

Implications of the Negev Terrorist Incident

by [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](#), [Ehud Yaari \(/experts/ehud-yaari\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](#)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



[Ehud Yaari \(/experts/ehud-yaari\)](#)

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The terrorist attack in the Negev threatens to escalate into both a wider Israel-Gaza conflict and an Egyptian-Israeli diplomatic crisis.

The August 18 Palestinian terrorist attack in Israel's southern Negev Desert is the most serious such incident since 2008. The Israeli casualty toll was nearly forty, including eight dead. Seven of the terrorists were killed as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) responded and the fighting extended into the night.

The violence represents a major break in the relative calm on Israel's southern border, with major implications for both the situation in Gaza and Israel's relationship with Egypt. The focus of military action has now shifted to the Gaza area, and another Gaza escalation cycle may be underway, with an uncertain outcome. Furthermore, the incident is seriously aggravating Israeli-Egyptian relations, with Cairo claiming Israel killed and wounded Egyptian soldiers in the course of the incident.

The Incident

The terrorist attack was conducted by elements of the Gaza-based Popular Resistance Committees (PRC), an organization with close operational ties to Hamas. It was controlled from Gaza and mounted via the so-called "U-route," by which Palestinian operatives attempt to move from Gaza to the Sinai and then into Israel. The attack itself was carried out along a strip of the Israel-Egypt border north of Eilat along Israeli Route 12, where the road runs very close to the boundary in an area frequently used for illegal immigration and smuggling.

As many as twenty terrorists were involved, apparently divided into several groups acting in concert. They used

various weapons, including at least one rocket-propelled grenade, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), explosive vests, and a mortar. Their targets included two civilian buses and several cars, and they used IEDs against IDF units responding to the action. The scope and complexity of the operation suggests careful planning and intelligence collection, significant logistics preparation, and determined execution.

The Israeli death toll included one IDF soldier and one counterterrorism police commando. Six Egyptian soldiers were also reportedly killed, and although the circumstances of their deaths are unclear, Egypt is claiming that some of them were killed by Israeli fire.

IDF Response

The IDF reportedly had general warning of a potential Sinai-based terrorist attack some days before the event, but not specifics regarding time and place. Special combat forces from the Golani Infantry Brigade and the police counterterrorism unit were deployed as a result of the warning and responded quickly to the incident. Some Israeli troops reportedly crossed the border briefly and shallowly to engage terrorists there.

After identifying the PRC as the group responsible, Israel retaliated directly against its leadership in Rafah with airstrikes. PRC leader Kamal Nairab (alias Abu Awad) and four of his lieutenants were killed, including military commander Imad Hamad, who Israeli intelligence believes planned the attack.

More broadly, the incident highlights the challenge Israel faces in responding to threats from the Sinai. Because of the peace treaty with Egypt, Israeli forces cannot operate in the area and must rely on Egyptian authorities to control criminal and terrorist activity there. Even if the IDF has warning of an attack, it cannot do much more than increase its state of alert, reinforce its side of the border, and pass the warning to Egypt. In 2010, Israel began construction of a security barrier along the Sinai border and is reportedly about 20 percent finished. Completion of this project will help but not eliminate the problem.

The Egyptian Dimension

The attack also highlights Cairo's growing Sinai problem. The vast Sinai Peninsula and 170-mile border with Israel have always proven difficult for Egyptian governments to control, including the Mubarak regime. But the situation has become more chaotic since the revolution, with smuggling, crime, and violence increasing significantly, including several attacks on gas pipelines and a recent assault by some 200 jihadists and Bedouins on an Egyptian police station at al-Arish in the northern Sinai.

Indeed, conditions in the area have been exacerbated by the government's traditionally poor relationship with the Bedouin population. Cairo has put most of its effort into policing the Sinai's northeast corner, where its ongoing "Operation Eagle" aims to disrupt criminal and jihadist activity. Yet this focus has left the central area more vulnerable to such problems.

Why Now?

The attack was most likely spurred by internal pressures among Gaza-based Palestinian terrorist groups to strike at Israel. Some group leaders may have believed that such an operation could relieve the pressure while avoiding full-scale Israeli retaliation, given that the attack was not conducted directly from Gaza.

Israeli sources indicate that the operation was also intended as a kidnapping action based on the Hizballah model: that is, a border attack coupled with the seizure of military personnel or civilians. Israeli civilian vehicles using this road are certainly vulnerable to such tactics, though no Israelis were taken in this instance. Moreover, Hamas has never really given up on kidnapping as a strategy, and the PRC aided the group in the 2006 seizure of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Implications

The incident, which became a prolonged engagement, has very serious implications. Most immediate is the potential for escalation. Rocket fire from Gaza has already resumed in earnest, with more than twenty launches into southern Israel, several of them hitting populated areas. For its part, the Israeli Air Force has struck multiple PRC and other terrorist-associated facilities in Gaza, in response to both yesterday's attack and the rocket strikes.

Israel did not immediately strike Hamas-associated targets, however, and the group has not joined directly in the attacks on Israel. Should those conditions change, the cycle of retaliation could expand in intensity and scope.

In addition, the incident has seriously aggravated Israeli-Egyptian tensions. Cairo has officially protested what it claims was the killing of its forces by Israeli troops, demanded an investigation of the incident, and closed the Nitzana cargo border crossing with Israel. The Egyptian chief of staff has gone to the Sinai, and anti-Israel demonstrations have occurred in Cairo and Alexandria. Contacts between the IDF and the Egyptian military continue, however.

Looking ahead, the IDF will need to focus more attention on the Sinai. This is not to say that Israel has done nothing up to now: the barrier project, changes in southern force structure, the issuing of periodic Sinai terrorist warnings, and the agreement to allow Egypt to deploy 2,000 additional troops into the peninsula for Operation Eagle all show that Israel has not been ignoring the problems. But it will now likely devote even more attention to the area. That means more money, more intelligence assets, more rapid construction of the barrier, and probably more forces in the south.

Conclusion

Yesterday's attack has triggered a strong reaction from Israel, as its perpetrators undoubtedly expected. The situation now threatens to escalate into both a wider Israel-Gaza conflict and an Egyptian-Israeli diplomatic crisis. Controlling this escalation will require careful responses from Hamas, Egypt, and Israel.

Specifically, Hamas must curb any surge in rocket fire by its own military wing and other armed elements. This will not be easy even if the organization actually wishes to do so. Egypt needs to prevent the emotions of the moment from producing a breach in relations with Israel and demonstrate that it is capable of maintaining security in the Sinai. And Israel must weigh carefully the scope and nature of its response. An overly harsh or broad Israeli retaliation could spur further escalation both in Gaza and in tensions with Egypt.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in military and security affairs. Ehud Yaari, a distinguished Israeli journalist and author, is a Lafer international fellow with the Institute. ❖

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