

Hamas Is Testing Israel Once Again

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Brief Analysis

The group likely hopes to avoid harsh retaliation by staging attacks from the West Bank instead of Gaza, but Israel could still decide to take forceful action given the nature of the latest plot.

On April 18, a terrorist conducted the first Hamas suicide bombing against Israel in years, targeting a bus in Jerusalem and injuring around twenty civilians. The attacker -- Abdul Hamid Abu Srour, a nineteen-year-old from the village of Beit Jala -- reportedly did not work alone, but rather as a member of a Hamas cell in Bethlehem that planned the operation. Israeli authorities apprehended the other cell members this week.

Hamas has been fueling violence in the West Bank for quite some time, and this attack is the culmination of many other failed ones. Historically, Hamas attacks in Israel have resulted in military retaliation, indicating that the Israel Defense Forces may launch operations of some sort against the group, perhaps even in Gaza. Yet several factors could reduce the chances of such retaliation or limit its scope.

Since the beginning of the current wave of violence -- which some politicians and analysts have been calling "the third intifada" -- Hamas has sought to execute mass-casualty attacks inside Israel in order to exacerbate unrest in the West Bank. Last November, the Shin Bet arrested a Hamas cell planning shooting attacks that could have resulted in many casualties. In December, a Hamas cell of six operatives planned to kidnap Israelis in a manner similar to the capture and murder of three teenagers in summer 2014, but they were arrested by the Shin Bet before executing their plans. That same month, the Israeli police, military, and Shin Bet worked together to arrest twenty-five members of a massive Hamas cell that intended to carry out suicide bombings in Israel. And last month, Palestinian security forces arrested another Hamas cell that had planned shootings and kidnappings. In addition, the IDF stated that at least four explosive labs have been discovered during the recent wave of violence.

By repeatedly attempting to execute terrorist attacks from the West Bank, Hamas is trying to stay relevant without

taking too many risks. As they have stated time and time again, many members of the group's military and political leadership do not want another war in Gaza at the moment, but they do want to intensify the violence in the West Bank and inside Israel. In this way, Hamas can increase its popularity by playing the "resistance" role without risking its rule in Gaza, since the group assumes Israel will retaliate only in the West Bank. This is also the reason why Hamas has quelled attempts by other terrorist organizations to attack Israel from Gaza. Yet such a strategy shows that the group did not learn one of the main lessons of the Gaza war in 2014 -- namely, that major incidents emanating from the West Bank are likely to bring Gaza into the mix, whether immediately or as result of subsequent escalation.

For its part, the Israeli government now faces a dilemma. On the one hand, it does not want to escalate the situation, but on the other hand, it might want to show Hamas that a civilian bus bombing crosses a line. The decision about whether and how to retaliate will largely depend on two considerations.

First, images of the burned bus have raised memories of the wave of bombings that occurred after the second intifada broke out in 2000, so the public might want to see the government react firmly. At the same time, however, public pressure for a harsh response has probably been limited by the fact that Monday's attack did not result in fatalities, and that few political figures have criticized Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu for his reaction so far.

Second, it is still not clear how close this West Bank cell was to Hamas officials in Gaza. True, the organization did claim responsibility for the attack on social media, but this does not necessarily mean it was responsible for every aspect of the plot or knew about it in advance. Previously, Hamas established a "West Bank bureau" to oversee operations in that territory. This bureau is situated in Gaza and led by one of the prisoners released as part of the Gilad Shalit deal, Abdul Rahman al-Ghneimat, who has extensive experience in executing terrorist attacks. The Hamas headquarters in Turkey has also been directing attacks in the West Bank for years; it is run by Saleh al-Arouri, a top commander who was exiled to Turkey and now resides in Qatar, apparently because of Israeli pressure on Ankara to expel him. If Israel find out that the bus bombing cell was supported and/or guided by either of these bureaus, the chances for military retaliation will increase.

It is also important to note that this weekend is Passover, which could affect the timing of any planned retaliation. Even if the government intends to take action, it might postpone operations in order to avoid potential escalation during the holy days.

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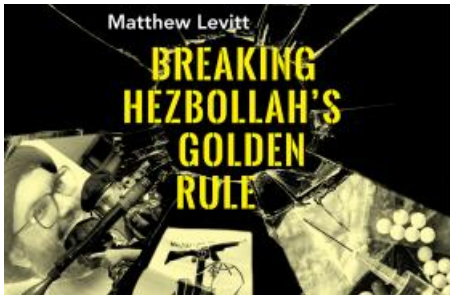


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