

'Preemptive Targeted Killings' As a Counterterror Tool: An Assessment of Israel's Approach

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Aug 28, 2001

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Brief Analysis

Yesterday's killing of Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) chief Abu Ali Mustafa by Israel, and the State Department's condemnation of this act, have refocused attention on Israel's use of "targeted killings" as part of its counterterror policy. Since the start of the "al-Aqsa intifada," Israeli forces have killed more than three dozen Palestinians allegedly involved in planning or carrying out attacks on Israeli civilians. Nearly all have been from Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Palestinian Authority (PA)-affiliated groups such as the Fatah Tanzim. Critics of these actions claim they are ineffective, if not counterproductive. What does the record show?

How Effective?

In the past, assassinations have borne mixed results as a counterterror tool. The April 1988 killing of Yasir Arafat's military deputy Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) in Tunis had little effect on the intifada then raging in Gaza and the West Bank, while the killing of Hamas bomb maker Yahya Ayyash ("the engineer") in January 1996 prompted the quadruple revenge bombings in February/March of that year. On the other hand, the October 1995 assassination of PIJ chief Fathi Shkaki in Malta led to the splintering of this organization, hindering PIJ operations long thereafter.

In certain circumstances, assassinations can have a significant impact: in groups in which knowledge of key operational details is limited to a few individuals; where power is not institutionalized, but rather concentrated in the hands of a small number of senior officials; or where the leader is key to keeping in check potentially fractious rivalries among subordinates. The threat of assassination, moreover, forces leaders of such groups to focus on their own security, leaving less time and fewer resources available for operations against civilians. In groups like PIJ and Hamas, there are only a few people with expertise in selecting and training bombers, planning and executing bombings, and building the bombs themselves. While killing individual experts may not have a decisive overall effect, a campaign of "preemptive targeted killings" can, over time, together with more traditional counterterror measures, effect the ability of these groups to carry out operations.

The current campaign of assassinations started in November 2000; since then, nearly half of those targeted have been from Hamas, with the remainder being from the Tanzim, the PIJ, Palestinian security forces, and the PFLP (in that order). Press reports suggest that Israel's assassinations have exacted a toll on the operational capabilities of

Hamas and the PIJ in particular. In the past month, several major attacks have been foiled (including an attempt to blow up a bus on 2/8, the Tel Aviv central bus station on 3/8, a Haifa disco on 17/8, and a target in Beersheva today, while on 6/8 Israeli security arrested a suicide bomber awaiting orders). Moreover, several bombings produced fewer casualties than could have been expected (notably, the PIJ suicide bombing of the cafe in Kiryat Motzkin on 12/8, which injured 21 Israelis). These (and other) failures can, in part, be attributed to Israeli luck, good intelligence, and an alert citizenry. There are, however, also signs of more than the usual poor planning, inadequate preparation, and sloppy execution that often characterize these operations. (In the attempted bus bombing, wires and a switch protruding from a bag the bomber was carrying gave him away, allowing the bus driver and several soldiers to subdue him; in the attempted Tel Aviv central bus station bombing, the woman carrying the bomb fled when confronted by security personnel; and in the Kiryat Motzkin attack, the bomber showed shocked diners his explosive belt before blowing himself up, giving them time to flee or take cover.) Israeli military officials have suggested two reasons for these failures: the assassinations may have depleted the ranks of the most experienced Palestinian planners, and caused PIJ/Hamas to rush what is usually a protracted, painstaking process that in the past took weeks, in order to prove that they remain in the fight.

What Are the Criticisms?

Some critics have insisted that Israel arrest and prosecute, rather than kill, Palestinians involved in attacks on civilians. In fact, it has arrested large numbers of "wanted" Palestinians residing in PA-controlled areas thus far (more than 100, according to one Israeli press report), because it has an interest in doing so: these arrests often yield information useful in preventing additional attacks. But it is not always possible to dispatch an undercover team deep into Palestinian areas in order to snatch "wanted" men. By using snipers, explosive devices, and antitank missiles, Israel can strike at targeted individuals in the heart of any of the major Palestinian cities or towns without incurring the military risks or political costs associated with entering "Area A."

Others say that "targeted killings" deepen Palestinian hatred of Israel—creating new legions of volunteer suicide bombers, and perpetuate the "cycle of violence." (Curiously, such concerns are rarely if ever raised in connection with Palestinian violence against Israelis.) Both claims are dubious, at best. It is not possible to assess the claim that Israeli assassinations create throngs of volunteers; reliable data on this matter is simply not available. Even if true, though, it is irrelevant if the most experienced planners and "engineers" have been killed, and as a result, new volunteers are inadequately trained and their operations poorly planned and executed, leading to a high proportion of operational failures. As for the so-called "cycle of violence," this fundamentally miscasts the conflict as a tribal feud driven by the lust for vengeance (though many individuals are certainly motivated by such emotions), rather than a conflict in which the PA, PIJ, Hamas, and others are trying to use violence to achieve political ends. (Open acknowledgment of this is found in the Palestinian insistence that the violence will not end until their demands are met.)

Finally, some Israelis have expressed concern that the assassinations have contributed to the popularity of Hamas and PIJ by creating new martyrs. While this might be true, forgoing preemption entails significant risks, as it could provide the bombers with the breathing space necessary to rebuild their capabilities.

The Least Undesirable Option

Thus far, around a dozen Palestinian civilians have been killed as a result of the three dozen or so "targeted killings." Were Israel to use massive force to snatch "wanted men," the result would undoubtedly be heavy casualties on both sides -- but especially on the Palestinian side. (Hundreds of civilians—if not more—died when the U.S. invaded Panama in 1989 to capture President Manuel Noriega, and when UN forces in Somalia tried in 1993 to capture members of Mohammad Farah Aideed's clan.) Alternatively, relying only on arrests and passive defensive measures would likely lead to more mass casualty attacks in Israel, and greater pressure on the Sharon government to respond

more forcefully. Israel's current approach—which employs "targeted killings" as part of a comprehensive approach to fighting terror—has proven reasonably effective, averts escalation, and compared to other options available, entails fewer risks to innocent civilians. For this reason, as long as the PA is not fulfilling its obligation to arrest Palestinians involved in attacks on Israeli civilians, Israel will likely feel compelled to continue such activities.

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