

Unusually Quiet: Is Israel Deterring Terrorism?

Jonathan Schachter

Introduction

Recent years, and 2009 in particular, were relatively quiet in terms of Palestinian terrorist activity within Israel. 2009 was the first year in a decade in which Israel did not experience a single suicide bombing. Some senior officials have attributed this comparative calm to Israeli deterrent power,¹ especially in the wake of Israel's use of force during the Second Lebanon War (2006) and Operation Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009). This essay will briefly examine the role and limitations of deterrence in Israeli counterterrorism efforts, while recognizing that determining the effectiveness of deterrence is easier said than done. The available evidence does not allow for definitive conclusions, but suggests that Israeli deterrent success is more modest than is often presumed, and that Israel is not making optimal use of the deterrence-enhancing tools at its disposal.

Analytical Challenges

Palestinian terrorism has manifested itself in many forms, including most recently rocket fire from Gaza. Though rocket attacks have been perhaps the most pressing terrorism problem for Israel of late, the analysis below relies on the incidence of attempted and successful suicide bombings as an indicator of Palestinian terrorist activity. To be sure, this approach is problematic. On the one hand, it reflects the tactic's impact on Israel and its preferred status among groups seeking to attack. Suicide bombing carries numerous tactical advantages over other means of attack, enjoys broad Palestinian public support,² has proven itself to be particularly

Dr. Jonathan Schachter, research associate at INSS

disruptive throughout Israel (i.e., not only in specific areas, such as those within rocket range), and since 2000 is responsible for far more Israeli fatalities than any other mode of attack.³

On the other hand, a terrorist group's choice of tactics reflects, *inter alia*, its desire to maximize the chances of success in the face of security measures. Suicide bombing itself is in part a response to the difficulties encountered in placing "unattended" explosive devices in sight of an aware, suspicious, and proactive Israeli public. So too the launching of rockets from Gaza in part reflects the difficulty Gaza-based terrorist groups have in dispatching suicide bombers, active shooters, and other attackers across the heavily fortified Gaza-Israel border. Thus, one cannot simply attribute a reduction in or lack of suicide bombings emanating from Gaza to *strategic* deterrence and a consequent decision not to attack at all. The emphasis on rockets, rather than suicide bombers, is more likely to reflect *tactical* deterrence (i.e., the choice of one tactic over another in order to improve the chances of success). Yet while Israel has a clear and ongoing interest in making suicide bombing and other terrorist

tactics more difficult to execute, it is obviously better if attacks are not even attempted. Given this underlying principle, strategic deterrence is the primary focus of this analysis.

Identifying deterrence cause and effect is complicated further, because although Israel's current deterrent efforts toward Hamas focus primarily on Gaza, and although the group's senior decision makers are located there and in Damascus, most of its suicide bombing activity has originated from the West Bank, where conditions are significantly different in terms of governance, Israeli and Palestinian security activity, freedom of movement, and economic development.

Among this tangle of difficult-to-isolate and measure variables, what is clear is that Hamas and other Palestinian groups engage with varying intensity in different terrorist activities at different times and that the reasons for this are complex. Nevertheless, the assumption here is that used cautiously, data on suicide bombing can provide insight into terrorist intentions and activities more generally.

In the context of deterrence, the challenger's status quo is the subject of little or no open discussion, suggesting that Israel is paying too little attention to one of the two most important variables in its terrorist challengers' decision making.

Does Deterrence Explain the Current Lull?

Deterrence provides one possible explanation for the total absence of successful suicide attacks in 2009. Referring specifically to the drop in suicide attacks and to the recent decline in both Hamas and Hizbollah activity more generally, Head of IDF Intelligence Major General Amos Yadlin credited deterrence first and foremost:

In retrospect, we can see clearly that the enemy is refraining from pulling the trigger or striking the State of Israel. At its foundation, deterrence rests on a simple cost-benefit calculation carried out by the enemy – between the benefits of striking us and the implications and the cost of such a provocative step. The cost derives from the enemy’s understanding of our ability to strike it and its willingness to take such a risk. Today the enemy assesses that [the implications and cost] are high and doubts its ability to predict our moves, after having failed to do so in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza in 2008.⁴

Explanations besides deterrence, however, are no less plausible and possibly more likely. Indeed, Yadlin went on to list four other factors that appear to be contributing to this period of quiet:

- a. The two groups’ official status, one a political party in Lebanon and the other the de facto government in Gaza, has created a level of accountability that did not prevail when both groups were entirely extra-governmental.
- b. The groups are using the current period to rearm.
- c. The influence of internal politics both in Lebanon and among Palestinians has diverted the groups’ attention away from the conflict with Israel.
- d. Related to this is the perceived need for international legitimacy, which is undermined by terrorist activity.

The explanations listed above, including deterrence, share the assumption that the reduction in terrorist attacks is the result of a decision (or set of decisions) not to attack. Consistent with this assumption is the remarkable absence of any mention of Israel’s preventive measures, including the still incomplete separation barrier between Israel and the West Bank and the nearly constant West Bank operational activity of the IDF, as well as the reportedly effective counterterrorism efforts of the Palestinian Authority’s security forces. The silence on this matter is

curious, as reduced efforts to attack and successful prevention are by no means mutually exclusive; both can contribute to a lower overall rate of successful attack. Nevertheless, prevention went unmentioned by Yadlin while the enemy's self-restraint was highlighted. Thus the assumption here warrants scrutiny: were there no suicide bombings because Hamas and other Palestinian groups stopped trying to attack Israel in 2009?

Answering this question fully is not as straightforward as it might seem. Deterrence is notoriously difficult to assess (how does one measure events that did not occur?). Moreover, in this case the available data lacks the granularity necessary to draw precise conclusions regarding likely causality. Nevertheless, a total lack of attempted attacks in 2009 would at least suggest that deterrence and/or one or more of the other reasons Yadlin specified can account for the fact that the year passed with no suicide bombings.

According to Israel Security Agency (ISA) data, Palestinian groups continue to try to pull the trigger. Israel interdicted 36 attempted suicide attacks in 2009, suggesting that the claims of Israel's deterrence success might be overstated. As illustrated in Figure 1, this represents a 44 percent decline from the one successful and 63 interdicted attacks in 2008, a year described without explanation as exceptional in the ISA's report on terrorism between 2000 and 2009, but a more modest 26 percent decrease from the average in 2005-7. The ISA attributes the large drop in attempted attacks between 2004 and 2005 to the completion of the separation barrier in the Samaria region, though this could also reflect the politics of Hamas's participation and subsequent success in Palestinian parliamentary elections held in January 2006.

In part because the data in the ISA report does not specify who was responsible for the interdicted attacks and where they originated, it is impossible to say to what extent the decision to attack, or the decision to attack less, reflects strategic deterrence, Hamas's internal and external political or tactical calculations, operational problems, and/or the judgments of other groups. At the same time, this is not to say that because any attacks were attempted after Operation Cast Lead, deterrence failed. Deterrence might account for some or all of the reduction in attempted suicide bombings in 2009. Just as the impact of deterrence cannot be determined precisely from the quantitative data, so too deterrence cannot be ruled out as a significant factor.

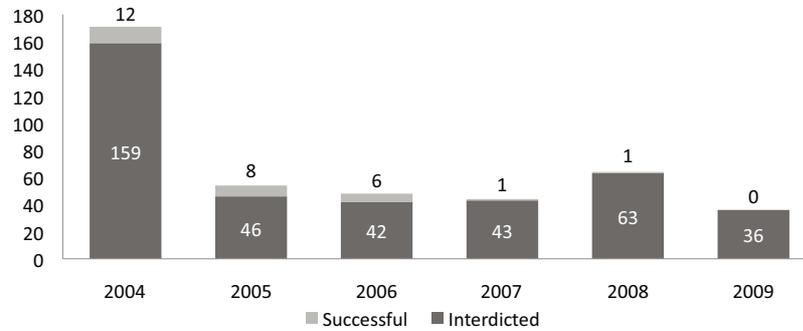


Figure 1. Interdicted and Successful Suicide Bombing Attacks⁵

Moreover, despite the analytical challenges preventing unambiguous demonstration of deterrence effectiveness, deterrence is material to the question of how Israel can reduce the threat of terrorism, especially because actions intended to strengthen deterrence under some circumstances can have the opposite effect. It is essential, therefore, to identify those circumstances and the extent to which they can be shaped by decision makers.

Factors Affecting Deterrence

Deterrence relies on the creation of a credible retaliatory threat. It is therefore perhaps natural that most of the Israeli discussion of deterrence focuses narrowly on the ability to make such a threat and to deliver on it if unacceptably challenged. This ability is linked most commonly to past and promised uses of military force, though non-military means such as economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure play a role as well.

A defender's deterrent threats are only effective if they compare sufficiently negatively with the challenger's status quo: in all likelihood, will the attack and its consequences leave the challenger better or worse off? The ways in which Israel wields its threats and affects the Palestinian status quo can either weaken or strengthen deterrence. However, in the context of deterrence, the status quo is the subject of little or no open discussion, suggesting that Israel is paying too little attention to one of the two most important variables in its terrorist challengers' decision making.

Deterrence can be undermined if the challenger's status quo gets worse, and in several ways. At the most basic level, as the difference

between the status quo and the outcome of threatened retaliation (i.e., the challenger's relative cost of action) shrinks, the likelihood of successful deterrence shrinks with it. Another way of conceptualizing this posits that a worsened status quo can lead to increased challenger motivation, and therefore increased threat of attack. More simply, it is increasingly difficult to deter a challenger with less and less to lose.

The status quo can deteriorate as the result of specific actions (e.g., destruction of infrastructure, economic sanctions), but also because of political stagnation (i.e., little or no diplomatic progress toward conflict resolution). In other words, the status quo is not static, and is subject to change (and manipulation) if problems are left unaddressed. The result of this is that over the long run, over-reliance on deterrence in general and on deterrent threats in particular can lead to a situation where deterrence undermines itself.

Deterrence can also be weakened if the challenger's defenses, and with them the ability to absorb retaliatory strikes, improve, or if the defender's credibility is weakened. In this sense, Israel's restrictions on the import of materials into Gaza that can be used in the construction of bunkers and its post-Operation Cast Lead policy of attacking targets in Gaza after every rocket or mortar attack can be seen as efforts to enhance, or at least maintain, deterrence.

Through "inducement" measures to improve the Palestinian status quo, Israel can inflate the relative strength of its deterrent threats and potentially reduce the appeal of terrorist groups in the process.

Posing credible retaliatory threats can strengthen Israeli deterrence, and the use of force can reinforce or restore credibility. Israeli actions during the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead might have had exactly this effect. It is not necessarily the case, however, that the more force is used, the greater the deterrent effect. On the contrary, the relationship between exercised force and subsequent deterrence appears to be limited by at least two factors. First, the use of force can create a new status quo sufficiently bad that the perceived costs of additional applications of force are relatively low. As this relative cost drops, deterrence becomes weaker. Second, and perhaps more germane given Israel's post-Operation Cast Lead experience, if the use of force leads to international condemnation, loss of political and diplomatic support, and/or charges (whether with or

without foundation) of war crimes and subsequent investigations (e.g., the Goldstone Commission), the result is likely to be greater difficulty and hesitation to use force in the future. This, in turn, can make deterrent threats less credible and therefore less likely to be persuasive.

The question persists whether terrorism can be deterred in the first place. Many discussions of deterring terrorist groups dismiss the possibility because such sub-state challengers typically lack critical assets that state defenders can threaten convincingly. This is a valid and significant concern for those developing counterterrorism policy. Interestingly, as noted by Yadlin,⁶ the participation of both Hizbollah and Hamas in legitimate political processes and their assumption of at least some of the functions and responsibilities of government have helped resolve this matter by associating the groups with the institutions and infrastructure of their respective polities, giving them more to lose than was the case when they were more purely opposition movements.

Having more to lose is simply another way of saying that the groups' status quo has improved. Herein lies an underappreciated and somewhat counterintuitive deterrence lever. By taking steps – known in deterrence literature as “inducement”⁷ – to improve the Palestinian status quo, Israel can inflate the relative strength of its deterrent threats and potentially reduce the appeal of terrorist groups in the process. In this light, one would expect (at the moment) that Israeli deterrent power could be greater in the West Bank than in Gaza, given the significant and growing economic, social, and other differences between the two regions, even though of late Israel has used far more force in Gaza.

Like reliance on deterrent threats, however, inducement measures are likely to have limited effectiveness. While they can make the potential outcome of a retaliatory strike more costly, by definition they make at least some current problems less urgent, which in this case can undermine other Israeli foreign policy goals vis-à-vis Hamas (i.e., aside from deterring terrorist attacks) such as applying economic and other pressure on the group and pushing for the release of IDF soldier

While the effectiveness of Israeli counterterrorism deterrence is difficult to quantify, it likely could be improved by recalibrating its underlying mix of threats and inducement actions to enlarge the space between the Palestinian status quo and the promised result of future Israeli retaliatory actions.

Gilad Shalit. An improved status quo can also lead to increased external pressure on Israel not to make good on its deterrent threats. For example, neither American nor European donors are eager to see their considerable investments in Palestinian infrastructure go up in smoke, regardless of the circumstances.⁸ Inducements, like threats, therefore can both contribute to and impede deterrence. Which effect prevails depends on how each is employed and under what circumstances.

Inducement carries two other concerns for governments confronting a terrorism threat. First, because inducement can be interpreted or spun as capitulation to terrorists, it is possible that such actions could lead to increased terrorism in order to secure additional concessions and/or lead other or previously non-violent groups to adopt violent tactics in order to gain concessions of their own. Second, this same interpretation or spin can set the stage for political opponents to level charges of giving in to terrorism, which is anathema in Israel, at least publicly, as it is in most democracies.

Conclusion

More than two years have passed since the most recent suicide bombing in Israel. Whether and how long this period of relative quiet will continue depends on a number of factors, including Israeli deterrence efforts, Israeli and Palestinian Authority security measures, and Palestinian terrorist groups' political and operational considerations. While the effectiveness of Israeli counterterrorism deterrence is difficult to quantify, it likely could be improved by recalibrating its underlying mix of threats and inducement actions in order to enlarge the space between the Palestinian status quo and the promised result of future Israeli retaliatory actions. Doing so in a way that maintains or, preferably, reinforces the credibility of Israeli deterrent threats is likely to pose a considerable challenge to Israeli decision makers. The easing of Israel's economic restrictions on Gaza following the May 2010 flotilla incident might constitute the basis for a natural experiment of sorts. Could the improvement of the status quo in Gaza lead to stronger Israeli deterrence?

Notes

- 1 See, for example, remarks by Israel Air Force Commander Ido Nehushtan in Noam Bar-Shalom, "Israel Is Deterring Hamas and Hizbollah," Israel Radio, May 11, 2010.
- 2 Juliana Menasce Horowitz, "Declining Support for Bin Laden and Suicide Bombing," Pew Global Attitudes Project, September 10, 2009, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1338/declining-muslim-support-for-bin-laden-suicide-bombing>.
- 3 Israel Security Agency, "Analysis of Attacks in the Last Decade: Suicide Attacks," n.d., <http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/english/TerrorInfo/decade/SuicideAttacks.pdf>, p. 1.
- 4 Remarks delivered at the Institute for National Security Studies, December 15, 2009.
- 5 The ISA defines interdiction quite conservatively: "a last-minute [interdiction] is...where the terror-infrastructure had been prevented/stopped when it was already on its way to mount the attack; namely not at the stage of planning/organizing, but after the attack or the perpetrator are already underway." Israel Security Agency, "Analysis of Attacks in the Last Decade: Suicide Attacks," n.d., <http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/english/TerrorInfo/decade/SuicideAttacks.pdf>, pp. 1-3.
- 6 Remarks delivered at the Institute for National Security Studies, December 15, 2009.
- 7 See Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).
- 8 See, for example, Tovah Lazaroff, "EU Official: Hamas Overwhelmingly Responsible for Gaza Damage," *Jerusalem Post*, January 27, 2009.