

Tunnel Vision

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Articles & Testimony

With so much recent focus on the West Bank "separation fence," the issue that prompted Israel to build a barrier in the first place has been obscured. But as this week's suicide bombings show, the threat of continued Palestinian terror lingers. And in some cases, that threat literally lingers just beneath the surface.

For a decade now, the arsenals of Palestinian terror groups have been armed and replenished by way of short smuggling tunnels that stretch across Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip. It is this Palestinian-made labyrinth, more than the Israeli-made fence, that poses a long-term threat to Middle East peace.

To be sure, this issue is not new. After the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993, it was reported that the Palestinians had built a network of tunnels for smuggling black market items like cigarettes and drugs, as well as weaponry, explosives, and even people from Egypt to Israel.

In some cases, the tunnels are elaborate; media reports indicate that some have wood paneling, electricity, lighting systems, air ducts, communications equipment, rails, wagons--even elevators. Building them takes less than three months and costs up to \$10,000. The better ones are burrowed well beneath the surface--sometimes more than 50 feet -- so as to evade sonar detection by the Israeli engineer corps.

Shockingly, many of the tunnels lead into the homes of Palestinians in Gaza, concealed beneath bedrooms, living rooms, and bathrooms. On October 12, 2001, the Israeli Defense Forces discovered a tunnel that actually led to a child's bedroom. Indeed, at the risk of putting loved ones in danger of an Israeli bulldozer raid, Gazans operate their tunnels because they are a lucrative source of income. Smuggling a person or an AK-47 rifle can yield \$1,000.

According to one Israeli spokesman, the Palestinians have made "hundreds" of tunnels in recent years. Indeed, more than twenty have been found and destroyed in 2003. Nonetheless, thousands of weapons and much ammunition have passed through, including heavy machine guns, armor piercing weapons, rocket-propelled grenades and, according to a July 30, 2000 Sunday Telegraph report, possibly even SAM-7 antiaircraft missiles. According to the Jerusalem Post, "raw materials necessary to build rockets" are often smuggled below ground to Gaza. Worse still, high explosives for suicide bombings have passed through these caverns

Some of the tunnels are meant for more than smuggling: In one report, Israeli engineers expressed concerns that the tunnels would be used to transport captured Israeli soldiers. Tunnels can also be used for complicated attacks against Israeli military targets. In September 2001, an explosion in a tunnel along the Egypt-Gaza border injured three Israeli soldiers.

According to Israeli sources, there are always three or four tunnels operational at any one time. They are extremely hard to find without good intelligence, and when soldiers work to locate and destroy the tunnels, they often come under sniper fire.

Meanwhile, Egypt, which claims to be working feverishly to maintain the Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire, is not without blame. After all, that's where the weapons are coming from.

According to Israeli defense minister Shaul Mofaz, the Egyptians "aren't making a 100 percent effort to prevent the smuggling of weapons through the tunnels." Another military official calls Egypt a "central oxygen supply line" for smuggling weapons. According to recent reports, the tunnels coming from Gaza actually lead to Egyptian military guard posts.

Of course the Egyptian government denies this. President Hosni Mubarak insists that Cairo "will not allow such activities, and if we found smuggled weapons, we would confiscate them." Indeed, the Egyptians have blown up a number of tunnels in recent years. But even so, the problem persists. Cairo is not doing enough. And it's probably a matter of will.

The fence? Sure, it's a source of contention. But the Israelis wouldn't want it so badly were it not for the continued importing of weapons that lead to suicide bombings. The one-sided focus on the West Bank fence is nothing but tunnel vision. ❖

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