

# Fighting a 'Terror-Supporting Entity':

## What Next for the Israel Defense Forces?

Dec 6, 2001



### Brief Analysis

**T**he Israeli cabinet's December 4 decision to treat the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a "terror-supporting entity," and the Tanzim militia and PA chairman Yasir Arafat's elite unit Force 17 as terrorist organizations, has seemingly expanded the range of military options for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in its war against terrorism. Unlike the first fourteen months of the current intifada, the IDF has now received a green light from its government to destroy two of the PA's most important military branches, as well as the Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements which have already been singled out as enemies. However, this change in the government's policy does not necessarily ease the life of Israel's military brass. On the contrary, the current strategy continues to impose on the IDF limitations in the use of force and requires the highest degree of dexterity from the IDF's planners and fighters.

### The Nature of the Opponent

Today, three types of military groups operate under the auspices of the PA. The first category includes the militant Islamic groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which are responsible for approximately half of the 230 Israeli dead and 2,200 wounded since the beginning of the intifada. The military branches of both organizations are small and well assimilated in the Palestinian community. Their members operate primarily from public buildings in crowded neighborhoods such as schools, mosques, community centers, clinics, and pharmacies. In addition, neither Hamas nor Islamic Jihad have training bases, recruitment centers, communication installations, or military headquarters. Their elusive nature presents a challenge for the IDF that cannot be addressed by conventional military means. Rather, a combination of timely intelligence, covert operations, assassinations, and preventive arrests are utilized.

The second type of military group within the PA consists of the Fatah-affiliated militias such as Tanzim, the Popular Resistance Committees, and the al-Aqsa Martyr Brigades. These organizations are, in essence, loose coalitions of irregular soldiers trained, equipped, and financed by the PA. With the exception of a few offices in each city, Tanzim has no tangible military assets, and its plainclothed operatives are indistinguishable from the non-combatant Palestinian population. Many members of the Tanzim work during the day in official security forces; when off duty they participate in military activities against Israeli targets, using the weapons and skills they acquired from their legitimate jobs. During the past fourteen months, Israeli security forces have destroyed dozens of Tanzim offices and assassinated several of its second-echelon leaders. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government has thus far resisted pressure to include in their targeted killing list key leaders of Tanzim such as its West Bank commander Marwan Barghouti. But the decentralized nature of the organization ensures that even if its senior leadership is eliminated, its grassroots members are likely to continue their low-intensity military activities.

The third category includes the twelve official security services of the PA, seven of which were established as part of the Oslo agreements. The strongest of Arafat's security services is the 14,000-member National Security Force, which consists of three infantry brigades in the Gaza Strip and eight infantry battalions in the West Bank. This force has been kept out of the fighting but may be activated if Israel decides to launch an all-out attack with the goal of destroying Arafat's regime. The other key organizations are the 15,000-member Civil Police, the 5,000-member

Preventive Security Service, and the 3,500-member Force 17. Although almost all of the PA's security services have been involved in terror activity in one way or another, Force 17 is the entity responsible for Arafat's security and is the only apparatus singled out as a terror group. This is not necessarily an indication that the organization has been more active in terrorism than the others. The decision is designed mainly to mount more pressure on Arafat, to increase his vulnerability, and limit his maneuverability.

For a conventional army like the IDF, dealing with the PA's uniformed services is a much more desirable task. Military and para-military units supply a wide array of targets for the IDF's ground and air forces. Each one of the services has headquarters, training bases, warehouses, and marked vehicles. The soldiers are uniformed and easily distinguishable. Although many of these targets have already been struck in the past fourteen months, dozens remain that have not yet been attacked.

#### Israel's Military Options

**Air strikes:** Although the use of American-made fighter bombers and attack helicopters on populated areas has exposed Israel to international criticism, the use of precision-guided air-to-surface missiles to strike Palestinian targets proved to be militarily effective. The IDF has been able to destroy dozens of installations and ammunition warehouses with minimal Palestinian casualties and with zero Israeli casualties. The Palestinians' lack of effective air defense capabilities enables the Israeli airforce to operate free from interference. Airpower does, however, harbor some considerable risks. Most Palestinian targets, especially in the Gaza Strip, are located in crowded, densely populated neighborhoods. Stray bombs can hit civilians and cause significant collateral damage. The missile attack on a Palestinian target located some fifty meters from Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah demonstrates the precision required. Bad intelligence or a technical malfunction could result in a debacle. Additionally, the use of airpower may be effective in degrading the PA's military infrastructure, but it is far less effective in detecting and eliminating squads of suicide bombers planning to perpetrate an attack. The elusive nature of the opponent, the problematic terrain, and Israel's determination to avoid attacks on civilians prevent it from reaping the full benefits of massive airpower.

**Land incursions:** Since April 17, Israel has been prepared to enter Area A the areas designated as being under exclusive Palestinian control. Indeed, it has done so at least a dozen times since then. Following the assassination of Tourism Minister Rehavam Zeevi in mid-October, the IDF entered six Palestinian cities and stayed there for periods ranging between two and five weeks. Despite the Palestinian employment of tens of thousands of armed men, IDF incursions into Area A hardly met resistance due to a deliberate Palestinian decision to avoid confrontation. This could lead to the wrong conclusion that the Palestinians suffer from lack of resolve and military incompetence. There is no assurance that the Palestinian lack of resistance will persist. Past experience of militaries operating in crowded urban terrain shows that effective Palestinian resistance could exact a high price from Israeli troops operating in Area A. Furthermore, the evidence is mixed about the effectiveness of land incursions: they may degrade the capabilities of organizations like Hamas and Tanzim, but so far they appear to have failed at preventing terrorists from infiltrating Israel through the porous West Bank border.

#### Conclusion: New Strategy, Old Tactics

As stated by Sharon's cabinet, Israel's new war strategy has allowed the IDF to hit Arafat's status symbol—his ability to fly, the guards who surround him, and his field operatives who submit to his orders—while emphasizing that Arafat himself will not be targeted nor will his regime be toppled. This strategy is geared more toward achieving political results than toward directly targeting terrorism. The latter will require the IDF to do more than what it has done in the past: defend the settlements and communities along the Green Line, target and arrest terrorists, disrupt the flow of weapons and ammunition into the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and degrade the PA's conventional military capabilities. The addition of U.S. and international political pressure, on Arafat and the PA and the supplementation

of Israeli military pressure, may be the key ingredient for changing the ground situation.

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