

Demolition of a Palestinian Islamic Jihad Tunnel Inside Israel

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The lack of armed response by Hamas or PIJ highlights the host of military and political factors restraining both organizations and the potency of new Israeli defense technologies, though radical elements may still decide to risk an attack out of desperation.

On October 30, loud explosions interrupted the fragile calm on the Gaza border as Israeli forces destroyed a tunnel infiltrating their territory. The explosions resulted in the deaths of several senior members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which operated the tunnel. Several Hamas members were killed during subsequent evacuation efforts.

Despite harsh declarations by PIJ and the Hamas government in Gaza, neither has responded by firing on Israel. This lack of armed action would have been inconceivable in the past, when events of this sort inevitably escalated into fighting. What made this instance different, and what lessons can be drawn from it? The fact that Israel demolished the tunnel on its own territory has not prevented these organizations from claiming it was an act of aggression. In other words, the decision to hold fire did not stem from any perception that Israel's move was a legitimate act of self-defense. Rather, top Hamas officials such as Ismail Haniyeh openly called for revenge during funerals for the operatives killed in the explosions. The lack of action must therefore be rooted in other factors.

The Palestinian reconciliation process. The decision may be a product of the same pressures that recently pushed Hamas into another round of reconciliation talks with the Palestinian Authority, including political isolation, Gaza's ever-escalating economic crisis, direct PA financial pressure, and the slow pace of reconstruction. True reconciliation seems impossible at the moment given current Palestinian realities, but both factions are likely eager to keep the process from collapsing in its first stages. Only a day after the tunnel incident, Hamas transferred authority over Gaza's borders to the PA, a momentous occasion that the organization surely did not want to spoil. Of course, Hamas still hopes to maintain control over its armed forces even after transferring civil responsibilities to the PA, which would allow it to resume acting like a terrorist organization unconstrained by political obligations. For now, though, it is not in the organization's interest to take the blame for collapsing the reconciliation process.

Deterrence. In 2014, Operation Protective Edge showed Gaza's leaders the costs of war. The Strip has not yet recovered from that conflict, in large part because the Hamas government's main focus is on reconstructing its military force and suppressing popular opposition to its rule. An escalation at this point would endanger the organization's hold on power and its efforts to contain PIJ.

Inconvenient timing. From a military perspective, neither PIJ nor Hamas is prepared for a major confrontation with Israel. Both organizations seem to regard building extensive cross-border tunnel networks for the sake of launching raids on Israeli soil as critical components of their future warfare strategy. This week's demolition may have taken away their most important asset in this strategy.

The element of surprise. Hamas and PIJ may still be trying to understand the advanced technological capability that Israeli forces demonstrated in discovering the secret tunnel. Israel has accelerated its construction of a continuous subterranean barrier along the Gaza border, a project that incorporates various tunnel-detection technologies. This week's demolition indicates that both organizations were caught completely off guard. They may now be attempting to learn from the setback and make plans for dealing with the new barrier's capabilities before diving into an armed confrontation.

Israeli restraint. Israel demolished the tunnel on its own territory, refrained from entering Gaza, and even refrained from issuing a public alert to its citizens as it normally does following an event of this sort. This restrained approach will likely keep PIJ from reasonably claiming that Israel is gearing toward confrontation, which in turn enables Hamas to demand that PIJ hold its fire, at least for now.

Gaza-Sinai isolation. Hamas has been taking strategic steps toward warmer relations with Egypt, and this tightening relationship with Cairo has obligated the organization to sever ties with the Islamic State (IS) and other terrorist elements in Sinai. Decreasing cooperation from Gaza in turn makes it more difficult for IS to use the peninsula as a springboard for attacks against Israel. This mode of operation -- which Hamas has used as an indirect way to threaten Israel while avoiding head-on confrontation -- is no longer an option (though IS elements have of course continued to target Israel on their own).

WHAT LESSONS CAN BE DRAWN FROM THE INCIDENT?

Four lessons stand out. First, Hamas has not yet been able to regain its former military, civil, and political stature three years after Operation Protective Edge. In the past, the deaths of such a large number of senior Hamas and PIJ officials would never have occurred without an immediate armed response.

Second, the demolition highlights the growing importance that tunnels hold in the eyes of Palestinian terrorist organizations. Cross-border tunnels of the type destroyed this week are a critical component of their offensive strategy against Israel. Even as Gaza sinks further into economic crisis, they continue to invest the bulk of their resources in subterranean infrastructure, giving it precedence over all other military and civilian needs. At the same time, the incident sheds light on -- and may drastically accelerate -- the now largely overt arms race between Palestinian tunnel diggers and Israeli countermeasures.

Third, by bringing Palestinian terrorists to an uncomfortable realization -- that Israel has a tunnel-detection solution capable of eliminating a key part of their military strategy -- the demolition operation could push them into a "use it or lose it" dilemma. That is, even if the Hamas mainstream is uninterested in escalation for now, PIJ or radical elements within either organization might still initiate a tunnel attack in the short term simply to prevent their colossal investment from being wasted. Such an attack would likely be unprecedented in its severity, thereby dragging Israel into a broad-scale operation inside Gaza.

Fourth, despite the implausibility of actual Palestinian reconciliation, the very existence of a gradual process between Hamas and the PA will contribute to stability as long as it lasts. Additionally, there is reason to believe that Egypt has asked Hamas and PIJ not to retaliate in the hope of maintaining a process it has been brokering from the start. This is a mixed blessing of course -- once the parties attempt to deal with their core issues of contention, Hamas may decide to evade political compromise by reverting to confrontation with Israel.

CONCLUSION

Operation Protective Edge brought Israeli deterrence in Gaza to an all-time high, resulting in a long period of relative calm. Israel has used this hiatus wisely, developing new technology of the sort that proved its effectiveness this week.

At the same time, this Israeli success could push Palestinian terrorist organizations into a corner and spur them to escalate -- despite the post-2014 deterrence, despite Gaza's growing internal crises, and despite the sensitive Palestinian reconciliation process. Yet one way or another, Operation Protective Edge served Israel's interests by giving it the time needed to take initiative in defending its southern border.

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