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Israel's Security Fence: Effective in Reducing Suicide Attacks from the Northern West Bank

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The International Court of Justice is expected to rule this Friday, July 9, on the legality of Israel's security fence. The Palestinians strongly oppose the security fence, claiming that the fence negatively affects them. Israel is now seeking to address their concerns through a variety of means relating to the route of the fence and to the creation of a humanitarian office to minimize the impact of the fence on the Palestinians. At the same time, it is indisputable that the fence is succeeding in its main objective of minimizing the risk of infiltration to Israel by suicide bombers in the northern West Bank. The entire fence is expected to be completed by the end of next year.

During the first half of 2004, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) successfully foiled every suicide bomb attack originating from the northern West Bank, specifically those from the cities of Nablus and Jenin, areas that have become infamous for exporting suicide bombers. Between October 2000 and the date of the fence's completion along Israel's northern rim, thirty-five "successful" suicide terror attacks in many Israeli cities could be traced to Nablus and Jenin. Those attacks resulted in the murders of 156 Israeli civilians. The relatively long route from the northern West Bank to Jerusalem and surrounding areas has forced terrorists to travel many kilometers to circumvent the fence. To carry out a successful attack, they must reach regions where the fence is still under construction. Construction is not yet complete because of Palestinian appeals to the Israeli Supreme Court and because of the magnitude of the project. However, even though the fence is not yet finished, it has allowed the Israeli security forces to better control infiltrators and to foil their plans prior to initiation. Another factor that helps minimize the scope of terrorism is the ongoing activity against terrorist groups' leaders and bomb engineers.

A Source of Suicide Bombers

Between October 2000 and July 2003, the date of completion of the first phase (known as Stage A) of construction of the fence along Israel's northwestern rim of the West Bank, thirty-five "successful" suicide attacks have originated from the northern West Bank alone. Specifically, twenty-one of the attacks originated from Jenin, and fourteen from Nablus. Those attacks caused the murder of 156 Israeli civilians. The attacks from Jenin resulted in the deaths of ninety-seven Israelis. (Among those attacks was the March 31, 2002, attack in Haifa, where a Hamas bomber blew himself up in the Matza restaurant. Fifteen Israelis were killed and 131 injured. Those attacks also included the June 5, 2002, attack at Megido junction, in which a Palestinian Islamic Jihad bomber blew himself up in a car bomb while crashing into an Egged commuter bus. Seventeen Israelis were killed and forty-two injured.)

In contrast, since Stage A was completed last summer, only three "successful" suicide attacks have originated from the northern West Bank. Those three attacks, one from Jenin and two from Nablus, were responsible for the deaths of twenty-six Israeli civilians. The most significant attack took place on October 4, 2003, in Haifa, where a suicide bomber from Jenin killed twenty-one civilians in Maksim Caf. Since December 25, 2003, there has not been a single attack from the northern West Bank, including Jenin and Nablus.

Nablus and Jenin: Operational Hubs

Since the beginning of the current intifada, Nablus and Jenin have been recognized as the primary sources of suicide bombers. The fourteen suicide attacks from Nablus have claimed the lives of fifty-nine Israelis. Among those attacks was the June 18, 2002, attack in Jerusalem, in which a Hamas bomber blew himself up inside an Egged commuter bus at the Patt junction, killing nineteen Israelis and injuring fifty. They also included the January 5, 2003, attack in Tel Aviv, in which two al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade bombers blew themselves up in the Old Central Bus Station. Twenty-three Israelis were killed, and 106 were injured.

As a result of the fence, a bomber from Nablus needs to travel south before entering the heart of Israel. The lengthy distance that suicide bombers must travel to circumvent the fence and enter into Israel allows the IDF and Israeli intelligence to buy precious time, locate the infiltrators, and foil their plans. Since January 2004, nineteen suicide bomb belts have been discovered, all originating from Nablus and designated for use by suicide bombers in Israel.

Given the disadvantage facing bombers from Nablus, bombers today prefer to act from Jerusalem and its environs (A-Rahm neighborhood), where the construction of the security fence is not yet completed. At those

weak points, suicide bombers find it easier to mix with local people and to enter the city of Jerusalem. However, by narrowing the range from which bombers can launch attacks, Israel can better focus its preventive strategy to foil attacks. From the start of 2004, about 2,000 Palestinians have been apprehended. Of those arrests, fifty-eight were suicide bombers caught in the West Bank.

The following examples, all from the past month, emphasize the central role of Nablus as a source for suicide bombers and the influence of the security fence on foiling those attacks:

In the beginning of June 2004, a terrorist group was exposed by the IDF. It was found that Lebanon-based Hizballah was sponsoring and guiding the group, which was headed by Halil Araisha. Araisha has a twenty-four-year history as a Fatah/Tanzim activist from the refugee camp of Balata in Nablus. Araisha personally recruited an eighteen-year-old suicide bomber named Mahand Karini from the Askar refugee camp in Nablus. Because of the difficulty posed by the security fence of exporting suicide bombers directly from Nablus to Israel, the terrorist group was forced to move Karini from Nablus to Ramallah. On June 4, 2004, Karini received a bomb weighing twenty-five kilograms, which was transferred separately from Nablus to Ramallah. From there, Karini and the bomb were taken to Kalandia village in the outskirts of Ramallah. Even though Kalandia is very close to Jerusalem, Karini failed to complete his mission on the day planned and had to sleep over in Silwad village near Ramallah. The terrorist group was arrested and the bombs they carried were safely deactivated by Israeli police. Mobilization of terrorists and bombs along the lengthy route and over several days, plus the need for stopovers in many places on the way, allowed the IDF greater control and leverage in locating the terrorists and foiling their plans.

On Friday, July 2, 2004, three Palestinians—affiliated with Fatah/Tanzim in Nablus and sponsored by Lebanon-based Hizballah—were arrested in a hiding place in Ramallah. They had planned to carry out a suicide operation in Jerusalem that same day. Muataz Karini, a sixteen-year-old boy from the Askar refugee camp near Nablus was supposed to blow himself up; however, he and his two operators—one a student at A-Najah University in Nablus—were caught. The three led Israeli forces to a garbage bin at Ramallah's central bus station, where a bag was found with twelve kilograms of explosives in a belt to be used by the bomber.

Conclusion

The Palestinians may not wish to admit it, but the net effect of the fence is to limit Israel's vulnerability to suicide attacks. The fence is only one part of a broader strategy, which has succeeded in lowering the threshold of violence. Israel's success in preventing the attacks can be attributed to three causes: the security fence, military activity against the leaders of terrorist organizations and terrorist activists, and the effectiveness of the fight against the sources of funding for such groups.

An open question remains whether the diminished level of attacks in 2004 has triggered a reassessment among Palestinian terrorists about the use of suicide bombing as a tactic, or whether the motivation remains unabated even if the capability has been somewhat impaired. A poll of Palestinian attitudes taken by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center suggests that 36.4 percent of Palestinians believe, indeed, that the fence is effective in diminishing attacks; however, a majority disagree, including 15.5 percent who believe it actually spurs attacks.

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