



The Decreasing Effectiveness of Hamas Terrorism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The downturn in Hamas's fortunes is not only political but also practical. From the 1990s through the "al-Aqsa intifada," it made lethal use of suicide terrorism. Its substitutes since then – ballistic, tunnel, and now kite terrorism – are decreasingly effective.

Hamas's recent political setbacks are well known. The most punishing was the downfall of Egyptian president and Muslim Brotherhood member Muhammad Morsi and his replacement by Abdel Fatah Sisi, who destroyed the tunnel industry from which Hamas derived most of its revenues.

That setback was worsened by the Palestinian Authority's attempt to deny Hamas revenue by reducing salaries to 70,000 PA employees in Gaza, by far the largest group of consumers in the Strip. The PA's goal was similar to that of Sisi: to generate less tax revenue for Hamas.

Yet the downturn in Hamas's fortunes is not only political but also practical, as can be seen in its approach to the exercise of terrorism. In the 1990s through the "al-Aqsa intifada," Hamas made lethal use of suicide terrorism. Its substitutes since then – ballistic, tunnel, and now kite terrorism – are decreasingly effective.

The effectiveness of suicide attacks by Hamas and its ally, Islamic Jihad, in the "al-Aqsa intifada" can be gauged by numbers of victims. Over the course of four years, these two organizations were responsible for the murders of 400 Israeli citizens (and dozens of foreigners), with Hamas responsible for the lion's share of the bloodletting.

The effectiveness of suicide bombing did not end there. It brought about the only absolute contraction of the Israeli economy since the state's inception, something no war with the Arab states has ever brought about – including the year-and-a-half long War of Independence.

The effectiveness of suicide bombing – in fact, the very phenomenon itself – came to an end after Israel reentered Area A in the Palestinian Authority in 2002. Ever since then, Area A has been subject to daily penetration and arrests of would-be terrorists.

The destruction of the sanctuaries that enabled Hamas to plan elaborate suicide bombings, coupled with the smashing of its human infrastructure through incessant arrests, considerably reduced the capabilities of both Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Hamas responded, as would most violent organizations under such circumstances, by looking for substitute means of hurting the enemy.

The decline in suicide bombings was followed, starting in 2004, by a spectacular rise in missile and rocket launchings. Hamas continually improved its missiles' payload and distance – so much so that by 2006, the number of Israelis directly affected by the missiles increased from 25,000 inhabitants in the immediate areas bordering Gaza to the hundreds of thousands who live in major cities such as Beersheba, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and beyond.

For all the feelings of terror the launching of over 14,000 missiles between 2004 and 2014 engendered (the phenomenon largely came to an end after the third bout between Hamas and Israel in the summer of 2014), missile terrorism was not nearly as costly to Israel as suicide bombing had been.

Military expenditures as a percentage of GDP and as a percentage of total government expenditures continued to decline, whereas at the height of the “al-Aqsa intifada,” they remained level.

Missile terrorism was far less costly in human terms as well. Even if we take into account all the casualties of the three rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas, mortalities add up to approximately 120 – that is to say, less than one-third the number of Israelis who were killed during the wave of suicide bombing. Note also that the wave of missile terrorism took place over ten years compared to the suicide bombing wave, which lasted four.

Whereas the effectiveness of suicide terrorism was vastly reduced as a result of the military punishment meted out by the IDF and the Israel Security Agency, missile terrorism became less effective over time due to technological developments that denied Hamas much of the potency of this means of attack.

BESA associate Uzi Rubin, in his extensive studies on the “Iron Dome” anti-missile system published by the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, has plotted its growing effectiveness over time. In the third round in 2014, only two of the 72 deaths during the 55 days of fighting resulted from missile launchings.

By then, Hamas had figured out that tunnel attacks, initially considered a supplement to its arsenal, should become a substitute for missile strikes.

Just as missile terrorism was far less effective than suicide bombing, so too was tunnel terrorism less effective than both before it was essentially foiled by technological developments.

Following the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, Hamas scored successes in tunnel forays in 2006 with the killing of two Israeli tank members and the capture of a third, in exchange for whom it successfully negotiated the release of over 1,000 Palestinian terrorists in 2011. Over the course of the 2014 campaign, Hamas used tunnels to surprise Israeli forces and succeeded in killing 11 of them in three separate incidents.

Significantly, it never used the tunnels it had dug into Israel territory, partially out of fear that Israel had developed the means to monitor and mine them. Israel did in fact succeed in killing at least 12 Islamic Jihad terrorists in a tunnel in October 2017.

In any event, the price tag for Israel of tunnel terrorism was only a fraction of the costs of missile terrorism.

It is against the backdrop of its never-ending quest to find substitutes for no longer effective terrorist measures that Hamas's innovation of kite terrorism can be understood.

Though it is too early to say conclusively that this means is the poorest substitute of all those that preceded it, it would seem that a solution will be found before it becomes lethal rather than simply destructive, as it is at present.

Of course, a technological solution would be best, but in its absence, some innovative combat moves against the perpetrators would be welcome.

The IDF increasingly reacts to the innovations of its enemies. It is now faced with a golden opportunity to show that operating beyond enemy lines in daring and innovative ways is not only a legacy of the past.

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