NATIONAL POST

FULL COMMENT

Stephen Starr: Drones in the sky, informers on the ground helped Israel track Hamas military chief

Stephen Starr, Special to National Post Nov 16, 2012 11:07 PM ET

Last Wednesday, the elusive Ahmed al-Jabari, commander of Hamas's military wing, was in a nondescript Kia sedan driving through Gaza City.

In video footage released by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), the car is seen moving slowly through light traffic on narrow streets. Nothing appears to be out of place as it approaches an intersection. Then, in a flash, the Kia explodes into flames before careening slowly to the right.

All that remained was a badly burned engine block and some mangled metal.

How could a joint operation by Shin Bet, Israel's internal security services, and the IDF target Mr. Jabari, leader of the al-Qassem Brigades, who reportedly never carried a cellphone and took obsessive care about his personal security?

The Hamas military chief had probably been under surveillance for months. Though Israeli intelligence services rarely publicize information about their operations, it is likely his every move had been closely watched, thanks to cutting-edge technology, allowing Israelis to map out his daily routine and create a plan of attack.

The actual missile strike was probably the least difficult aspect of the operation.

George Joffé, a professorial fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London, says the watchers had many options.

"Israel uses tracing technology and informers — if Mr. Jabari used a cell[phone], it would have been traced. Also, Israeli security, through drone technology as well as other sources, would have pinpointed Mr. Jabari long before."

Drones fly constantly above Gaza, says Mr. Joffé. "Israel also monitors all forms of communication, particularly if Internet-based," he said, adding all Internet and cellphone connections pass through the Israeli telecommunications system or at least can be monitored by Israel.

Israel, which withdrew from the heavily populated Gaza Strip in September 2005, still has agents operating clandestinely inside the territory. Though Israeli troops do not enter the Strip, Israel maintains control over Gaza's airspace, allowing it to follow individuals and activities on the ground deemed a danger to its national security.

But it has been from the air Israel has had most success in monitoring the actions of its enemies in Gaza.

Its most impressive "eye in the sky" is the Heron TP, a high-altitude, long-endurance drone. Israel's largest and most sophisticated drone weighs more than 4½ tonnes and can stay aloft for 36 hours straight.

These drones are not simply monitoring tools — they can also carry a 1,000-kilogram payload.

Military experts say the Heron TP is officially capable of flying at altitudes of 12,200 metres, but can likely reach higher altitudes, making them virtually impossible to spot from the ground.

Israel is a world leader in production of such advanced military equipment. Drones flying over the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and south Lebanon can provide its intelligence leaders with real-time images and information on the location of potential targets and what enemies may be planning.

"Israel doesn't have an ability to track things in real time using satellites from space," said Scott Johnson, a senior analyst at IHS Jane's, intelligence and defence consultants.

"But they are able to track moving targets through drones for hours at a time."

In Israel, the sky is the limit in terms of access to funds for intelligence research and development. Last year, about US$14.5-billion, or 6.9% of the country's gross domestic product, was spent on the military. Now, there is an increasing focus on intelligence gathering and high-tech weaponry.

But with the likelihood of a ground invasion in Gaza growing, it is not just from the sky Israel dominates the fight.

According to the IDF's website, it is working to improve the laser technologies used by its forces. Military laboratories staffed entirely by physicists and engineers, "all of whom hold scientific degrees … are currently conducting research on lasers, so as to improve the technology used by forces in the field," says the website.

Israeli infantry units use lasers to locate objects and people in the field and for ensuring the accuracy of their weapons.

Benedetta Berti, an associate fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, believes there will be more targeted assassinations.

“They [the Israeli government] have said they would. However, the main target has been killed — [Jabari] was the head of al-Qassam Brigades and had credibility over other important militant groups.”

Other analysts believe Hamas is a surrogate target for the more extreme groups actually responsible for firing most of the rockets.

“Some [rockets] are now from Hamas and this will increasingly be the case now that Ahmed Jabari has been killed,” said Mr. Joffé. “But more extreme groups have been largely responsible of late.”

Reports in the U.S. media claiming Israel had destroyed 90% of Hamas’s long-range missiles by Thursday night may point to the real motivation for the latest incursion: to destroy the terrorists’ missile stocks and inhibit a recently emboldened Hamas leadership.

Israel’s sophisticated weaponry, however, has not proved entirely successful in past campaigns against guerrilla opponents.

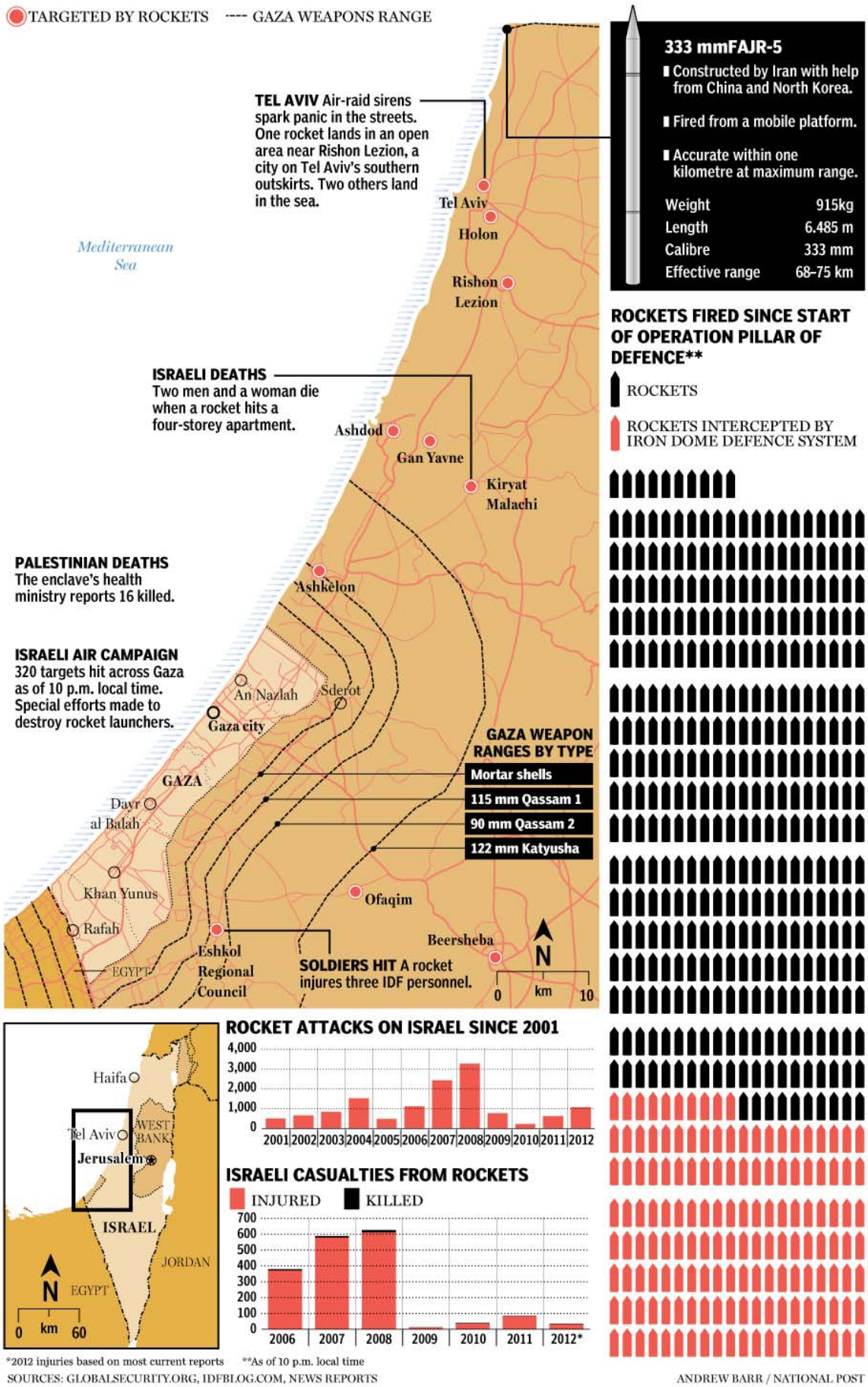
In the summer of 2006, Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite organization, succeeded after 40 days in fighting the Israeli army to a standstill. Israel’s use of high-tech military hardware and software could not definitively beat an enemy often operating underground.

Given Gaza’s warren-like streets and high population density, the result of the latest conflict could prove inconclusive for either side.

“We’ll continue the pressure and the attacks on Gaza until Hamas begs for a ceasefire,” a senior Israeli official told the Haaretz newspaper Thursday.

But with hundreds of rockets being launched from the Strip every day, some making it to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, any imminent end to the hostilities is unlikely.

HAMAS ROCKETS STRIKE DEEP INTO ISRAEL



*2012 injuries based on most current reports **As of 10 p.m. local time

SOURCES: GLOBALSECURITY.ORG, IDFBLOG.COM, NEWS REPORTS

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