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**Destroying the Tunnel:
Preserving Deterrence while Preventing Escalation**

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On October 30, 2017, the IDF destroyed an attack tunnel from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory dug by Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It was the IDF's most significant action in the Strip since Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, if only because of the chance result that senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad figures and members of Hamas's special unit were killed. The number of casualties, their seniority, and the operation on the attack tunnel, described by Hamas and other terrorist elements in Gaza as a "strategic infrastructure," are liable to create pressure on Palestinian Islamic Jihad to respond and make it difficult for Hamas to prevent or restrain such a response. Indeed, after the attack, these elements threatened to respond "at the right time in the right place," despite the lame reasoning, given that the tunnel crossed the border into sovereign Israeli territory.

While Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas presumably consider a response eminently justified, Hamas will prefer to contain the incident and block escalation because of its efforts to implement the reconciliation agreement with the Fatah/PA. Hamas is currently very attentive to Egypt, which is spearheading the reconciliation process, and Cairo has already transmitted unequivocal messages to the Hamas leadership about the need for restraint. Beyond the risk of hampering the reconciliation process, escalation is liable to further exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, whereupon Hamas would risk both harsh public criticism and erosion of its status within Gaza. Israel's deterrence, strengthened following Operation Protective Edge, is another likely restraining factor. Therefore, if there is a response, it will presumably be limited, designed primarily for show, and be carried out by Palestinian Islamic Jihad or another faction other than Hamas itself, a message to Israel that the Gaza regime does not want another round of fighting.

The Hamas leadership seeks to continue the positive momentum created by the reconciliation process with the PA, deemed advantageous for Hamas. Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, indicated as much when he threatened that he would "break the neck" of anyone trying to prevent the reconciliation. Therefore, and despite the tunnel's

destruction, Hamas, as planned and per the agreement, transferred control of the Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings to the PA two days after the attack. On November 12, the Rafah crossing on Egypt's border will also come under PA jurisdiction.

Israel's Deterrence

Hamas is reconstructing its military infrastructure relatively quickly and restoring the civilian infrastructure at a slower pace, both damaged in Operation Protective Edge. The delay in the civilian reconstruction is a result of several factors: the limits Israel imposes, for security reasons, on the import of dual-purpose materials; donations pledged that have not been transferred in full; Hamas's diversion of some of the resources and funds designated for civilian reconstruction to military buildup and tunnel construction; and PA sanctions, which have yet to be fully lifted. This has generated harsh criticism of Hamas within the public in Gaza. In addition to the extensive destruction expected in another round of fighting with Israel, Hamas is worried about Arab states stopping money transfers and the freedom of action that the US administration – which sees Hamas as responsible for anti-Israel aggression from Gaza's territory – is likely to grant to Israel in the next round.

It seems that the IDF's destruction of the attack tunnel has not changed the balance of interests that had already led Hamas to adopt a policy of restraint. On the other hand, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which is not responsible for governing Gaza, has a different set of considerations. Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis that group is more limited compared to its effectiveness vis-à-vis Hamas. How much deterrence Hamas wields against Palestinian Islamic Jihad is also debatable, and the latter's motivation to respond is higher. It is therefore not inconceivable that Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and perhaps Hamas, too, if and when one of its attack tunnels is damaged, will prefer to respond in or from Judea and Samaria, assuming that an Israeli response against the Gaza Strip would be restrained.

Policy Recommendations

Overt and covert military operations against Hamas tunnels: Israel's proven ability to locate and destroy attack tunnels undermines the rationale of the approach shared by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad that attack tunnels are a strategic and psychological tool par excellence, certainly in light of the decreasing effectiveness of rocket attacks because of the Iron Dome system. Clearly Israel will continue to destroy attack tunnels that cross the border into Israel, and continue to build an underground obstacle. The October 30 operation against an attack tunnel, the latest operation against tunnels on the Gaza Strip border since Operation Protective Edge, is a clear statement of deterrence. The message is that Israel will not allow an infringement of its sovereignty or harm to its citizens and is willing to risk a more extensive military confrontation to attain these goals. At the same time, in order to complete the underground obstacle project, Israel

needs time and stability, and hence Israel's desire to avoid escalation that might lead to a military conflict with Hamas at this time. It therefore suits Israel to distinguish between tunnels that have crossed into Israeli territory and those that have not done so yet. If the response to border-crossing tunnels must be overt and firm, when it comes to attack tunnels that have not yet crossed into Israeli territory it behooves Israel to continue to act against them using "gray zone" strategy with various covert means in order to preserve plausible deniability. Israel can afford to do so only if it possesses proven technologies to pinpoint digging routes. Such technologies allow Israel constant reliable tracking of tunnel digging and the intelligence to destroy tunnels the moment they cross the border.

In case response takes the form of rockets from Gaza, whether by Hamas or any other organization, Israel must maintain its current policy, whereby Hamas, as Gaza's sovereign, is responsible for any rocket launch and/or attack. Accordingly, Hamas's military infrastructures are fair counterattack game. Israel will have to continue to maneuver between the need for a military response to Hamas to maintain deterrence and prevent sporadic rocket attacks, and the need to reduce chances of escalation leading to another extensive round of fighting.

Possible cooperation with a Palestinian unity government: While the policy that terrorist tunnels must be destroyed is fairly widely accepted, the reconciliation process is more complex for the Israeli government. The destruction of the attack tunnel highlights the need to formulate a policy on the reconciliation process and maximize opportunities it may afford Israel to form a more convenient strategic environment. The rationale of Hamas's violent struggle against Israel, which is still in effect, is now secondary to the organization's desire to assimilate into the Palestinian political system and gain legitimacy, with an eye to seizing control of the Palestinian system in the future. Therefore, Hamas still insists on maintaining its military wing.

While the chances that the reconciliation process will succeed are slim, its very existence may serve Israel's strategic interests and enable the creation of a more convenient reality for both Israel and the Gaza Strip population. The reconciliation process strengthens the PA and its leader, President Mahmoud Abbas, and cements support for the diplomatic struggle strategy and the internationalization of the PA (to which Israel must also respond) at the expense of the policy of terrorism. Therefore, it would be unwise for Israel to undermine or obstruct the reconciliation process through its military activity. From the perspective of Israel's strategic interests, if the process fails, it should be the result of Palestinian action. Therein lies the importance of safeguarding the complex balance between the need for a military response and preserving deterrence on the one hand, and leveraging the possibilities of improving the strategic reality inherent in the very existence of the reconciliation process on the other.

Accordingly, cooperation with the Palestinian unity government, which enjoys Egyptian backing, should be furthered, particularly the Palestinian security apparatus to be stationed at the border crossings to facilitate the transfer of the materials necessity for a large scale reconstruction of Gaza. At the same time, it is imperative that Hamas be pressured to recognize the Quartet's conditions; this demand has been stipulated by President Abbas and echoed by the US and Egypt. Vis-à-vis the international community, especially Egypt and the United States, it is important to further Abbas's insistence that there be "one authority, one law, one gun." This demand is designed to put pressure on Hamas to dismantle the organization's military wing and give up its weapons, even though the chances that Hamas will agree to this are highly remote.

At the same time, Israel must use the new reality in the Gaza Strip to expand and entrench cooperation with the Egyptian security services and the Palestinian security apparatus at the border crossings. This will help prevent transfers of arms from Sinai, Israel, and PA territories into Gaza and ensure the regular, efficient flow of construction materials and other civilian reconstruction means into the region, and ensure that they will not be used for Hamas military buildup.