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## **Children of Tunnels, Children of Knives**

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The current security discourse in Israel relating to the Palestinian arena focuses primarily on two issues: the offensive tunnels dug from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory, which have returned to the headlines in recent weeks following the collapse and flooding of three tunnels within the Strip, and the wave of violence that erupted in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in the autumn of 2015, with knife-based terrorism at its forefront. Against this background, questions arise regarding the role of social media among the other elements fueling the actions of young Palestinians and motivating them to take part in digging and stabbing activity.

### **Children of Tunnels**

That Hamas resumed digging tunnels in the Gaza Strip following the end of Operation Protective Edge in August 2014 comes as no surprise. The destruction of the tunnels in the course of the operation and the action taken by the Egyptians to destroy the tunnels between the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula have caused immense damage to Hamas's military infrastructure and to the Strip's main industrial and economic artery. Since the IDF withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, the "Gaza Underground" infrastructure has enabled the entry of weapons, raw materials, and food from the Sinai Peninsula. The disappearance of these resources as a result of Egyptian activity has had a detrimental impact on young industrialists, engineers, and contractors that were previously supported by this infrastructure. Unemployment of youth in the Gaza Strip currently stands above 50 percent, and the generation of parents is now the dominant sector in the workforce. With no alternative source of employment, adolescents and young adults between the ages of 15 and 20 are employed by the Hamas military wing, which provides them with an income and a meaningful purpose by employing them to dig the offensive tunnels.

Social media constitutes an aggressive means of recruitment and branding in the service of Hamas, including viral campaigns (*#rijal al-Anfaq* – "men of the tunnels"). These campaigns include messages of national, religious, and heroic orientation on the digging

of tunnels. However, the involvement of these young Palestinians in the digging of tunnels does not necessarily derive first and foremost from ideological reasons, but stems also, and perhaps primarily, from economic needs, boredom, and a search for ultimate meaning. Accordingly, membership in the “commando units” of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, which coordinates the digging, has become the primary employment center for unemployed children and youth in Gaza.

At the same time, social media has served not only as recruitment agencies for the digging of tunnels, but also as a platform for voices opposed to these activities. The deaths caused by the collapse of the tunnels in January 2016 sparked a heated debate on social media focusing on the young Palestinians employed in the digging. Prominent in this discourse is a critical tone, reflected in opposition to what is perceived as Hamas’s cynical abuse of child and youth labor, and in some cases, is accompanied by messages that contrary to the recruitment vision of “light at the end of the tunnel,” these young Palestinians are actually digging their graves with their own hands. There has also been mounting discussion of the phenomenon of suicide among young Gazans due to their desperate situation. For its part, Hamas enhances its recruitment efforts by organizing extravagant funerals for the victims of this logistic arm of al-Qassam Brigades – a privilege previously reserved solely for the fighters.

### **Children of Knives**

In contrast to the events in the Gaza Strip, the phenomenon of the “stabbing youth” is not organized, run, or funded by any organization – not the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, or any other institution in East Jerusalem or the West Bank. It is a phenomenon of individuals, with some operating in small groups of two to three. None of these individuals are considered leaders of public opinion, although Hamas and the Palestinian Authority have been quick to embrace their activity and in some cases to claim responsibility for it. For both entities, this is based on political interest, and is a reflection of the competition between them for leadership in the Palestinian arena. Within this framework, they compete with one another to fund the funerals and provide financial support to the families of the perpetrators after their death, in the event they are killed during the attack.

The support for stabbing attacks is also reflected in the terminology used to describe these actions: the children carrying out the stabbings are referred to as “freedom fighters” and “*fedayeen*,” and their young friends describe them in romanticized heroic terms. Facebook pages contain many comparisons of the stabbing boys and girls to Hollywood heroes such as Batman, Spiderman, and Superman. Against the background of its declining status as the legitimate leadership among the younger generation, the Palestinian Authority has not proposed an alternative way to deal with the phenomenon.

Today's social media has broken the state monopoly and accessibility to knowledge and information, and has thus made the world that exists outside the refugee camps open to young Palestinians. Teenage boys and girls are now exposed not only to their immediate physical surroundings but also to those of millions of their peers, in Israel and around the world, who enjoy better living conditions than they do. The voice of these young people echoing on the internet – in “virtual classes” – and the extensive exposure they receive there creates an illusion of capability and power. However, when these young people attempt to make an impact and effect change outside the virtual platforms, they run into a low glass ceiling in Palestinian society in every way. When all the roads are blocked, frustration and radicalization arise among the young generation, leading, inter alia, to the “children of knives.” Moreover, the frequency and glorification of stabbing attacks constitute a source of inspiration for young Palestinians suffering from personal hardship in their immediate surroundings.

### **The Limitation of Powers: What Can or Cannot be Done**

Neither the imposition of a physical obstacle nor airstrikes will prevent young Palestinians armed with smartphones and an internet connection from rapidly spreading their ideas. This combination of ideas, a world with no physical borders, and rapid means of dissemination greatly limits, and in fact obviates the chances of suppressing and eliminating this threat by military means. This aspect of social media is characteristic of both the messages that inspire terrorism and the criticism of the violence – regardless of its sources. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube pages cannot be “massacred”; their servers are frequently located outside the arena of confrontation, and attempts to carry out “targeted assassinations” of the internet in certain regions are not effective. The erasure of pages and the closing of accounts only result in the reestablishment and reopening of these and other pages and accounts, in a mutation-like pattern.

Yet the prevalent view in Israel, which regards the young Palestinians who dig tunnels and conduct stabbing attacks as products of a process of religious and political radicalization by Hamas and of incitement led by the Palestinian Authority waged on the social media, is imprecise and at best a partial picture. The social networks are communication tools – not the root of the problems. The efforts to take care of the symptom, i.e., incitement on social media, without addressing the illness, namely, the problematic core issues in the Palestinian arena, including the hardships and sources of frustration of the young generation, will not serve to eradicate the phenomenon of children who turn to tunnels and knives.

On the other hand, alongside the efforts to implement operational (and partial) solutions to the symptoms – that is, the digging of attack tunnels and knife-based terrorism – and alongside action against incitement on the social networks, Israel should formulate an

extensive plan of action that focuses on employment and the economy, and seeks to build a positive future for the children of the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank. Reducing the attractiveness of joining the tunnel-digging teams in the Gaza Strip and doing away with the knife attacks as a means of national expression and as a solution to personal problems will require the promotion of solutions to hardships rooted in unemployment, poverty, and the impossibility of social mobility.

