



The IDF's Gaza Wall Might Change Hamas Strategy

by Yaakov Lappin

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Time may be running out for one of Hamas's main weapons against Israel: its cross-border terror tunnels. As Hamas loses its potency against Israel in Gaza, it is turning its attention to fanning the flames of terrorism in the West Bank.

According to Israel Defense Forces (IDF) assessments, Israel will complete an underground wall stretching along the 60-kilometer (37-mile) border with Gaza by 2019. The wall is the product of several years of research and development, and is designed to eliminate the tunnel threat to Israeli communities located near Gaza.

During the past three years, since the end of its last conflict with Israel, Hamas has invested major resources into its tunnel maze. One of its top goals is to rehabilitate an ability to inject murder squads into Israeli territory through the tunnels. Once inside Israel, they could target IDF soldiers and Israeli civilians for murder or kidnapping whenever the next conflict breaks out.

But Israel has invested far more than Hamas has in trying to eliminate that threat. It is paying 150 million shekels (\$42.5 million) for each kilometer of the new wall.

Work began on the subterranean project in areas where Israeli communities are very close to the border. Then, gradually, other areas began receiving protection.

During a conference call with reporters in August, the commander of the IDF's Southern Command, Maj.-Gen. Eyal Zamir, said the wall would prevent "the digging of tunnels into our territory," adding that work was "advancing

according to plan. In the coming months, this project is going to significantly accelerate. We will see an expansion in the scope of the works. Within two years, we will be able to complete work."

Many details about the wall remain classified, but IDF sources have indicated that it will contain electronic sensors. These sensors will issue alerts to military control centers, sounding the alarm about suspicious tunnel-digging activity. The control rooms, would, in turn, be able to order action if necessary.

Similar military control rooms are popping up along the Gaza border to handle intelligence coming in from Israel's above-ground border fence. Sensors installed on the barrier, together with units from the IDF's Combat Intelligence Collection Corps, are joined by drones, spy balloons, and radars, all of which feed the control centers with a flow of data and alert them to suspicious activity.

The big question now is whether Hamas will sit back and watch Israel take away its offensive tunnel option or whether it will feel cornered and strike out, risking a new conflict.

Hamas's military wing, the Izzadin al-Qassam Brigades, [issued a statement](#) earlier this month saying the underground wall "will not limit the ability of the resistance" and vowing to "find the solutions needed to overcome it." But Ely Karmon, a senior research scholar at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Herzliya, Israel, told the Investigative Project on Terrorism that Hamas is unlikely to launch attacks in response to Israel's wall. "They cannot initiate a military maneuver now. The timing is bad for them," Karmon said, citing Hamas's financial woes. Its troubles are made worse by the fact that Qatar, under US pressure, is cutting off cash flow to the Gaza Strip.

Hamas wants to engage Egypt to improve its isolation and find a way out of its financial crisis. It just [opened an office](#) in Cairo. It cannot depend on friends like Turkey, which has a limited ability to provide assistance, Karmon said. "Beyond that, Hamas is under pressure from the Palestinian Authority. A new military clash with Israel will harm them," he added.

During his remarks, Maj.-Gen. Zamir said the "Gaza arena is stable," adding, "We have identified that Hamas remains deterred, and that it is restraining many attacks [by smaller Palestinian armed factions]." At the same time, he said, Hamas was fanning the flames of terrorism to spread in the West Bank. It was orchestrating terror cells remotely as it prepared itself for future war in Gaza.

That assessment was echoed by Karmon, who said Hamas is likely to respond to Israel's improved position against the tunnels in Gaza by upping attempts to generate terrorism from the West Bank.

Karmon suggested that Hamas, together with Tehran, could try to smuggle rockets into the West Bank, citing a directive by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to assist West Bank terrorist cells. "The Iranians understand that Hamas is deterred in Gaza, and limited in what it can do," Karmon said.

Karmon cited information unveiled by the chief of Israel's domestic intelligence agency, the Shin Bet, in recent days, which [told the government](#) that about 200 terror attacks have been thwarted so far in 2017. "Most of the big attacks [that were stopped by the Shin Bet] were organized by Hamas, not Fatah," Karmon said. "Hamas's whole campaign is focused on the West Bank, and includes using clans that support Hamas and distributing propaganda for violent incitement. They are neutralized in Gaza and are trying to heat up the West Bank."

Meanwhile, back in Gaza, Hamas continues to neglect the basic needs of the 2 million Palestinians over whom it rules. According to the chief of the IDF's Southern Command, Hamas remains focused on its quiet military build-up, "Many resources in Gaza are going to the Hamas military wing. They could be used instead to improve the humanitarian situation," Zamir said. "We continue to prepare. Reality is explosive. It could deteriorate into a conflict at any time."

In addition to offensive tunnels, Hamas has built a maze of tunnels underneath Gaza City. Zamir described them as "an underground metro network" designed to move Hamas armed members, weapons, and logistics out of Israel's sight.

Israel's Southern Command is watching these activities closely. It is preparing a range of solutions designed to enable Israel to turn Hamas's underground city into a death trap if a new conflict begins.

The IDF's Southern Command recently sent out images of civilian facilities in Gaza that Hamas uses as cover for military-terrorist activities. One image is of a six-story residential building near which Hamas built an underground facility, according to the military. Another is of a home containing a family with five children that is linked to a tunnel leading to a mosque. That tunnel enables Hamas terrorists to move underground and use human shields in the process.

This type of activity "endangers the civilians of Gaza," Zamir cautioned. "We hope that this quiet will continue, but we are continuing to prepare, and are on high alert."

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