDF and Israel Police exposed a Hamas terror cell from the village of Tell near Nablus that planned to abduct a soldier or a settler from one of the bus stops at the Samaria region's main junctions. The abducted Israeli was to be used as a bargaining chip in negotiations for prison release with Israel.

In its investigation, the Shin Bet learned the cell members conducted observations at major junctions, main roads and bus stops in the area to gather intelligence for the planned attack. The cell leader also made inquiries about possible safe houses in the Nablus area to hide their hostage.

The plan was for cell members to disguise themselves as local Jewish residents and entice a victim to enter their vehicle.

The Shin Bet seized weapons the cell members planned to use to carry out the kidnapping, including a handgun, an electric shocker and pepper spray. The cell members also allegedly planned to acquire more weapons.

The cell leader, 26-year-old Hamas member Muad Ashtiyah, is suspected of planning the attack, purchasing weapons to carry it out and recruiting other members.

Hamas members Mahmoud Ramadan and Ahmed Ramadan, both aged 19, are suspected of joining the cell after being recruited by Ashtiyya.

The cell members were in contact with Omar Assida, a Hamas militant and member of the Hamas top command in the Gaza Strip, who is responsible for organizing military actions and the flow of funds from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank. The Hamas command in Gaza provided guidance and financing for the planned abduction.

The Samaria military prosecution is expected to file indictments against the three cell members.