

# Terrorism As a Strategic Threat to Israel

Jun 5, 2003



Brief Analysis

**M**any Israelis and Palestinians once again have a sense of hope, following President George W. Bush's meeting with Arab leaders at Sharm al-Shaykh and with Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority (PA) prime minister Mahmoud Abbas (known as Abu Mazen) in Aqaba. This new hope in both societies poses an existential threat to terrorist organizations operating in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Once Israel is no longer viewed as an enemy, there is no clear justification for the existence of such organizations. Hence, it should come as no surprise that these organizations are trying to escalate operations against Israel in an attempt to derail any peace initiatives. In the past, suicide operations undertaken by these organizations have been quite successful in achieving this objective; this should not be allowed to happen again.

## What Next for the Terrorist Groups?

Those terrorist groups that continue to reject Israel's existence have two options: either they can step up the pace of terrorism with the aim of disrupting the peace process or they can lay low until they see an opportunity to resume their activities. So far, it seems that many terrorist groups are choosing the first option and increasing the frequency of their operations against Israel. According to Israeli security forces, there have been sixty-three serious alerts of potential attacks as this week's summits unfolded, including suicide bombings. This is in contrast to the general trend of less frequent alerts reported during the previous few weeks. Nevertheless, whichever strategy they pursue, terrorist groups represent a serious threat to the peace process.

**Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.** The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades have been responsible for numerous suicide operations, most recently the May 19, 2003, Afula mall bombing. On May 31, only minutes before Sharon and Abu Mazen's meeting in Jerusalem, al-Aqsa released a statement declaring that it does not recognize the Roadmap and that it will continue attacks. This statement is particularly ominous because al-Aqsa is closely linked to PA Chairman Yasir Arafat. The organization's future was a major issue of contention during the recent formation of Abu Mazen's government. He demanded that al-Aqsa be dismantled, but Arafat refused to comply.

**Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).** Hamas and PIJ are currently engaged in ceasefire negotiations with the PA. Even Hamas and PIJ operatives held prisoner by Israel are pressuring the heads of their organizations to reach an agreement with the PA in the hopes of being freed; previously, they had called for intensification of the conflict as a means of leveraging their release. In contrast, the leaders of these groups based abroad—particularly in Damascus—oppose a ceasefire, calling for continuing terrorist operations. In the end, this debate is of limited significance. After all, Hamas and PIJ field operatives continue to carry out terrorist attacks even as the ceasefire negotiations proceed. Most disturbing, the two groups have given no indication that they are even considering changing their long-held position that Israel is an illegitimate state that must be eliminated. The record of past Hamas ceasefires suggests that the organization uses them primarily as a means of regrouping when under pressure, so that it can resume terrorist operations with renewed vigor once conditions become more favorable. Even if a ceasefire is reached, there is no reason to lessen the pressure on Hamas and PIJ. They should be pursued relentlessly until they explicitly renounce the use of force and show by their actions that they have abandoned terrorism and violence once

and for all.

Hizballah. On May 25, Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah reacted to the PA's acceptance of the Roadmap by stating, "Is there any wise man that cuts off his hands, sells his body and soul to go to negotiate?" On June 3, Nasrallah and Haled Mashal, head of the Hamas "Political Bureau," met in Beirut to deliberate on the progress made during this week's summits. In a joint statement, they declared, "We the resistance organizations, even though these summits target us, are not worried, because we presume that these processes are destined to fail."

Traditionally, Hizballah does not rely on verbal protesting alone, but rather takes actions to ensure that its objectives are met. On May 20, Israeli authorities seized the Egyptian fishing boat Abu Hussein, in which they found terrorist and explosives expert Ahmed Musah Abu Amarah. He was caught in possession of equipment for manufacturing 122-millimeter rockets, components for making explosives, and seventy-two compact discs containing instructional videos on subjects such as assembling explosive devices (including suicide belts) and inflicting maximum carnage during suicide attacks on buses. During questioning, Abu Amarah revealed that he had been trained and equipped by Hizballah and transported to the boat by three armed Hizballah operatives. The owner of the boat had been trained by Hizballah as well, and had facilitated the smuggling of weapons and operatives in the past.

**Terrorism: How Much of a Threat?**

More than just a tactical challenge, the terrorism targeting Israel today poses a strategic threat to Israeli security and regional stability. Terrorism usually does not present a direct threat to a country's existence in the way that military invasion or nuclear weapons do. But terrorism can be a strategic threat in that it is able to undermine the stability and daily life of the society it targets.

Some of those hostile to Sharon claim that his demand for an end to terrorist attacks is a calculated maneuver aimed at establishing obstacles to the Roadmap. Quite the contrary, Sharon's demand is an essential prerequisite for successful negotiations. This demand stems from his understanding that without an end to terrorist operations, Israeli public opinion will prevent him from pursuing the Roadmap. Hence, suicide bombings have broad political significance in addition to their specific, tragic results.

The ideology of Hizballah and the Palestinian terrorist groups clearly calls for the elimination of Israel through armed resistance. In fact, this goal is their primary *raison d'être*. For example, as much as Hizballah's apologists claim that the group is a Lebanese political party, it has long focused on fomenting resistance against Israel rather than advancing its agenda in Lebanon. Like other terrorist organizations, Hizballah is not bound by the responsibilities of a political entity or government and hence is unfazed by those factors that might deter a state from attacking Israel. This lack of constraint escalates the danger that the group poses. Moreover, as long as these organizations refuse to accept the existence of Israel as a Jewish state and insist that violence is the way to achieve their goals, they will inflame Palestinian public opinion and disturb Israeli thinking, thereby impeding stability in the Middle East and jeopardizing U.S. interests. Peace initiatives are doomed to fail unless coordinated efforts are made to dismantle the apparatus of terrorism in addition to apprehending individual terrorists and preventing new attacks. These efforts must be made simultaneously by Israel, the Palestinians, the Arab states, and the international community.

During the first weeks of 1996, a few months after the assassination of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, all sides seemed to make a commitment to peace. Then as now, Arab leaders and the U.S. president met at Sharm al-Shaykh and offered their peace pledges. Yet, this atmosphere changed after a series of suicide bombings in February and March 1996, followed by the Israel Defense Forces' Operation Grapes of Wrath in April. The resultant political turnaround demonstrated the degree of mistrust generated on both sides by the concerted wave of terrorism and the inevitable military response. That terror wave was also a factor in the defeat of Labor Party prime minister Shimon

Peres at the hands of Likud candidate Binyamin Netanyahu—a defeat that many saw as a setback for the peace process. The present atmosphere of hope should not be allowed to suffer the same fate as the post-Rabin moment. There is every reason to worry that terrorist organizations will bring about that result; the question remains what will be done to stop them.

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