

The Unavoidable Campaign to Destroy the Jenin Terrorist Hub

Kobi Michael and Ori Wertman | No. 1606 | June 1, 2022

The Jenin area has recently emerged as a breeding ground of terrorism and a relatively easy and free theater of action for Islamic Jihad, the largest and strongest active organization there. The Israeli defense establishment has marked this area as an extremely dangerous problem and has elected to focus its offensive effort there. In essence, however, this effort amounts to no more than extinguishing local fires. This activity makes it possible to thwart individual terrorist actions – the importance of which should not be discounted – but it can neither disrupt the terrorist campaign in Jenin nor deal a critical blow to the terrorist infrastructure in the area. The effects and possible strategic value of a far more extensive campaign throughout the Jenin area using much larger Israel Defense Forces against many more fronts in the area should be assessed. The strategic objective of such a campaign should be to destroy the terrorist infrastructure in the area and demonstrate deterrent power there and beyond.

Since late March 2022, Israel has been the target of a terrorist campaign in which 19 Israeli civilians have been murdered. The Israeli response is taking place throughout Judea and Samaria, but the primary effort is in the Jenin area, the starting point of the terrorists in three attacks in which 11 Israelis were murdered. The activity in this area has raised the level of Palestinian agitation and boldness, leading to many shooting incidents, in which an Israeli policeman from Yamam (Israel's National Counter Terror Unit) was killed and dozens of civilians and soldiers were wounded.

Together with the streak of successes in deadly terrorist attacks, there have been many more attempted stabbings and unsuccessful car ramming attacks and a larger number of terrorist attacks, some of which could have been especially severe and fatal, but which were foiled by the Israeli security forces. It is therefore appropriate to analyze the current period, not merely with respect to the terrorist attacks that resulted in murder, but also those that failed and were thwarted. The severity of the terrorist campaign that Israel faces reflects the cumulative scope of the terrorist attacks and the translation of that campaign into violent cognitive resistance, which is

being effectively fed by Hamas's cognitive effort on the social networks. At the same time, the terrorist campaign reflects the success of Hamas and other groups (the northern branch of the Islamic Movement, Hizb al-Tahrir, and the Palestinian Authority) in making the Temple Mount compound a unifying factor for the various movements in Palestinian society and parts of Arab society in Israel.

The Jenin area has recently emerged as a breeding ground of terrorism and a relatively easy and free theater of action for Islamic Jihad, the largest and strongest active organization there. Cooperation is developing there between Islamic Jihad and other organizations, especially Hamas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and also the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades of Fatah. Over the years, the resistance ethos in Jenin has gone beyond a local phenomenon; the area has become a symbol of violent resistance. Historically, Jenin has been a geographically, politically, socially, and economically outlying area where the central government's control was weak. This was the case with the British Mandate during the 1930s, whose forces killed Izz ad-Din al-Qassam in 1936 in the vicinity of the village of Ya'bad. Over time, al-Qassam became a source of inspiration and a symbol of national resistance during the Second Intifada. The IDF suffered many casualties in Jenin, which has been perceived as a stronghold of the Palestinian resistance, during the Second Intifada and then especially in more recent years, during the rule of the Palestinian Authority.

In recent years, the Jenin area has enjoyed real prosperity, particularly the city of Jenin itself. The city's economy has been based on the purchasing power of Arab Israeli citizens, who frequent the city and the region. Palestinian workers from the Jenin area have been employed in Israel, and the Jalameh Crossing has become institutionalized, with the volume of goods and number of people passing through growing consistently. The establishment of the Arab American University in Jenin, many of whose students are Israeli Arabs, has also accelerated the city's economic development. Student dormitories were constructed around the city, and commerce in the surrounding new neighborhoods are oriented to the students who move there. The development of the city's real estate and economy has been impressive, but the usual assumption that negatively correlates between improvement in the economic and employment

situation and the motivation for terrorism has been proven wrong in the case of Jenin. Despite the economic prosperity, relatively high employment rates, and the close connection with Arabs from Israel and the Israeli economy, Jenin has remained an active breeding ground for terrorism. The resistance ethos continues to simmer, with terrorism being exported on a large scale with the city serving as a source of inspiration for other districts in the West Bank and beyond, including the Gaza Strip – thanks to Islamic Jihad's prominent standing in Jenin and its affiliation with the organization in the Gaza Strip.

Twenty years have passed since the Second Intifada began, and many of the young generation from Jenin now leading the terrorist campaign did not experience it, its terror, and its harsh results for Palestinian society. At the same time, the feeling of achievement of Islamic Jihad and the other organizations, which Hamas fosters; the atmosphere of incitement; and the cognitive effort led by the organization, in addition to the activity of Iran in the area and its major ongoing support for Islamic Jihad (and perhaps also Iran's feeling of achievement due to the US withdrawal from the region), combined with Israel's hesitant and cautious containment policy, are increasing the motivation and determination of the young generation to enlist in the terrorist campaign against Israel. Added to this broad picture are events such as the death of Shireen Abu Akleh during a clash between Israel and the Palestinians and the riot that erupted during her funeral, which caused real cognitive damage to Israel and has put the Palestinian question back on the global agenda. The bloody price already exacted by the terrorist attacks, together with the feeling of achievement in the international arena and the assumption that Israel will hesitate to resume the format upon which it acted during the Second Intifada is also feeding the violent cognitive resistance.

The Israeli defense establishment has marked the Jenin area as an extremely dangerous problem and has elected to focus its offensive effort there. In essence, however, this effort amounts to no more than extinguishing local fires. Special operations aimed at arresting wanted terrorists and suspects are primarily intelligence-oriented and, in most cases, seek to foil imminent terrorist attacks. Given the absence of comprehensive activity designed to strike a major blow against all terrorist

infrastructure, the IDF's activity allows armed Palestinians in the area to organize relatively easily and to focus their effort and firepower against Israel's special forces. Under these conditions, each special operation, even if it ends in the arrest or killing of a wanted terrorist or suspect, becomes just another glorious chapter in the Jenin resistance ethos and in some cases, also causes losses and casualties on the Israeli side. While the importance of individual counter-terror operations should not be discounted, they are not able to disrupt the terrorist infrastructure in the Jenin area. Even worse, this kind of activity results in unity and solidarity among Palestinian operatives and erodes Israel's deterrence.

Those opposed to a large-scale campaign cite the risk of escalating into a multi-front conflict and say that the threat posed by the Jenin area should be dealt with by means of individual operations. The achievements of the current Israel method of operation in the Jenin area, however, are liable to exact an extremely high price from Israel in the long run. Israel's fear of a large-scale campaign in Jenin along the lines of Operation Defensive Shield involving the entire West Bank, and possibly also the Gaza Strip and extreme religious and nationalistic groups among Israeli Arabs, has not escaped the terrorists operating in Jenin and the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere. They perceive this concern as Israel's weakness, leading the terrorist groups in Jenin to show audacity by initiating clashes and the Hamas leadership to show arrogance and euphoria. Furthermore, this concern also affects Hezbollah and Iran, thereby eroding Israeli deterrence.

For this reason, the current policy on events in the Jenin area should be reconsidered, and the possible strategic value of a far more extensive campaign using much larger IDF forces against many more fronts in the Jenin area, both rural and urban, should be assessed. Such a format will neutralize the ability of the armed Palestinians to focus their firepower against IDF forces, which will operate simultaneously on different fronts on a large scale. The possibility that the conflict will expand exists, but if this occurs, the IDF and the Israeli security forces are capable of devising a quick and suitable response and must do so. Otherwise, Israel will become hostage to a struggle led by Hamas. At the same time, it must be stressed

that a hard blow in Jenin can definitely cause substantial deterrence against expanding the conflict.

The strategic objective of such a large-scale campaign should be to destroy the terrorist infrastructure in the area and to demonstrate deterrent power there and elsewhere. Furthermore, a large-scale action in Jenin should also serve the strategic logic against the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip and deter it from adhering to the strategy that it has adopted since Operation Guardian of the Walls. The relative tranquility in the Gaza Strip is deceptive: The area plays a significant part in the recent escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian theater. The insulation strategy pursued by the Hamas leadership is characterized by an effort to preserve calm in the Gaza Strip and keep it ostensibly out of the active campaign, while simultaneously stepping up the effort on all the other fronts, led by a focused and systematic cognitive effort of incitement and preparing popular opinion for armed resistance. For its part, the Israeli government, in the name of the concept of containment and the desire to avoid dragging the Gaza Strip into the main conflict taking place in the West Bank, has decided against exacting a price from the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip – a policy perceived by the Palestinians as weakness and that may also be encouraging terrorist efforts. A crushing large-scale campaign against the terrorist infrastructure in the Jenin area will exact a heavy price from those committing terrorism and will reshape the rules of the game in the Palestinian theater. It will be led by the ground forces and will counteract the impression that Israel is afraid to use force, while also demonstrating deterrent power well beyond the Palestinian theater.