

# How Israel Catches Lone Wolves

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Articles & Testimony

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## The successful campaign to curb the latest 'eruption' of attacks has relied on technology, smart policing, and cooperation with the Palestinian Authority.

For more than a year, Israel has been engaged in efforts to curb an intense wave of attacks by Palestinian youth acting on their own. This "Haba" ("eruption" in Arabic), as some Palestinians call it, has been gradually contained by the Israeli military and intelligence agencies. The scope of incidents has been dramatically reduced, leading to a sharp decline in the number of casualties on both sides. At its peak in October 2015, the Haba produced no less than sixty serious attacks a month, whereas by spring 2016 the number of severe incidents was down to four or five a month, close to the standard pace of terrorism in previous years.

In a similar manner, riots and violent demonstrations involving Molotov cocktails, explosive charges, and stones aimed at Israeli army units and civilian traffic have also become much less frequent: from 650 cases in October 2015 to around one hundred in May-June 2016.

Forty Israeli were killed and 498 injured during the first year of the Haba. The Palestinian death toll reached 247, including 150 assailants; most of the rest of the casualties were involved in violent riots and skirmishes. The number of Palestinians injured is hard to determine since the Palestinian Authority counts every person slightly affected by smoke grenades as wounded. However, it would be safe to assume a total of about 1,500 injuries.

In order to reduce these numbers, the Israeli government was obliged before very long to adopt a new approach toward terrorist threats emanating from the West Bank and to employ previously untested methods, departing from the strategies employed to combat Palestinian terror offensives over the past three decades (which included the two *intifadas*, 1987-91 and 2000-03). Faced with the Haba, the IDF's Central Command, in cooperation with Israel's Security Agency -- better known by its Hebrew acronym Shabak -- opted initially to avoid developing a comprehensive new doctrine, preferring to deal with the rapidly expanding assaults on a case-by-case basis. It took a few months to decipher the differences between the Haba and the preceding *intifadas* and to come up with appropriate answers. As the unique features of the Haba emerged, Israeli planners quickly moved away from their

old patterns of response. No drastic measures were taken to restrict Palestinian traffic within the West Bank and into Israel proper, and no punitive steps affecting the general Palestinian population were introduced. The routine arrangements pertaining to the deployment of inspection roadblocks, the system of permits, and the highway patrols remained as they were prior to the outbreak of the Haba on September 13, 2015, which accidentally coincided with the 22nd anniversary of the signing of the Oslo Accords.

Israeli security officials have invested much effort in studying the sudden rise in the number of violent incidents. The main features of the Haba were fairly easy to discern. First, most perpetrators have been quite young, between the ages of 17 and 22. Almost all of them have been unaffiliated with any Palestinian political faction. They embarked upon spontaneous individual initiatives, typically without sharing their plans of attack with friends or relatives. Often, they fit the definition of "from zero to hero" terrorists: They came mostly from the margins of their social groups; few if any were recognized as political activists or leaders among their peers. Social media, primarily Facebook, served as their platform rather than any of the many politically sponsored media outlets.

In most cases they were motivated by personal circumstances, striving to avenge and imitate previous attackers, and in some cases seeking to gain recognition as martyrs. Although many were driven to act by the widespread allegations that Israel was seeking to change the status quo at the al-Aqsa mosque, very few were devout Muslims. Patriotic sentiment trumped religion as the strongest driving force, coupled as always with feelings of indignation and humiliation at the presence of Israeli troops.

When the Haba was at its most active, a surprisingly high proportion of attackers were women -- up to one fifth. Investigations showed that almost all of these women -- including a 72-year-old grandmother from Hebron -- were seeking to escape family hardships, such as pregnancies out of wedlock, arranged marriages, violence within the family, and so forth. Quite often it seemed that these women were seeking death or arrest in order to break away from their environment. In more than one instance, a young woman would wave a kitchen knife or scissors far from the Israeli soldiers, not posing any real threat, knowing that she would be immediately taken into custody.

Furthermore, the well-armed Fatah cadres of the Tanzeem ("The Organization") -- the backbone of Yasser Arafat's Second Intifada -- refrained from joining the cycle of violence. Hamas activists, and to a lesser extent those recruited by Hizballah's Unit 133, played a secondary role in the Haba. Hamas squads managed to carry out a handful of operations, but failed to channel the sporadic individual surge of violence into a massive uprising. No attempts to establish a "Unified Command" for the Haba ever materialized, as happened in the First Intifada. And most importantly, in the great majority of attacks no firearms were involved. Shooting incidents totaled 107, less than a quarter of them leading to casualties. The Haba consisted mainly of cold arms: knives and hatchets (252 stabbings), and occasional vehicular rammings (47). Only one case of suicide bombing (on a bus) -- a favorite Palestinian weapon in the past -- took place, six years after the previous such attack.

Since there was no real command structure behind the Haba, Israeli defense leaders were reluctant to accept the advice of right-wing politicians and settler spokesmen to mount an all-out search-and-destroy campaign covering the whole of the West Bank. Resisting pressure from some members of the security cabinet, then-Defense Minister Moshe (Bogie) Yaalon, together with the heads of the IDF and Shabak, agreed that a repetition of the 2002 Defensive Shield Operation would be counterproductive: It would not deter would-be individual assailants, but would antagonize large sectors of the Palestinian society not (yet) engaged in violence. In the same vein, these leaders rejected suggestions of closing off the West Bank or bringing economic activities to a halt.

In closed-door debates, proponents of a new and less muscular approach emphasized that most of the attackers came from the fringes of West Bank society: young people struggling with social marginalization, who had experienced repeated setbacks in their private lives or faced insurmountable personal or financial hardship. The collective profile of the assailants identified most as frustrated individuals who felt that their lives had reached a

dead end, to the point that many sought salvation through martyrdom. Many of those captured during assaults told interrogators that they believed that death for the sake of jihad would reward them with the recognition they failed to obtain in life. It eventually dawned on Israeli analysts that many of the attackers who had maintained their own Facebook pages tended to replace their old pictures with new self-portraits just weeks, and sometimes only days, before setting out on an attack, so that mourning ceremonies could display photos of the "martyrs" that were appropriately current and flattering. In numerous cases, would-be assailants also wrote about their wish to sacrifice their lives in the form of short poems, Quranic verses, or tributes to other *shahidis* (martyrs).

Another important conclusion was that roughly half of the attackers came from only six localities in the West Bank: the suburb of Jebel Mukabar on the southern outskirts of East Jerusalem; Kalandiya refugee camp; the villages of Qabatya, Sair, and Yata; and a few neighborhoods in Hebron. Most other towns and villages did not join in. Each of these localities had, of course, its own unique economic conditions, social tensions, and complaints concerning nearby Israeli settlements and army presence. In general, Mount Hebron was the main springboard for attacks partly because pro-Hamas clans dominate the region at the expense of the Palestinian Authority.

On top of that, about half of all attempts occurred in and around the same six road junctions, from Jalameh border crossing in the north through Beit El, Tapuach, and Etzion in the center down to two intersections in Hebron. Young Palestinians repeatedly targeted Israeli soldiers at these junctions, many of them to avenge friends or family members who had been killed there in previous attempted attacks. This trend continued despite the IDF's fortification of its positions around these junctions. Attackers knew that their chances of murdering an Israeli soldier in these well-defended places were slim, and the chances they would be killed or captured very high. Hence, choosing to carry out an attack in any of these junctions amounted to a suicide mission.

Although there were few attacks involving firearms during the Haba, these were often most serious. Israeli investigators discovered that some of these attacks were sophisticated operations by small "sacrifice squads" formed *ad hoc*. Members spent time on reconnaissance and planning. In most cases they were equipped with improvised Swedish Karl Gustav or old Port Said submachine guns manufactured in local metal workshops. A few of these squads might have been influenced by ISIS attacks in Europe, although none of the fifty or so people who participated in these attacks had any affiliation or contact with the terror group.

The Haba also brought about a sharp increase in what the Palestinians describe as "Popular Resistance" -- riots and violent demonstrations in which Israeli soldiers and civilian passengers in cars or buses were attacked with stones, Molotov cocktails, and, less frequently, improvised explosive charges and pipe bombs. There were 4,656 such incidents in one year -- from about September 2015 to August of 2016. This mode of unrest became routine after the Fatah movement's Sixth Conference, held in Bethlehem in 2009, approved a program of unarmed confrontation. The number of such disturbances reached its peak in October 2015, yet unlike during the previous *intifadas*, public participation was limited. At most there would be few hundred demonstrators, but more often several dozen teenagers. The general public consistently stayed away. Gradually, the number of incidents declined, although a rate of around 100-150 incidents a month has been maintained through the winter of 2016.

Israeli security officials were concerned that the Haba would escalate into a much wider uprising, drawing into the violent clashes additional segments of Palestinian society. They were especially worried about an increase in the use of firearms, due to the substantial amount of weapons in the possession of the Palestinian security organizations and the Tanzeem. While Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad preached the urgent need to switch to an armed revolt, debate in pro-PA circles focused on formulating plans to direct the Haba toward the storming of Israeli settlements and military outposts and the disruption of Israeli traffic on West Bank roads. The general sentiment among many Palestinian intellectuals was that the West Bankers needed to raise the "price of the occupation" by transforming the series of individual attacks into an orchestrated effort to mobilize the public and define clear objectives for acts of

violence. Prominent Palestinians made statements supporting this goal, including Marwan Barghouti, who is in an Israeli jail serving a life sentence. Many consider Barghouti a suitable successor to Mahmoud Abbas, but even his supposedly staunchest supporters ignored his advice. A similar plan published by a group of well-known intellectuals, gathered for workshops at the al-Masarat think tank in Ramallah, similarly failed to make an impact on Palestinian conduct.

Palestinian elites' efforts to capitalize on or direct the propagators of the Haba toward catalyzing a larger and wider movement failed. No doubt that failure had something to do with the divisions and lack of political capacity within West Bank society. But a well-considered Israeli policy certainly played a role as well. The obvious Israeli priority was precisely the opposite of Barghouti's and the others': to prevent a deepening and widening of the Haba by avoiding actions that might draw the bulk of the Palestinian population into direct confrontation. The Israeli government opted for a pinpointed response to a novel terrorist challenge, not a punitive approach to West Bank society generally.

There are six main components of Israel's counter-Haba strategy that have emerged over time. The first and arguably most important has been to reduce tension over the Temple Mount. Since its beginning, the Haba revolved around the sensitive situation at al-Aqsa mosque and its surrounding area. The Palestinian narrative, promoted by the PA as well as other factions, has claimed that the Israeli government wished to gain a Jewish foothold in this holy place and ultimately impose some form of divided control there. Allegedly, the Israeli government was moving toward establishing a new regime that would allow those Jews who wished to do so to pray on the Temple Mount.

Until fairly recently, this was not and could not have been a problem, for just about every Orthodox rabbi in the country forbade Jews from praying there lest they inadvertently trespass on the inner sanctum -- the holy of holies -- of the destroyed Temple. While the Temple stood, only the High Priest was allowed to go there, and then only on one day of the year -- Yom Kippur. That was the basis in religious law for the prohibition, since no one knows exactly where that spot was. In the past, many rabbis also understood that the provocation could lead to unnecessary loss of life, and so violated another rabbinic principle -- *pikuach nefesh* ("saving a life"). More recently, however, some very vocal nationalist Orthodox Jews, including a few rabbis, have taken a different and more aggressive attitude toward the Temple Mount, arranging visits there and promoting a vision of building the Third Temple. Israeli governments have never encouraged these extremist groups.

Many Palestinians were sincerely concerned about the future of al-Aqsa. Both Islamist leaders and PA politicians urged Palestinians to defend al-Aqsa and struggle to retain exclusive Muslim control over the Temple Mount -- what Muslims call Haram al-Sharaf. This has led to frequent skirmishes in the al-Aqsa courtyards as well as the stoning of Jews praying at the Wailing Wall below. The almost weekly outbreak of violence led Israeli authorities to outlaw the Islamic Movement within Israel that used to maintain shifts of "guards," both men and women, in the mosque. These "Murabitoon" and "Murabitat" were also declared illegal and their presence in the Mosque discontinued.

This action quickly led to a sharp decline in the number and severity of clashes with the Israeli police. At the same time, the Israeli government reinforced the existing prohibition of Jewish prayer, and prevented politicians and right-wing extremists from visiting the al-Aqsa compound. Dialogue with officials from the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf (or "Endowment," the organization that oversees the Temple Mount) also helped ensure the pacification of the area. An agreement with Jordan to install surveillance cameras -- though never implemented because of PA objections -- helped demonstrate that Israeli authorities were not seeking to alter the longstanding status quo. Although restrictions on the number and ages of Palestinian allowed up to the Temple Mount for Friday prayers remained in place, the widespread conviction among Palestinians that "al-Aqsa is in danger," as the Islamic Movement's slogan goes, slowly melted away. As a result, stabbings in Jerusalem, and attacks elsewhere motivated by the al-Aqsa issue, started to decline.

The second component of Israeli policy in dealing with the Haba concerned social media. As Facebook -- and to a lesser degree Twitter, YouTube, and other social media platforms -- became the favorite means of communication for would-be assailants and those inciting violence, Israeli intelligence diverted significant additional resources to monitoring the web, rapidly screening the flood of information to identify potential threats. The innovative software employed underwent continuous upgrades and adaptations, including methods to crack encrypted messages, commonly used by Hamas and Hezbollah operatives. A few months after the Haba began, no less than a third of Shabak manpower was already assigned to technological departments, this in addition to the massive capabilities of the famed 8200 division of IDF military intelligence.

The combined cyber effort allowed Israeli analysts to identify persons inclined to attack, and thus initiate preventative measures. At the same time, Israeli officials set "traps" in the different social media forums to lure potential attackers. Cyber offensives brought down sites engaged in inciting violence. Aided by the Shabak's network of informants in every Palestinian locality, Israeli efforts thwarted roughly 400 intended assaults -- almost half of all planned attacks, including some 20 plots to kidnap Israeli soldiers and civilians.

The third component has been selective retaliation. In response to the Haba, Israeli security agencies limited retaliatory measures to the immediate environment of the attackers. Family members of attackers, and sometimes their extended clans, were denied work permits in Israel, which are a major source of income throughout the West Bank. Some were also denied trade licenses and permits to enter Israel. Villages that produced several attacks were isolated, and temporarily put under lockdown with military checkpoints on all roads leading to them. When repeated stabbing attacks occurred, for example, at the Jalameh crossing point into Israel near Jenin, Israeli officials blocked all traffic, affecting trade of every sort. The security services also demolished the houses of attackers on occasion, imposing such a significant economic price on the families, clans, villages, and neighborhoods that local leaders felt obliged to deter the youth from perpetrating further attacks.

Officers from the six Israeli territorial brigades in the West Bank also kept in constant communication with Palestinian notables, *mukhtars* (local leaders), and schoolmasters. Private pirate radio stations pouring oil on the flames were raided and shut down. Prayer leaders preaching violence were arrested and sentenced. In many places, Israeli officials sought to identify and then capture the organizers of riots and those who offered money to teenagers willing to demonstrate. Gradually, these efforts helped create a powerful if quiet lobby among the Palestinian population against the expansion of the Haba into something more pervasively violent. Towns and villages not drawn into the cycle of violence received various economic incentives, so carrots as well as sticks played a role in this highly targeted approach.

The fourth component of the strategy focused on better cooperation with the Palestinian Authority. In the early phases of the Haba, the PA security organizations remained largely inactive, mainly due to a lack of explicit orders from President Abbas. For many months, fully uniformed Palestinian national security personnel served as honor guards and coffin-bearers in the funerals of the *shahids*. This procedure was later abandoned under Israeli pressure and at the urging of the U.S. advisory team under Security Coordinator Fredrick Rudersheim. The exchange of intelligence, mainly concerning preventative arrests to foil planned attacks, functioned throughout the Haba, but in the early stages the Palestinian security organizations were reluctant to take preventative action. Both officers and soldiers of the different Palestinian security agencies -- most of them employed part-time on meager salaries -- were confused as to what was expected of them, since PA organs kept applauding the attacks, glorifying the martyrs, and accusing Israel of "arbitrary executions" and endless provocations.

The intense communications between top Israeli and Palestinian security officials made Abbas and his advisers aware of the risks of rapid deterioration, which both sides knew would surely be used by Hamas to undermine the PA. In one instance, the Shabak provided the details of a Hamas network charged with making preparations to take

over the West Bank when Abbas quits. Eventually PA troops, first in civilian clothes and later in uniform, were deployed to the junctions where violent clashes took place in order to stop rioters from getting close to the Israeli soldiers. Later, PA security officers liaised with village leaders, clergymen, and education officials to urge them to deter local youth from joining the attacks. By the winter of 2016, PA security services accounted for a third of all arrests of suspects, compared to merely 10 percent at the start of the Haba.

The intensification of PA security efforts allowed the Israelis to reduce their own nightly raids into Palestinian towns and villages aimed at capturing those involved in either planning terrorist acts or in mobilizing young people for riots. This system of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation kept expanding despite frequent public calls by senior PA officials, as well by as Hamas, to end it. As a result, from the start of the Haba no more than a handful of names appeared on the "wanted list" at any given time. Altogether, some 2,000 persons were arrested, though many were released after receiving warnings.

The fifth component of the strategy involved specifically going after the weapons. The Israeli military carries out nighttime raids into Palestinian towns, refugee camps, and villages in order to capture suspects for interrogation and confiscate weapons. These raids sometimes require forces of battalion strength or more, but usually consist of small groups of soldiers, often disguised as Arabs. These raids increased in number during the Haba, as more intelligence was gleaned from social media and agents. However, the focus has gradually shifted to a systematic campaign to dismantle metal workshops spread across the West Bank, which are used for the clandestine production of improvised weapons and explosives.

More than three dozen such workshops ceased functioning during the first year of the Haba. This effort continues to be a high priority, in order to restrict the number of firearms available on the black market. By this past summer the raids had caused a sharp rise in the price of improvised rifles and revolvers, making them too expensive for most young people to purchase. The price of an improvised "Karlo" has jumped to 2,000 Sheqels and a Kalashnikov now costs no less than 40,000 Sheqels. That is about four times the prices of just 18 months ago.

Disrupting Hamas operations constitutes the sixth element of the strategy. Underground Hamas networks in the West Bank have never recovered from the blows inflicted on them during and after the Second Intifada. Hamas's military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, hoped to use the Haba to resurrect and expand its West Bank presence. However, the PA security organizations engaged in efforts on an almost daily basis to round up Hamas loyalists attempting to resume operations, while Israeli authorities pursued their "mowing the grass" doctrine against Hamas, as well as the remnants of Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front. All efforts to direct and fund operations by Hamas's secret "West Bank Committee" in Gaza, composed of Hamas commanders from the West Bank who were released to the Gaza Strip as part of the 2011 Shalit deal, came to naught. The same is true of the efforts undertaken by Qassam operatives exiled in Turkey. Throughout the Haba, Hamas remained a marginal player, unable to match its inflammatory rhetoric with action on the ground.

Hamas-sponsored demonstrations along the fences of the Gaza Strip, often involving attempts to provoke IDF soldiers, were met with caution and restraint on the part of Israeli authorities; the IDF usually responded with only a modest use of tear gas and some warning shots. Since there were few Palestinian casualties at these events, the situation did not metastasize into a wider confrontation. Meanwhile, as indirect methods failed, Hamas abjured attacks from Gaza for fear of getting disproportionately bloodied in another round of hostilities.

Other Palestinian factions similarly failed to make a real impact on the course of events. The Tahrir (Liberation) party, for example, instructed its followers to steer clear of the violence, as it has done during previous intifadas. Only one Tahrir loyalist was involved in a stabbing attack. Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front, and other veteran factions with military wings have proven incapable of recovering from their losses during the Second Intifada.

The overall impact of Israeli policies was to strengthen Palestinian skepticism of the possible benefits of intensifying the wave of attacks. All public opinion polls in the West Bank during the Haba repeatedly showed that, despite instinctive support for attacks against Israeli soldiers, policemen, and civilians, the great majority of Palestinians remain doubtful that the Haba can overthrow the status quo; hence, they are reluctant to take personal risks on its behalf. By June 2016, for example, a Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research poll showed that half of all West Bankers were of the opinion that the Haba was already over.

The Israelis have managed so far to constrain the Haba and prevent it from achieving the scale of a Third Intifada by engaging wide sectors of Palestinian society in the West Bank. Unlike the Second Intifada, which was directed to a large degree by Yasser Arafat and his lieutenants, the PA steered decisively away from involvement in the violence. Whereas under Arafat many members of the security agencies participated in terrorism, together with the Tanzeem cadres armed by Fatah, very few of them participated in operations during the Haba.

The attacks started and remained almost the exclusive domain of young people, frequently teenagers -- desperate lone wolves who lacked official backing or training. They were encouraged by a public climate in which so-called martyrs are glorified, but without any organizational backbone to make the Haba coherent politically, the attraction of their example diminished.

Stabbing incidents and armed attacks will not cease completely, but they are likely to regress to the levels of 2011-14, when twenty incidents of serious terrorism occurred on average every year, along with 2,300 incidents of stone-throwing, Molotov cocktail-hurling, and so on. However, the present, more "normal" level of violence in the West Bank is unlikely to diminish further so long as no dramatic transformation of the political situation is on offer. Thus, the containment of the Haba simply represents a return to a more tolerable level of confrontation. It cannot promise an end to the danger of renewed large-scale violence, and it remains a constant reminder of the inherent weakness of present arrangements in the West Bank.

*Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow with The Washington Institute and a Middle East commentator for Israel's Channel Two television. This article originally appeared on the [American Interest website \(http://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/01/10/how-israel-catches-lone-wolves/\)](http://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/01/10/how-israel-catches-lone-wolves/). ❖*

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