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The Palestinian Terrorism of the Past Year:

Causes and Policy Recommendations

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The wave of "lone wolf" terrorism that has plagued Israel over the past year was marked predominantly by stabbing and car-ramming attacks, as well as occasional shooting incidents and organized attacks carried out by the Hamas infrastructure in the West Bank. The expressions of this wave of terrorism have fluctuated since it began in September 2015, alternating between periods of calm and periods of friction. Note that the visible manifestation of the phenomenon is limited compared to its true scope. According to reports, hundreds of attacks have been thwarted over the past year, and it is likely that without these efforts by both Israelis and Palestinians, the actual scope of the phenomenon would have been much greater and more violent.

In addition to its volatility, the wave of terrorism has also been cyclical: attacks by individuals lead to an Israeli response – in most cases the killing of the perpetrator ("neutralizing"). This in turn intensifies feelings of despair and desire for revenge among Palestinians, and so on. In effect, both sides are trapped. Periods of calm or declines in the volume of actual attacks should be attributed to the individual and joint preventive efforts of both the Israeli and Palestinian security forces. This is particularly due to the Israeli effort to distinguish between the population not involved in terrorism and the perpetrators of terrorism, and to minimize the areas of friction between Israeli security forces and the Palestinian population. But in practice, the phenomenon and the potential for escalation and widespread outbreaks remain: the decrease in the volume of attacks should be seen as a result of treating the symptoms, not their causes. Without truly addressing the causes, this wave of terrorism will presumably continue with all its fluctuation and erraticism. There is likewise the possibility of a dangerous deterioration due to a loss of control – resulting, for example, from the collapse of the Palestinian Authority or a significant decline in the performance of its security forces and their security cooperation with Israel – or an especially harsh response by Israel.

The scope and complexity of the wave of attacks do not seem to reflect a single, principal explanation for the phenomenon. Different actions carried out by different individuals have different motivations, although many of the actions share a common set of reasons and factors.

Among the external causes of the wave of attacks is inspiration originating with the Islamic State and the caliphate vision, alongside contrasting inspiration from the Arab Spring. These sources of inspiration are supported and strengthened on social networks, which also expose the younger generation to "Western pleasures" and to the zeitgeist (human rights, democracy, self-determination), paint the reality of the lives of the younger generation with dark, depressing colors, and undermine whatever remnants of hope they have regarding their personal futures. At the same time, social networks expose the younger generation to incitement and a picture of despair and day-to-day difficulties offered by radical Islamic groups such as the Islamic State. All of these exist within a reality of ongoing ethno-national conflict with no end in sight, and daily tension, with varying degrees of violence, between the Palestinian population and Israeli security forces. The combination of these factors intensifies the push to get up and do something.

Internal factors include despair at the inability of the Palestinian leadership to advance national goals, including ending the occupation, exercising political independence, and ensuring a better future on the personal level, especially for young people. These join the deep frustration with the Palestinian Authority's low performance level, its corruption, and its inability to provide personal security and maintain law and order. The harsh economic reality in the Palestinian territories does not allow young people to find themselves in the labor market. For educated young people, the problem is even more severe. Moreover, Palestinian society is undergoing accelerated generational changes, expressed in the weakening of traditional sources of authority that in the past served as restraints against violence and lawlessness. The authority of parents and "tribal elders" (sheikhs and family elders) has eroded, as have traditional social sources of authority that characterized the Palestinian social structure (the mukhtar and the education system – the standing of teachers, for example). Similarly, national and governmental institutions have declined in stature and difficulties in enforcing law and order have grown. In most cases, in the absence of the alternative of joining an organized terrorist infrastructure – due to the considerable damage done to the terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank – frustration, aggression and incitement are channeled into "lone wolf" terrorism.

This violence does not necessarily reflect national or religious sentiments, but rather in many cases is an expression of personal frustration and social distress. The act of stabbing has turned into a kind of "social cleansing" mechanism: young people whose self and social esteem have been undermined are eager to carry out an attack in an attempt to restore their reputation and standing. Traditional values or customs, such as family honor and blood feuds, remain effective and influential, and thus in many cases of "lone wolf" attacks the perpetrators are family members who are avenging the death of their relatives who sought to carry out an attack and were killed by the Israeli security forces, or to defend the honor of their family, as their act is seen as atoning for or purifying the disgrace brought upon it. Added to these internal factors are the incitement (though institutional incitement has declined in the past two months) and the copycat effect.

Since the individuals who set out with the goal of carrying out an attack know that their action will likely end with their death, their deeds can be seen as a kind of sacrifice. Although some have left behind explicit wills in which they do not attribute national or religious justification to their actions, the general atmosphere, namely the Israeli occupation and the political deadlock, creates a national-religious context for the attacks and may be used to accelerate the outbreak of more organized and dangerous terrorism.

Israel cannot address all of the fundamental problems motivating "lone wolf" terrorism, but it can moderate some of these factors with the goal of partially addressing the causes of the phenomenon and not just its symptoms. There is great importance in maintaining a low level of friction with the civilian population and continuing to refrain from collective punishment. In addition, Israel can make a very significant contribution toward improvement of the economic reality in the West Bank and the Palestinian Authority's strengthened ability to govern, which in turn can improve the restraint of violence.

Regarding the long term, with the continued stalemate of the political process on the one hand, and understanding the importance of a functional and effective PA on the other, Israel can act to redefine the kinds of areas in the West Bank. For example, Israel can redefine Area C in coordination with the Palestinians, or independently, if this coordination does not help. Instead of seeing all of it as a single bloc, it can be categorized into a number of areas representing different statuses for different purposes. For example, different areas can be designated for tourism development, agricultural development, development of industrial parks, and infrastructure development. Distinguishing between different parts of Area C would enable Israel to maintain control over the most essential areas for security and settlement needs, while allowing it to allocate land to the economic infrastructure required for developing the Palestinian economy in a way that expands the territory under full Palestinian control (such as Area A). In addition, Israel can apply the model of the electricity agreement signed recently with the Palestinian Authority to other types of infrastructure, such as water, sewage, environmental protection, and transportation, in a way that delegates more authority and responsibility to the Palestinian Authority. These kinds of agreements aid in improving the PA's ability to govern and its political performance, reduce the chances of its collapse, restrain violence, and may perhaps even succeed in strengthening its public support, which has significantly eroded in the past year. These kinds of steps might over time change the atmosphere, aid in enlisting the pragmatic Arab world and the international community in renewing the political process, and create better conditions for its revival.