

Hamas:

Toward a Lebanese-Style War of Attrition?

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Brief Analysis

Lebanon may well have come to the West Bank and Gaza. Over the past year and a half, Hamas has adopted traditional Hizballah guerilla tactics such as roadside bombings, short-range rocket and mortar launchings, using squads of terrorists from a variety of groups, and videotaping attacks and potential suicide bombers. In the proud words of Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah, "[Palestinians] are now operating against the Israeli occupation with Hizballah methods." More ominous, there are increasing signs that Hamas may follow Hizballah's example and broaden its operational objectives to include targeting Americans for attacks.

Terror in Harmony

At the beginning of the current intifada, Hamas played a surprisingly small role in the violence: Fatah elements were the main force followed by Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). But after key Hamas bombmakers and military commanders were released from Palestinian Authority (PA) prisons, Hamas quickly became the dominant actor in an umbrella organization of opposition forces including PIJ, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and various elements of Arafat's Fatah organization—such as the Tanzim and Force 17—under the banner name of the National and Islamic Front. Six months later, Hamas spokesman Ibrahim Ghawsheh described the "harmony" that quickly developed between "the Islamic forces represented in the Hamas and [Palestinian Islamic] Jihad movements and the national forces, especially the Fatah movement." Ghawsheh explained that this harmony "helped in expanding and diversifying areas of confrontation, especially with the Fatah's ownership of various weapons." Since then, Hamas has conducted terrorist attacks independently as well as in joint operations with Fatah under the rubric of "popular resistance committees," the "Salahadin Brigades," or the "Return Brigades."

Hizballah as Mentor

According to a report filed by Reuters, European intelligence agencies informed Israeli authorities that a Hizballah agent had infiltrated Palestinian territory recently with forged papers to advise the joint Fatah-Hamas Salahadin Brigades squad on the execution of the February 14 ambush of an Israeli tank. The attack, a textbook example from Hizballah combining a diversionary attack with high-grade roadside bomb targeting respondents, exceeded even Hizballah's own success in that it destroyed Israel's best-armored tank. Hamas cells have successfully emulated

other Hizballah tactics as well, such as carrying out dozens of mortar and frontal assaults such as the January 9 attack on an Israeli army outpost in Gaza that killed four Israeli Bedouin soldiers. Hamas has also adopted the Hizballah tradition of videotaping ambushes, roadside bombings, and the "living wills" of prospective suicide bombers. Hamas claims responsibility for most of its attacks and frequently displays these videos on Hizballah's al-Manar satellite television, broadcast from Beirut.

Weapon of Attrition

In the mold of Hizballah's katyusha rockets, Hamas has developed a weapon of attrition in the Qassam I, II, and III short-range rockets. With ranges varying from 1.5 up to 12 kilometers, the rockets are reportedly modeled after a North Korean design, which Hamas bombmakers reverse engineered based on samples obtained from Hizballah and smuggled into Gaza. In line with its policy of harmony among terrorist groups, Hamas has shared this technology with Tanzim squads who, in turn, have displayed and tested their Aqsa I and Aqsa II rockets on Hizballah's al-Manar television.

Hamas has reportedly sought expert advice from Hizballah on the development of Qassam III rockets with a range of up to 12 kilometers, and has sought funding for the project from sources in Saudi Arabia. On December 18, two weeks before the seizure of the Karine-A, Israeli authorities arrested Osama Zohadi Hamed Karika, a Hamas operative attempting to cross the Rafah border. Karika was found with documents detailing the development of the Qassam rockets, and admitted under questioning that he was embarking on a second trip to Saudi Arabia to brief unidentified persons on the development of the rockets and to obtain their funding for the project.

Hamas and Hizballah see the rockets (which are highly inaccurate) as a strategic weapon capable of threatening airspace critical to Ben Gurion International Airport, deterring Israeli action, and targeting civilian morale by terrorizing densely populated civilian centers. While the rockets have caused little physical damage since they were first fired at civilian targets on January 25, they have caused a stir within Israeli security and policymaking circles, especially after a batch of Qassam II rockets (until then operated only out of Gaza) was seized in the northern West Bank close to Israeli population centers and key infrastructure. On February 11, Israeli forces conducted a major operation in Gaza searching for rocket and mortar factories, launching pads, and operators.

Targeting U.S. Interests?

On February 6, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet testified that if groups like the PFLP, PIJ, or Hamas "feel that U.S. actions are threatening their existence, they may begin targeting Americans directly, as Hizballah's terrorist wing already does."

In fact, the United States has already taken action that Hamas likely perceives as threatening. Five days before the September 11 attacks, FBI and Customs agents raided the offices and froze the assets of Infocom, an internet company linked to Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzouk, who has been listed as a Specially Designated Terrorist by the U.S. government. Three months later, on December 4, 2001, the Bush administration froze the assets of the Holy Land Foundation, labeling it a Hamas front organization. Included in this financial blocking order were two financial institutions linked to Hamas and located within the Palestinian territories: the al-Aqsa International Bank and Beit al-Mal Holdings Company. Additionally, individual Hamas associates in the United States are likely to face deportation as the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) begins to implement its Absconder Apprehension Initiative first slated to target illegal aliens of Middle Eastern descent, prioritizing those with criminal or terrorist connections.

On September 22, the INS deported Ghassan Dahduli, a longtime leader of the Hamas-associated Islamic Association for Palestine and an associate of convicted al-Qaeda operative Wadi al-Hage. On December 17, 2001, just two weeks later, Hamas and PIJ released a manifesto in the West Bank and Gaza declaring that "Americans are the enemies of

the Palestinian people" and that they "too are a target for future attacks." The following day, on December 18, 2001, Hamas leaders issued a statement vowing revenge for Yacoub Aidkadik (a member of a Hamas terrorist cell who died in a firefight with Israeli soldiers), saying that "Americans [are] now considered legitimate targets as well as Israelis."

The U.S.-led war on terrorism also appears to have affected the debate within Hamas regarding the targeting of U.S. interests. Time magazine reported in its December 17, 2001, edition that a correspondent was told by "sources in the Hamas military wing" that "somewhere in a Hamas safe house, militants inflamed by the American war in Afghanistan are debating whether it is time to add U.S. targets in Israel and the territories to their hit list."

Conclusion

Over the past few months, Hamas has sought to alter the nature of its conflict with Israel to mirror the model successfully implemented by Hizballah in Lebanon. At the group level, Hamas and other Palestinian groups are still unlikely to take the next step and follow Hizballah's example of targeting Americans. The past few weeks, however, have witnessed a rise in incidents by individual Palestinians attacking Israelis. Just yesterday, a fifteen-year-old Palestinian girl was shot dead attempting to stab an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint near Tulkarm; a suicide note was found expressing her complete exasperation. Hamas in particular is a highly decentralized organization, and it is certainly possible that some of its cells or individuals could similarly decide to take matters into their own hands and begin targeting Americans in Israel and in the Palestinian territories, as the CIA director suggested.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

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