THE END OF PALESTINIAN TERRORISM?

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As we near the end of a conference on how terrorism ends, I wish that I could present in the case of Palestinian terrorism a good example of terrorism ending, but unfortunately, I cannot present anything quite so definitive and optimistic.

Before I begin, I should point out that while the title of this session refers to Palestinian terrorism, this obscures the fact that there are several Palestinian terrorisms, carried out by different groups (and sub-groups) with different motivations, interests, and agendas. I will focus primarily on the terrorist activity of Hamas, but will discuss other groups briefly as well.

TERRORISM DURING THE SECOND INTIFADA

Ten years ago almost exactly, the second intifada began, and Israel began to contend with the worst wave of terrorism it has ever known. This is particularly noteworthy for our purposes here because Israel currently is experiencing some of the quietest years it has known. While I don't know anyone who would feel confident predicting that we have seen the end of Palestinian terrorism, certainly something has changed recently.

The most significant manifestation of terrorism during the second intifada was suicide bombing, and for several reasons. Suicide bombings caused more fatalities than any other terrorist tactic in the 2000-2009 period, accounting for 43% of the total.[1] They were (and continue to be) the subject of considerable

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[1] Israel Security Agency, "Analysis of Attacks in the Last Decade," n.d., http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/Hebrew/TerrorInfo/decade/DecadeSummary_he.pdf, p. 3.

Palestinian public approval,[2] and were the focus of Palestinian terrorist groups' competition for public support.[3] Even ostensibly secular groups like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Fatah al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade adopted the tactic and some of the catalytic religious rhetoric previously reserved for use by Hamas and PIJ. The frequent occurrence of suicide bombings in cities throughout Israel played a significant role in establishing and maintaining the urgency of the second Intifada between 2000 and 2005; this was not a "territories" problem or one that affected only soldiers or settlers. For most Israelis, the day-to-day concerns of intifada-related violence waned and essentially ceased when suicide bombings did the same. Other Palestinian violence, particularly rocket attacks of limited range and effectiveness, has had far less impact on life, economics, and politics in Israel.

While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues, over two and a half years have passed without a single suicide bombing in Israel and over five years have passed since Hamas claimed responsibility for such an attack. I would like to explore with you the question of how this dramatic change in the intensity of Palestinian terrorism came about.

I'll address the change chronologically, focusing first on the factors that led to the end of the second intifada, then turn to the role of one factor in particular – deterrence – which gets a great deal of attention, but which I will argue is largely misunderstood.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the number of suicide bombings climbed sharply from 2000 to 2002, after which there was a more gradual decline.

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[2] See, for example, Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre, "Poll No. 39 Part I, December 2000 - On Palestinian Attitudes Towards Politics including the Current Intifada," http://www.jmcc.org/Documentsandmaps.aspx?id=460 and Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Palestinian Territories: Support for Suicide Bombing," http://pewglobal.org/database/?indicator=19&country=168.
[3] Anat N. Kurz, *Palestinian Uprisings: War with Israel, War at Home* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studes, 2009), p. 58.
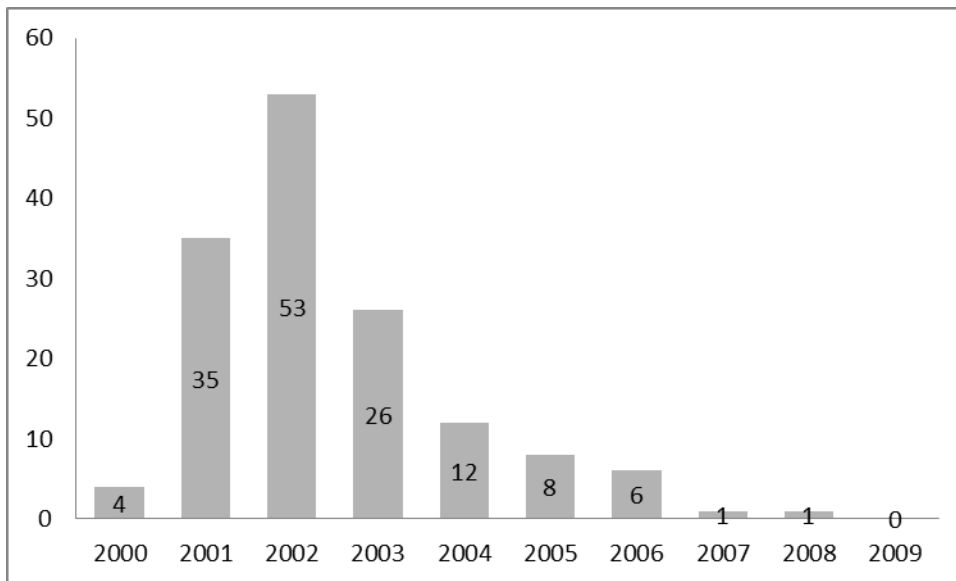
Figure 1. Suicide Bombings

Consistent with the conclusions of Professor Cronin and others, it is clear that multiple factors have influenced the use and non-use of the suicide bombing tactic among Palestinian terrorist groups. The decision making behind such attacks and the ability to carry them out defy simple explanations. Rather, a collection of political and operational factors interact to render such attacks more or less likely and more or less likely to succeed.

Three turning points in the decline of suicide bombings during the second intifada are noteworthy, each coming in response to different operational and/or political developments. The first came in March 2002; after 30 people were killed by a suicide bomber at a Passover meal at the Park Hotel in Netanya (the second intifada's 53rd suicide bombing, according to Israel Foreign Ministry statistics), the Israel Defense Forces launched Operation Defensive Shield. The operation included the re-entry of Israeli forces into the major cities of the West Bank (Bethlehem, Jenin, Nablus, Qalqilya, and Ramallah), which had been under Palestinian civil and security control since the Oslo accords and follow-on negotiations during the 1990s. The operation resulted in the death or capture of

numerous terrorists and terrorist suspects and the discovery of 23 explosives workshops.[4]

The effects of Operation Defensive Shield are difficult to isolate and appear to have unfolded over time. Ten suicide bombings took place while the operation was ongoing, perhaps in an attempt to demonstrate its ineffectiveness in preventing such attacks as well as to exhibit the continued potency of the groups under attack. Indeed, more suicide bombings took place during the month after the Park Hotel attack than had taken place in the preceding month. The following month saw seven attacks, six of them coming within nine days (May 19-27).The rest of 2002, however, saw a significant decline in attacks. While suicide bombings peaked at 53 in 2002, about two-thirds (36) of those attacks occurred in the first half of the year.

It appears that Operation Defensive Shield contributed to the decline in suicide bombings both directly and indirectly. The arrest and death of terrorist operatives and the disruption of terrorist group infrastructures caused by the operation are likely to have made carrying out suicide bombings more difficult over time. Moreover, the redeployment of the IDF in and around the West Bank major cities allowed for greater opportunities to develop and exploit intelligence to disrupt terrorist attacks before they were carried out (Israeli targeted killings reportedly also peaked in 2002 at 78).[5] The desire to avoid a repeated head-on collision with the IDF, particularly as exemplified by the comprehensive operations in Jenin, may have served to deter some terrorist activity as well. As I mentioned, I plan to return to the issue of deterrence shortly.

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[4]   "Operation Defensive Shield (2002)," *ynetnews*, March 12, 2009, http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3685678,00.html.
[5] The Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, cited in Hillel Frisch, *Motivation or Capabilities?: Israeli Counterterrorism against Palestinian Suicide Bombings and Violence*, Mideast Security And Policy Studies no. 70, (Ramat Gan, Israel: The Begin-Sadat Center For Strategic Studies, 2006), p. 15.

Though it is impossible to gauge accurately the influence of the various factors independently, the statistical trend at the time is noteworthy. The number of suicide bombings fell by 50 percent from 2002 (53) to 2003 (26).[6]

In 2004, a second milestone led to a further drop of more than half (to 12 bombings). The year was characterized by more frequent IDF operations in the West Bank and Gaza, including the targeted killing of Hamas leaders Ahmad Yassin and Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, and, probably more significantly, the completion of substantial sections of the separation barrier between Israel and the West Bank. Given that Gaza has been effectively fenced off since 1994 (the same year suicide bombings first appeared in Israel, and a year after the first such attack in the West Bank), most Palestinian suicide bombers have launched their operations from the West Bank. Though the West Bank barrier has been controversial because of its course, its effectiveness in making it more difficult for bombers to reach their targets appears beyond dispute; even Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad leaders have said as much.[7]

The third milestone is actually a collection of Israeli and Palestinian political decisions made or carried out in or around 2005, when the number of successful suicide bombings fell to eight, and the number of attempted (but prevented) suicide attacks fell by 71 percent, from 159 to 46.[8] In 2005, Hamas escalated its non-violent, institutionalized political activity, which may have substituted for its terrorist activity. Specifically, Hamas participated – and fared well – in municipal elections that year, and though it abstained from the February presidential elections, it decided to join the legislative elections scheduled for January 2006.

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[6] Israel Security Agency data on attacks prevented are available from 2004.

[7] Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "The Leader of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad again Admits that the Israeli Security Fence Built by Israel in Judea and Samaria Prevents the Terrorist Organizations from Reaching the Heart of Israel to Carry Out Suicide Bombing Attacks," March 26, 2008, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/ct_250308e.htm.

[8] Israel Security Agency, "Analysis of Attacks in the Last Decade," n.d., http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/Hebrew/TerrorInfo/decade/DecadeSummary_he.pdf, p. 2.

While in 2005 Hamas saw in Fatah a political rival, the violent schism between the two groups and their respective territories was still two years away. Hamas' increasing inclination at the time to participate in organized Palestinian national politics appears to have led at least part of the group's leadership to recognize the need to moderate its relationship with the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority and even to announce that it would abide by the Sharon-Abbas truce signed in February 2005. Considering the bad blood between the two Palestinian factions since then, it is striking that in justifying Hamas's intended adherence to the truce, Mahmoud al-Zahar claimed at the time that if Israel would "continue the quiet, then we [Hamas] are going to continue, *because we are committed to Abu Mazen.*"[9]

2005 was also the year Israel unilaterally disengaged from Gaza, a step announced by Ariel Sharon in December 2003. It is likely that part of the reduction in attacks in 2004, and especially in 2005, can be explained by the Palestinian groups' desire not to provide Israel's leaders any reason to delay the withdrawal or to change their minds.

In addition to the three identifiable milestones described above, throughout the period under review Israel engaged in an intensive campaign of targeted killings intended to disrupt terrorist operations, dismember terrorist organizations, and distract terrorist personnel. Though controversial and ultimately subject to restrictions handed down by the Israeli Supreme Court in 2006, targeted killings took a significant toll on Hamas's middle management and thereby impeded the group's ability to act.[10]

Though I have presented the various milestones and other considerations individually in the order they developed, their effects were, and continue to be, cumulative. By 2005, Hamas was faced with increased IDF and Israel Security Agency activity in the West Bank, a largely effective separation barrier, a desire

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[9] Other Hamas officials rejected the ceasefire. Molly Moore, "Palestinian, Israeli Leaders Pledge to End Attacks," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2005. Emphasis added.
[10] Daniel Byman, "Do Targeted Killings Work?" *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2006): 103.

to limit the threat posed by targeted killings to life and limb of middle and senior level personnel, an inclination to become more active in the official Palestinian political arena, and a desire to not delay the IDF's forthcoming exit from Gaza. The dramatic reduction in the number of successful and attempted attacks, therefore, reflects a mix of Israeli efforts to limit the group's capability and the creation of internal and external incentives not to attack. In short, Hamas suicide bombings declined because carrying them out had been made more difficult and because it was in the group's interest not to do so. Other groups acted differently, based on their particular circumstances, objectives, and considerations.

It should be noted that the numerous efforts to arrive at a ceasefire, especially during the early years of the second intifada, failed. This is not to say that such efforts are necessarily doomed to failure. At the end of the day, Hamas and other terrorist groups act according to their interests. Mediation and negotiation will only work when they create disincentives to the use of terror, as was the case in 2005 and arguably since then as well.

In the years since 2005, the number of attempted attacks has fluctuated, but has not returned to 2004 levels. At the same time, the number of successful attacks has continued to drop, to six in 2006, one in both 2007 and 2008, and zero in 2009 and so far in 2010. One can argue whether the second intifada ended in 2005, but the widespread suicide bombings associated with it clearly did.

The aggregate numbers of attacks do not tell the full story, however. That Hamas has not claimed responsibility for a single suicide bombing since August 2005[11] suggests that Hamas's leadership made a strategic decision to move away from suicide bombings. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), alone or in

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[11] Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Suicide and Other Bombing Attacks in Israel since the Declaration of Principles (Sept 1993)," http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-+Obstacle+to+Peace/Palestinian+terror+since+2000/Suicide+and+Other+Bombing+Attacks+in+Israel+Since.htm. The annual numbers of attacks provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Israel Security Agency differ slightly, though the trends they indicate do not.

cooperation with al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, has claimed responsibility for almost all of the eight suicide bombings that have taken place since then.

The disparity in PIJ and Hamas activity can be interpreted in a number of ways. The two groups differ significantly. PIJ has always been smaller, more extreme in its positions, less subject to public pressure (in part because of its limited formal political aspirations), and closer to Iran. Its calculations regarding when and when not to attack, therefore, differ as well. It is also possible that Hamas sees in PIJ a proxy, allowing for occasional strikes at Israel, but without the burden (and potential benefits) of claiming responsibility. For its part, Israel has tried to limit this possibility by holding Hamas in word and in deed responsible for any terrorist activity originating in Gaza. This approach has borne some fruit in recent years, as Hamas has acted to limit rocket launching from Gaza by PIJ and other groups.[12]

One could argue that the increase in rocket attacks from Gaza, which corresponded with the decline in suicide bombings (and attempted bombings) in 2005, suggests that the second intifada has gone through a metamorphosis, but is nonetheless ongoing. The emphasis on rockets does represent a tactical evolution, necessitated by the difficulties encountered in carrying out suicide bombings, much as suicide bombings were to some extent driven by earlier successful measures taken against planted explosives. Obviously this evolution away from suicide bombing is of little comfort to residents of Sderot and other communities within rocket range. Nevertheless, in terms of their effect on life in Israel – and throughout Israel – the rocket attacks from Gaza pale in comparison with the suicide attacks of 2000-2005. At least so far, these tactics differ qualitatively to such an extent (and regressively, in terms of their potency) that it is difficult to consider one a continuation of the other. The idea that even the thousands of rockets fired to date constitute an extension of the second intifada is unconvincing.

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[12] "Hamas 'Working to Curb Gaza Rocket Attacks,'" BBC, April 2, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8601171.stm.

A WORD ABOUT DETERRENCE

In the period since the end of the second intifada, and especially in the wake of the Second Lebanon War in 2006 and Operation Cast Lead in late 2008/early 2009, much has been made about the importance of those campaigns in restoring, maintaining, and/or enhancing Israeli deterrence vis-à-vis terrorist groups like Hizbullah and Hamas. Moreover, many point to the lack of attacks in 2009 and 2010 as evidence that deterrence is working.

There are numerous problems with this understanding, however. Most importantly, terrorist groups continue to try to attack, even if they haven't been successful. The reduced number of attempts might be explained, in part, by deterrence, but the suggested causal relationship between deterrence and the number of successful attacks undoubtedly is exaggerated.

Deterrence relies on the creation of a credible retaliatory threat. It is therefore perhaps natural that most Israeli discussion of deterrence focuses narrowly on the ability to make such a threat and to deliver on it if unacceptably challenged. This ability is linked most commonly to past and promised uses of military force, though non-military means, such as economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure play a role as well.

However, a defender's deterrent threats are only effective if they compare sufficiently negatively with the challenger's status quo – in all likelihood will the attack and its consequences leave the challenger better- or worse-off? The ways in which Israel wields its threats and affects the Palestinian status quo can either weaken or strengthen deterrence. However, in the context of deterrence, the status quo is the subject of little or no open discussion, suggesting that Israel is paying too little attention to one of the two most important variables in its terrorist challengers' decision-making.

Deterrence can be undermined if the challenger's status quo gets worse, and in several ways. At the most basic level, as the difference between the status quo and the outcome of threatened retaliation (i.e., the challenger's relative cost of

action) shrinks, the likelihood of successful deterrence shrinks with it. Another way of conceptualizing this posits that a worsened status quo can lead to increased challenger motivation, and therefore increased threat of attack. More simply, it is increasingly difficult to deter a challenger with less and less to lose.

The status quo can deteriorate as the result of specific actions (e.g., destruction of infrastructure, economic sanctions), but also because of political stagnation (i.e., little or no diplomatic progress toward conflict resolution). In other words, the status quo is not static, and is subject to change (and manipulation) if problems are left unaddressed. The result of this is that over the long run, over-reliance on deterrence in general and on deterrent threats in particular can lead to a situation where deterrence undermines itself.

Deterrence can also be weakened if the challenger's defenses, and with them the ability to absorb retaliatory strikes, improve, or if the defender's credibility is weakened. In this sense, Israel's restrictions on the import of materials into Gaza that can be used in the construction of bunkers and its post-Operation Cast Lead policy of attacking targets in Gaza after every rocket or mortar attack can be seen as efforts to enhance, or at least maintain, deterrence.

Posing credible retaliatory threats offers to strengthen Israeli deterrence, and the use of force can reinforce or restore credibility. Israeli actions during the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead might have had exactly this effect. It is not necessarily the case, however, that the more force is used, the greater the deterrent effect. On the contrary, the relationship between exercised force and subsequent deterrence appears to be limited by at least two factors. First, the use of force can create a new status quo sufficiently bad that the perceived costs of additional applications of force are relatively low. As discussed above, as this relative cost falls, deterrence becomes weaker. Second, and perhaps more germane given Israel's post-Operation Cast Lead experience, if the use of force leads to international condemnation, loss of political and diplomatic support, and/or charges (whether with or without foundation) of war crimes and subsequent investigations (e.g., the Goldstone Commission), the result is likely to be greater difficulty and hesitation to use

force in the future. This, in turn, can make deterrent threats less credible and therefore less likely to be persuasive.

The question persists regarding whether terrorism can be deterred in the first place. Many discussions of deterring terrorist groups dismiss this possibility because such sub-state challengers typically lack critical assets that state defenders can threaten convincingly. This is a valid and significant concern for those developing counter-terrorism policy. Interestingly, the participation of both Hizbullah and Hamas in legitimate political processes and their assumption of at least some of the functions and responsibilities of government have helped resolve this matter by associating the groups with the institutions and infrastructure of their respective polities, giving them more to lose than was the case when they were more purely opposition movements.

Having more to lose is simply another way of saying that the groups' status quo has improved. Herein lies an underappreciated and somewhat counter-intuitive deterrence lever. By taking steps, known in the deterrence literature as "inducement,"[13] to improve the Palestinian status quo, Israel can inflate the relative strength of its deterrent threats and potentially reduce the appeal of terrorist groups in the process. In this light, one would expect (at the moment) that Israeli deterrent power could be greater in the West Bank than in Gaza, given the significant and growing economic, social, and other differences between the two regions, even though Israel has used far more force recently in Gaza.

Like reliance on deterrent threats, however, inducement measures are likely to have limited effectiveness. While they can make the potential outcome of a retaliatory strike more costly, by definition they make at least some current problems less urgent, which in this case can undermine other Israeli foreign policy goals vis-à-vis Hamas (i.e., aside from deterring terrorist attacks) such as applying economic and other pressure on the group and pushing for the release

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[13] See Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

of IDF soldier Gilad Schalit. An improved status quo can also lead to increased external pressure on Israel not to make good on its deterrent threats. For example, neither American nor European donors are eager to see their considerable investments in Palestinian infrastructure go up in smoke, regardless of the circumstances.[14] Inducements, like threats, therefore can both contribute to and impede deterrence. Which effect prevails depends on how each is employed and under what circumstances.

Inducement carries two other concerns for governments confronting a terrorism threat. First, because inducement can be interpreted or spun as capitulation to terrorists, it is reasonable to worry that that such actions could lead to increased terrorism in order to secure additional concessions and/or could lead other, even previously non-violent groups to adopt violent tactics in order to gain concessions of their own. Second, this same interpretation or spin can set the stage for political opponents to level charges of giving in to terrorism, which is anathema in Israel, at least publicly, as it is in most democracies.

While the effectiveness of Israeli counter-terrorism deterrence is difficult to ascertain with any certainty, it likely could be improved by recalibrating its underlying mix of threats and inducement actions in order to enlarge the space between the Palestinian status quo and the promised result of future Israeli retaliatory actions. Doing so in a way that maintains or, preferably, reinforces the credibility of Israeli deterrent threats is likely to pose a considerable challenge to Israeli decision-makers. The easing of Israel's economic restrictions on Gaza following the May 2010 flotilla incident might constitute the basis for a natural experiment of sorts. Could the improvement of the status quo in Gaza lead to stronger Israeli deterrence?

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[14] See, for example, Tovah Lazaroff, "EU Official: Hamas Overwhelmingly Responsible for Gaza Damage," *Jerusalem Post*, January 27, 2009.

CONCLUSION

Israel was largely successful in putting a stop to the second intifada's deadliest tactic, and it is significant that Hamas has not claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in over five years. Nevertheless, the underlying conflict persists and Hamas, PIJ, and other groups remain opposed to a peace agreement with Israel. There is little reason to believe that suicide bombings are no longer a threat or that the tactical evolution that led to rocket attacks has ceased. Though there were no successful suicide bombings in 2009, three dozen attempted attacks were prevented. The performance of the Israeli security services is remarkable, but it is probably unreasonable to expect a 100 percent success rate preventing such attacks moving forward. At the same time, Hamas and other groups continue to invest in acquiring rockets of increasing range, threatening to put Israel's major cities back in harm's way.

Suicide bombings undoubtedly were an effective terrorist tactic and a symbol of the second intifada, but they hardly are essential for a third. A new uprising could be marked by widespread rocket attacks, a currently unanticipated form of violence, or as some have suggested, by pervasive non-violent forms of protest.[15]

We would be hard-pressed to declare Palestinian terrorism over. Perhaps we are witnessing the beginning of the end or maybe just an extended lull. Nevertheless, many of the measures identified as contributing to terrorism's end elsewhere around the world (i.e., mixes of military measures, political incentives, achievement and denial of goals, etc.) likely also have contributed to the relative quiet in Israel, however ephemeral it might prove to be.

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[15] Shaul Mishal and Doron Mazza, "Preempting a 'White Intifada,'" *Haaretz*, February 22, 2010.