

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

February 18, 2002

PALESTINIAN ROCKETS: DIMENSIONS OF THE THREAT

Shlomo Brom
Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

The current round of violent conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has lasted for almost eighteen months. In a drawn-out confrontation of this sort, each side tries to gain an advantage over the other by adopting new tactics or introducing new weapons, based on the lessons learned from its own and the other's actions, successes and failures. Because the struggle is so protracted, there is plenty of time to draw conclusions, integrate new tactics, and develop new weapons.

Since the outbreak of this round of violence, the Palestinian mode of combat has evolved in several ways. One of the more prominent changes has been the attempt to acquire or develop weapons that provide a stand-off capability, that is, long-range firepower. This is seen in the use of mortars and rockets against Israeli targets.

Palestinian security forces are barred by the Oslo Agreements from equipping themselves with these types of weapons. As a result, they can acquire mortars and rockets only by smuggling them in or developing and producing them in improvised facilities, that is, local ironworks. Since Israel controls the land and sea access to the Palestinian-controlled territories, smuggling of weapons is a difficult and complicated matter. Although some materiel is

smuggled in, especially via tunnels running under Israeli-controlled territory along the Egyptian border, the Palestinians have apparently been unable, thus far, to smuggle in significant quantities of these types of weapons. In the two cases in which Israel intercepted ships attempting to bring in large cargoes of weapons, mortars and rockets were a significant component of the shipments.

As a result, the Palestinians have had to rely on local production of mortars and rockets. Initial efforts involved production of mortars in PA facilities. These were distributed to all the organizations and have been used by PA personnel and the Tanzim as well as by Hamas. The use of mortars has been largely confined to the Gaza Strip, primarily against settlements in the Katif Bloc, less so against army installations and hardly at all across the "Green Line." Thus far, several hundred mortar bombs have been fired, virtually without effect. The explanation for that lies in their limited accuracy and payload. Moreover, their limited range – a few kilometers – sometimes allows Israeli tank crews to locate the launchers and destroy them with counter-fire.

In principle, most of these weaknesses do not apply to rockets. Rockets have greater range and can carry heavier and more destructive warheads.

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
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But they are even less accurate than mortars, especially if they come from improvised, non-standard production lines.

It was Hamas that initiated the production of Qassam rockets, first the short-range Qassam-1 and now the Qassam-2, with a range in the neighborhood of 8-10 kilometers. Hamas produces these rockets both in Gaza and the West Bank, and it hopes to use them in both places. Israel has defined the firing of rockets against civilian settlements as a "red line" the crossing of which would invite severe reprisals. And when rockets were fired at Israeli territory from northern Gaza, the response included heavy air bombardment of PA installations and a prolonged incursion into the northern part of the Gaza Strip.

From Israel's perspective, the use of rockets threatens to upset the current balance of power, which strongly favors Israel, by injecting two new elements into the equation: longer range Palestinian firepower and the ability to attack civilian settlements in Israel from the West Bank. Such attacks could seriously disrupt day-to-day life over large areas of the country, due to the proximity to the West Bank of major population centers and the international airport at Lod. The background to this concern is the trauma caused by Hizbullah's success in creating a "balance of terror" whereby towns and villages in the north of the country are held hostage to Israel's "good behavior."

In fact, the Israeli response seemed disproportionate, because of the political and military leadership's inability to appreciate several important differences between Hizbullah's position and that of the Palestinians. In the first place, Hizbullah has a secure supply-line through which Iran transfers thousands of modern, longer-range rockets. These are more accurate and capable of inflicting much more damage than are Palestinian rockets, which are low in quality and few in number. Secondly,

Israel is less likely to invade Lebanon in order to take control of areas from which rockets are launched, both because of their longer range and because of the continuing influence of Israel's long and unhappy experience in Lebanon. By contrast, the IDF enters PA-controlled territory at will, and the political constraints on its acting there are actually diminishing. Finally, Israel finds it very difficult to get good intelligence about Hizbullah but is very well informed about developments in the Palestinian-controlled territories.

For all these reasons, the damage that can be expected from the use of Qassam rockets is minimal. Israel has a much better capacity to operate against them, prevent smuggling, destroy the production facilities, and intercept or kill the operators, even if it cannot completely prevent their production or use against Israeli targets. Above all, Israel has superior deterrent capability through its threat to take and hold the areas from which they may be launched. That threat can be very effective, as the "Beit Jala-Gilo" model clearly shows. Palestinians can fire from Beit Jala into Gilo any time they choose to, but they have generally refrained from doing so since Israel demonstrated to them that the price they will pay, in terms of both physical damage and political costs, far outweighs any tactical benefit. In Lebanon, too, the same deterrent has been quite effective, notwithstanding the problems described above.

What this means is that while Israeli population centers may come under sporadic rocket fire, the expected damage is not likely to transform Qassam rockets into a threat of the same magnitude as suicide-bombers or gunmen opening fire in the center of Israeli cities. The idea that a rocket may strike without prior warning is unpleasant to contemplate, but Israel has the capacity to keep this problem within manageable bounds.