

Operation Defensive Shield:

The Israeli Actions in the West Bank

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Brief Analysis

What has Israel accomplished in its ongoing and large-scale operations in the West Bank? How well have the operations gone from the perspective of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)? The balance sheet is more positive than some accounts have suggested.

The Aims and Tactics of the Operations

The Netanya Park Hotel suicide bombing on March 27, the eve of Passover, ended a month in which the Israeli death toll reached 128, and which prompted the IDF to launch a large-scale offensive throughout the West Bank. The operation began with a raid into Ramallah—including the center of the city and the Mukata, Arafat's headquarters—followed by Jenin, Qalqilya, Tul Karm, Nablus, Bethlehem, and Bet-Jalla. Specific, small-scale operations were carried out in Hebron, while the operation has so far excluded Jericho and the Gaza Strip.

The original timeframe for the operation was set to be four weeks to achieve the main goal, and four weeks for follow-up operations. From the start, however, it was clear that diplomatic and political constraints could seriously limit this timeframe. Targets were therefore prioritized to achieve as much as possible before international pressure culminated.

Regular joint task forces based on infantry and armored corps units served as advance forces in the forefront of the operation. Once the takeover of a location was complete, reserve forces replaced the regular ones, which in turn continued to the next target. By staying for longer periods in each location, the IDF was able to conduct extended efforts to locate wanted suspects and materiel. In order to carry these tactics out, the IDF mobilized reserve units on the largest scale since the 1982 war in Lebanon.

The IDF learned several lessons from the previous operation (e.g., regarding encircling hundreds of suspected terrorists, maintaining the encirclement, and leaving them only the choice of surrender or of facing the IDF directly). As a result, many more wanted persons were captured or killed, and more of them were medium- and high-level activists.

While the isolation of Arafat in his headquarters received much of the media's attention, the central military objective of the operation was aimed at the physical and organizational infrastructure of the terrorist apparatus throughout the West Bank: arresting or killing senior activists and specialists and destroying physical assets such as weapons and suicide-bombing devices. Previously, senior Palestinian leaders were awarded immunity. By contrast, this operation aims to arrest Tanzim leaders such as Marwan Barghouti. The operation has also provided the IDF detailed documentary evidence—some of which has now been released—about the intimate connections between Arafat, his security apparatus (including Jibril Rajoub's Preventive Security and Tawfik Tirawi's General Security), and Barghouti, as well as the latter's involvement in terrorist attacks inside Israel, such as the Hadera Bat Mitzvah shooting.

The Results of the Operation

The IDF operations have succeeded in inflicting fairly serious direct damage to terrorist infrastructure. On the level of materiel, large amounts of weapons and ammunition were captured, including: dozens of explosive devices; several ready-to-use suicide explosive devices and electronic devices for detonating them; over a dozen workshops for the manufacture of explosives; several thousand rifles and hand-held guns, including hundreds of sniper rifles, dozens of telescopic sights, and night-vision equipment; dozens of antitank rocket-propelled-grenade launchers; several mortars; and dozens of heavy machine guns.

Even more important, hundreds of militants have been killed in the operation, and several hundred more were apprehended and interrogated, including senior persons wanted on the list submitted to the Central Intelligence Agency and the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the past. To note some highlights:

Ramallah. The IDF raided the Mukata in order to capture several senior terrorists and PA officials involved in financing and directing terrorist activities. Among them is Fuad Shubeiki, responsible for arms acquisitions including the Karine-A arms shipment from Iran.

Bethlehem. Among the 150 armed militants who took refuge in the Church of the Nativity, where the IDF is intent on preventing escape, are several medium-to-senior-level terrorist activists. While Israel has no intention of forcefully entering the church, it is intent on preventing the escape of the militants. Two of these are:

1) Ibrahim Musa Salem Abyat "Abu Galif," a prominent Tanzim operative who heads a military cell and was involved in the firing of mortars at the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo and in the murder of Yehuda Edri, Sarit Amrani, and Avi Boaz.

2) Abdallah Daud Mahmud A'a-Kader, who heads Tirawi's Palestinian General Intelligence service in Bethlehem and has been involved in the organization and execution of multiple terrorist attacks, as well as in producing explosives. He is also responsible for the shooting attacks against Gilo and the Bethlehem bypass roads.

Nablus. Hundreds of Hamas and Tanzim militants gathered in the Old City (Kasbah). The IDF entered the Kasbah with large, highly trained forces. After five days of heavy fighting in which the IDF troops had to deal with some 300 booby traps, fifty militants were killed while the rest of the militants surrendered. The IDF lost only one soldier.

Jenin. The militants here showed the heaviest resistance by far. In the Jenin refugee camp, unlike most other places, the militants did not surrender even after the outcome of the battle became clear, and held out in a densely populated area. As was the case throughout the West Bank, the IDF refrained from using artillery and airstrikes, except for the carefully targeted use of missiles from Apache helicopter gunships in Jenin. By default, the IDF used massive ground forces in a difficult urban environment. Because of all of these elements, a long battle ensued and twenty-two Israeli soldiers were killed, out of a total of twenty-eight in the whole West Bank. More than a hundred militants were killed, along with a larger number of civilians.

A further tactical method was the use of special-operations forces. Utilizing precise real-time intelligence, special forces carried out operations such as the raid on the village of Tubas east of Nablus, where six senior Hamas activists who had taken refuge there after fleeing Jenin were killed. The head of the cell was Keis Adwan, commander of the Az-a-Din-al-Kassam brigades (the Hamas military wing) in the northern West Bank. He was personally responsible for several suicide bombings, including the Park Hotel Passover bombing and the Haifa restaurant attack. In total he was responsible for the death of some seventy-four Israeli civilians.

Conclusion

The IDF strategy aims to make clear to the Palestinians that the use of violence in order to achieve political goals is futile. The early March incursions into refugee camps reflected the growing attitude in the IDF that it would have to take direct action against terrorism because pressure on the PA to do so was unfruitful. Several aspects of the

current operation represent the full acceptance of this regrettable conclusion: the publication by the IDF of documents signed by Arafat, tying him to the funding of Tanzim terrorist operations; the IDF raid on the headquarters of the Preventive Security Force headed by Rajoub, previously considered the most promising candidate for fighting terrorism; and, most important, the deep incursion into the heart of West Bank cities and refugee camps.

As today's suicide bombing in Haifa shows, this operation will not mean the end of terrorism in Israel, nor was it expected to. However, it can have a significant effect on the scope and intensity of the attacks in the next few months. So that it may do so as effectively as possible, Israel is today insisting on the continuation of certain aspects of the operation, despite U.S. pressure to the contrary.

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