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Individual Terrorism: The Media Perspective

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In recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of terrorist attacks and attempted terrorist attacks in the West Bank and Jerusalem that have occurred in ordinary, day-to-day situations. These attacks, which have targeted both civilians and the security forces, have included cars running over individuals, shootings, stabbings, IEDs, rock throwing, Molotov cocktails, and tire burnings. According to General Security Services figures, there were 683 attacks in 2012, 1,271 attacks in 2013, and 1,834 attacks in 2014. By the end of August 2015, there were already 972 attacks in 2015 (120 in June, 105 in July, and 168 in August). This essay examines the media coverage of the phenomenon, focusing on the nature of the coverage, how the events are framed, and how the incidents are reported as isolated security incidents without a comprehensive discussion of their reflection of trends in Palestinian public opinion and their connection to Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Until recently, Israeli coverage of individual terrorist attacks has followed a set pattern, notable primarily for the lesser prominence assigned to these attacks by the media. Attempted attacks, rock and Molotov cocktail throwing, and tire burnings that do not result in casualties are rarely reported. Moreover, even when the topic does make it to the media, it remains on the sidelines; coverage is brief, not prominently placed, and is quick to leave the news cycle. While there has been an increase in coverage of terrorist attacks in recent months, these attacks generally enter the media discourse if they occur in at least one of four contexts. One is if people were killed in the attacks, although even then the coverage stresses the atypical nature of the incident. The June 29, 2015 attack near Shvut Rachel, for example, in which one civilian was killed, received full and prominent coverage, with the reports stressing the human angle (the man killed belonged to a bereaved family) and not the security aspect. The second situation involves a relative increase in attacks during a short period of time. In that case, coverage tends to connect events with headlines such as “24 hours of terror,” “A series of attacks,” “Wave of terrorism,” “Wave of attacks,” “Terrorism around the clock,” “Attack follows attack,” “Endless terrorism,” “A night of attacks,” and “A weekend of terrorism.” The third situation occurs when the attacks occur outside of the West Bank or quite close to the

Green Line. The attack on Rosh Hashanah eve, in which stones hurled at a car in the Arnona neighborhood of Jerusalem led to the death of the driver, and recent attacks on Rte. 443 were covered thoroughly, with reports on the latter examples noting that the road is a major thoroughfare to Jerusalem: “Stabbing in key traffic artery” and “Terrorism in one of Israel’s most important roads.” The fourth situation is when the casualties are soldiers, in which case the question of bravery is at the center of the coverage.

Even in these four situations, however, the coverage focuses on the specific event only and lasts no more than one or two days. More to the point, coverage is generally detached from any political context, and in the vast majority of the cases relates only to the tactical security angle. Thus, media coverage jumps from one event to another without engaging in a comprehensive debate over the event and its relation to a phenomenon whose significance – security and political – is far-reaching.

This leads to another prominent feature of coverage: the framing of the attacks as acts of individual terrorism. This framing matches the discourse in the social media in the West Bank, which see the incidents as the result of a personal and spontaneous initiative on the part of individual attackers. In other words, these attacks are not part of an overall plan or greater organized terrorism. This sentiment appears in the Israeli media as well, reflected in headlines such as “Solo attacks,” “A lone attacker,” or “Individual terrorism.” Many news items and analyses imply that there is no connection among the different attacks. The picture emerging is one of coincidence: the attacks are the result of local activity without a guiding organizational infrastructure, even if the attackers draw encouragement and backing from organizations such as Fatah or Hamas. In recent weeks, the framing has also stressed the incidental nature of the incidents, a theme supported by Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon’s assertion that these attacks resulted from an atmosphere of incitement during Ramadan, i.e., “an atmosphere that will pass.”

Even if these attacks are the work of individuals, launched out of personal and/or local initiatives, the fact that the figures indicate an increase in the phenomenon’s scope must be explained. Is the connection among the lone events coincidental, or has there been a change in the atmosphere, including the relations between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank and in Jerusalem? What is the role of the media in assessing and confronting the phenomenon?

It appears that the media on the one hand, and the political and security establishment on the other, are treating these attacks much the same. Both clearly prefer to handle the problem at the tactical level and relate to the attacks as sporadic incidents or waves. One may assume that if and when there is a palpable and long term increase in the severity and impact of the attacks, neither the security-political establishment nor the media will have any choice but to change the discourse and meet the challenge. Israel will have a

direct reason as well as legitimacy – at least in the eyes of the Israeli public – to take familiar countermeasures, i.e., the use of heightened military force, with greater determination than is currently the case. In addition, when it is no longer possible ignore the broader contexts of the escalation, the discourse can be expected to include a more in-depth look at the political and social aspects of the phenomenon.

At the moment, it seems that that in order to deal with the phenomenon of individual terrorism, a balance must be found between the intensive media response to selected isolated events – which may create pressure on decision makers to take severe action and thereby contribute to a cycle of escalation – and acclimation to a routine of daily attacks in the security arena. Turning the spotlight on individual terrorism without *surveying* possible solutions for the phenomenon is problematic in that it may leave Israeli citizens with a greater sense of personal insecurity. On the other hand, one can argue that the media is demonstrating responsibility by not inflating the phenomenon, which could spur the political leadership to direct the military echelon to take more offensive measures in an effort to foil attacks or in response to their occurrence. In any event, the routine of attacks presents the danger of escalation, as one isolated attack (whether it is committed by a Palestinian or by a Jew) is enough to set the ground ablaze. Therefore, in order to avoid a continuation of the current situation, public, political, and media discourse that deals with the broader significance and context of the phenomenon is necessary. Perhaps this discussion will help decision makers search for a way out of the danger ridden status quo.

In addition to broad political and ongoing security realms, another dimension of the phenomenon must be addressed, namely, what emerges from the discussion on social media in the West Bank. This discussion reflects the atmosphere that at least partially explains the increase in the number and frequency of the attacks: The West Bank has a very young population with low labor force participation and a high rate of youth unemployment, which fuels frustration and radicalization and encourages the turn to terrorism. This discourse supports the line of thinking that calls for the development of a long term plan for job security in the West Bank in order to expand the labor market, with an emphasis on youth integration into government and civil institutions the West Bank in order to foster a sense of engagement and trust between the public and the governing systems. Notwithstanding – if not because of – the current political impasse, this should be done in full cooperation with the Palestinian Authority, which also possesses a clear interest in curbing the trend of escalation and preventing a situational flare-up.

