

Recent attack suggests 'organized terrorism' is resurgent

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 23.08.2023

The spate of terrorist attacks in Judea and Samaria warranted the decision to move up the meeting of the Diplomatic-Security Cabinet, not just because of tragedies that made 2023 the deadliest year since 2005, but also because we are now potentially facing the return of organized terrorism to our daily lives.

Unlike the attack in Hawara, which appears to have been perpetrated when terrorists saw an opportunity to target Israelis who had arrived in Samaria, the attack in the Mount Hebron area earlier this week was against settlers in the region following a deliberative process. It was carried out by an organized, well-armed cell, using a drive-by method. To stage such an attack, preparations have to be made beforehand. It usually implies that the known terrorist organizations - rather than just local cells - are involved in the logistics, not just in the orchestration and funding aspects. We can also assume that the interrogation of the suspects who were detained early Tuesday will shed light on their terrorist affiliation and set things straight.

The attack took place just a few days after a Hamas cell was discovered in the Binyamin region, whose members plotted to abduct an IDF soldier and were detained by the Shin Bet security agency at an early stage of their planning. Its members were equipped with arms, they collected intelligence and cased the area for the would-be attack in order to familiarize themselves with the soldiers' routine in the Binyamin area. They also figured out escape routes and even managed to prepare a hideout where they were to keep their captive. They operated with the backing and direction of the Hamas headquarters in the Gaza Strip and beyond.

Such an abduction would not be just like any other attack. It is a complicated undertaking and requires coordination between various regions and logistical planning over a long period while avoiding detection by Israeli or Palestinian security services. Such an attack will also trigger a strong response and interrogation effort. Due to the ripple effect it could generate, a green light for such a decision would normally originate at the leadership level of an

organization; it is not just a local initiative. In light of all this, it would not be a stretch to assume that even as Israel experiences “lone-wolf terrorism” there is also an effort on the part of the organizations to restore the pattern of “organized terrorism”. Whether or not this is the case, the current wave means Israel must reassess its strategy in fighting terrorism in Judea and Samaria.

Hamas warns

The overall atmosphere in Judea and Samaria foments terrorism. The incitement from Gaza, Iran, and Hezbollah fans those flames, as does the incitement by various Palestinian Authority elements and the Fatah. To this, one must add the gleeful feeling that Israel is becoming weaker and disintegrating from within. The younger Palestinians, who have carried out most attacks, are not deterred as much as previous generations were. This generation was not around when Operation Defensive Shield was launched in 2002; it no longer feels the scars from that era. The attacks provide inspiration for copycat perpetrators - especially in the era of social media. The Palestinian street is replete with arms that are easily available. The friction and constant contact with Israeli society both within and outside the Green Line provide many opportunities to carry out attacks. Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority has been duplicitous: On the one hand, its security apparatuses have been coordinating with Israel and shown a commitment to prevent attacks; but on the other hand, it has been glorifying terrorists, supporting their families and has not put a single person on trial for terrorism against Israel. All these features have defined the recent terrorist wave.

Hamas, on top of all of the venom it sends our way, has also carried out several moves aimed at signaling to Israel what its limits are and where it stands. This was the case a week ago, when it sent 50 rockets toward the sea, including Ayyash-250 variants, which are designed for long ranges. This was designed to warn Israel lest it worsen conditions for Hamas prisoners. This was also the message it sent when it allowed rioters to storm the border fence in Gaza in several locations. Israel did not retaliate forcefully over these actions. Moreover, it continues to allow some 18,000 laborers from Gaza to enter Israel daily. While it's true that the salaries they earn, help stabilize the Gaza Strip economically, they also bolster Hamas. It is still unclear to what degree these workers get used by Hamas for other purposes. We can assume that the Shin Bet security agency has been monitoring this.

How should Israel respond?

First, we should make it clear once again that there is no such thing as a “game changer” and “game over” when fighting terrorists. This is a battle that requires steadfastness along with systematic, protracted actions aimed at eroding the enemy’s capabilities and having it question its actions’ viability and effectiveness.

Israel’s overarching goal in Judea and Samaria is to keep Israelis secure on both sides of the Green Line, to thwart terrorist attacks, and to prevent terrorists from building networks. The policy toward the Palestinian population is supposed to serve this goal, or at the very least not hinder it. It would be wrong to ignore the positive impact a peaceful civilian and economically stable routine could have. On the other hand, we must not shy away from taking vital steps for defense or deterrence just so we can keep this routine, or because there is a concern for the PA’s overall stature. The same goes for action well within Palestinian territory – which has so far been carried out by the IDF and the Shin Bet with a daring and wise approach – and for routine security operations, including the placing of roadblocks and other measures.

Israel should also continue with the policy of separating Gaza from Judea and Samaria and reassess the policy of allowing Gazans to work inside the Green Line, especially in light of how Gaza has been adversely affecting Judea and Samaria, including by directing terrorist activity there.

We should task the security agencies with devising a systematic program to prevent arms smuggling to Judea and Samaria and to locate and confiscate large quantities of arms there. The thought that this is a lost battle ignores the many successes Israel has had in countering similar challenges not that long ago.

Israel should increase its counterterrorism activity primarily when it comes to Hamas cells in Judea and Samaria and try to have some members of the Hamas headquarters, who have been directing terrorists in Judea and Samaria, taken out of the game. This will not only frustrate their efforts but also bolster deterrence vis-a-vis other enemies from other theaters.

As for the Palestinian Authority – this requires a separate strategic discussion, not just in the context of the latest events. This September marks the 30th anniversary of the Oslo Accords. This is a good opportunity to assess the overall cost-benefit analysis of that move. This will also be an opportunity to discuss its

future and the alternatives, as well as to decide where Israel is heading.

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