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Defense Intelligence Agency Appraisal

Israel: Experience in Combating Terrorism (U)

Summary

(C/NF) Terrorism has long been a major element of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel's response has been extensive in terms of resources invested, duration of counterterrorist measures, and persistence in trying to keep terrorism at a manageable level. Israeli society at all levels has been organized to meet what is seen to be a serious threat. The Israelis have prevented terrorism from disrupting the fabric of society, but this success has come at the price of major economic, social, military, and political costs. This experience suggests that to combat a serious terrorist problem effectively, there must be a sustained national effort. This entails the proper organization of civilian activity, the development of concepts and doctrine to deal with terrorism, the creation of effective decisionmaking procedures, and the establishment of appropriate counterterrorist forces. Israel's experience suggests this is not an easy task.

Discussion

The Historical Context

(C/NF) Both Arab and Jewish organizations have employed terrorism since Israel's pre-independence period. Before independence, Arabs and Jews conducted terrorist-type actions against one another, the British, and other targets. After independence, Israel faced a period of small-scale terrorist actions, at first largely by Arab individuals but later directed or supported by Arab states, primarily Egypt. The latter actions were much more serious in terms of scope, casualties produced, and the organization behind them. This period was effectively ended by Israel's 1956 war with Egypt, one outcome of which was the termination of Egyptian-supported Palestinian terrorist operations from the Gaza Strip.

(C/NF) From 1956 to 1965, Israel enjoyed almost complete freedom from terrorist operations. The rise of Palestinian political and military organizations, particularly after 1965, led to the reemergence of a serious terrorist threat. This period produced the most determined operations against Israel and the strongest Israeli response. After almost 20 years, the period has not ended, and it does not appear likely to end soon.

The Israeli Response

(C/NF) Israel's response to terrorism has been characterized by a confrontational approach, with the use of force seen as the essential means for dealing with the threat. In aggregate and over time, four important elements have served to keep the problem at a tolerable level:

- Counterterrorist operations were generally conducted within a political framework conceived and approved by the senior security echelon.
- Appropriate decisionmaking foras were established to permit rapid decision on, and implementation of, counterterrorist actions.

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- Concepts and doctrine regarding counter-terrorist measures were developed, which were consistent with the confrontational approach adopted by the government.
- Appropriate antiterrorist and counterterrorist forces were organized and employed against the threat.

(C/NF) The creation of political concepts under which major actions, including the use of large-scale force and extensive internal security measures, could be taken and still retain the support of Israeli society was perhaps the central step toward developing an effective approach. These political concepts included what came to be called Ben Gurionism, (a hardline, force-focused approach to dealing with the Arabs), the "war on terror" of the mid-1970s, and the offensive strategy of the Begin-Sharon-Eitan triumverate. Although all Israelis did not support these concepts, in their day they received substantial public backing. This allowed the government a relatively free hand in countering the perceived terrorist threat.

(C/NF) The commitment to a reprisal policy is deeply ingrained in the Israeli military establishment. Although Israeli military intelligence officials have consistently warned that such actions have had little deterrent effect on terrorists, the leadership has shown a willingness to take action if Israel's security interests are at stake. In general, the populace has supported former Prime Minister Rabin's view that "the only place to meet the terrorists is on the battlefield."

(C/NF) To carry out their approach to counterterrorism, the Israelis established appropriate decisionmaking groups and the channels necessary to implement the decisions made. This process involved determining, often in advance, which members of the security echelon would be involved in specific operational activity. For example, during certain periods territorial commanders were authorized to use cross-border artillery fire to retaliate for terrorist strikes in Israel, while authority to send a counterterrorist force across the border was retained at cabinet level. Decisionmaking procedures varied somewhat from cabinet to cabinet, but the government and military were able to quickly reach a decision and implement it. The decision to launch the 1978 incursion into Lebanon was made on the same evening that the terrorist incident occurred which provoked the action, and the military had initiated all measures short of actually crossing the border even before the cabinet had agreed to act.

(C/NF) Along with setting up decisionmaking procedures was the development of concepts and doctrine. Israel, again over time, moved from a policy of simple "eye for an eye" operations to a fully developed doctrine of retaliation. This held that terrorism could be countered by placing an unacceptably high price (to the Arabs) on such operations. By the mid-1950s, this idea had been supplemented by the concept of coercion or compulsion. Under this doctrine, terrorism was to be dealt with by forcing the Arab states to curb the activities of terrorist organizations operating from within their territory. This concept no longer linked specific terrorist actions to specific instances of retaliation but left Israel free to act when and where it felt most appropriate.

(C/NF) The doctrines of retaliation and coercion were supplemented in the 1960s and 1970s by those of preemption and prevention, under which Israel conducted operations aimed at heading off threatened terrorist operations or disrupting terrorist organizational activity. These concepts gave Israeli decisionmakers readily available and familiar guidelines to deal with terrorism. Furthermore, the concepts of coercion, preemption, and prevention were applicable to other issues relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Regardless of outcomes, Israeli decisionmakers perceive these concepts to be reasonable and justifiable responses to the evolving Arab threat.

(C/NF) Rounding out Israel's approach to countering terror was the development of the types of forces required to implement decisions. Israel deploys a formidable array of territorial brigades, frontier guard units, and paramilitary forces to defend against terrorist operations. These are backed by impressive physical security measures and a population acutely sensitive to the terrorist threat. One measure of the effort is the 40,000 volunteers serving in the Civil Defense, an organization created in 1974 in the wake of several serious incidents.

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(C/NF) Since independence, Israel has developed excellent capabilities for counterterrorist operations. Starting in the early 1950s, when not a single IDF unit was capable of offensive operations, the government created elite strike forces capable of conducting an array of counterterrorist operations. This effort included the doctrine of "exhausting the mission." That is, unless the raiding force suffered at least 50 percent casualties, its commander had to explain personally to the Chief of Staff why an operation failed.

(C/NF) By 1956, Israel had in the Paratroop Brigade a highly trained instrument for counterterrorist operations. It was used to raise the capabilities of other units, such as the Golani Infantry Brigade. Although other forces have been added, particularly in the Air Force and Navy, these paratroop and infantry units remain the core for counterterrorist operations outside Israel. They have a long tradition of success, and senior security officials have shown great confidence in their ability to carry out complex operations.

(C/NF) Despite the sustained and costly effort, Israel's success in countering terrorism has been mixed. At the most general level, the measures taken have prevented terrorism from seriously damaging the fabric of Israeli society. At a somewhat less general level, it appears that Israeli retaliatory, coercive, and preemptive actions have reduced the level of threat. Israeli cross-border counterterrorist actions, particularly some of the larger ones, have had a suppressive effect.

(C/NF) This was demonstrated along all four of its political boundaries. Successively, and largely through the use of extensive force against either the terrorists or host states, the Israelis brought a virtual end to terrorist operations along its borders with Egypt (1956), Jordan (1970), Syria (1974), and Lebanon (1982). While terrorist acts occasionally occur across these borders, the incidents have been reduced to a manageable level. The main terrorist threat now comes from groups or individuals inside Israel or Israeli-occupied territory, or from attacks on Israeli interests abroad. Although spectacular incidents sometimes occur, the trend since at least 1967 appears to have been toward a reduction in the number of terrorist incidents against Israel and Israeli interests abroad. While other factors may have been involved, Israel's forceful actions undoubtedly contributed substantially to the downward trend.

The Cost of Combating Terror

(C/NF) The cost of this relative success has been high, whether measured in economic, social, military, or political terms. Economically, counterterrorist measures consume a significant amount of Israel's scarce resources. For example, in 1975 about one percent of the workforce was involved just in guarding schools. For an economy already burdened by the diversion of personnel to reserve duty, this represents a substantial loss. There have also been social costs. Security measures disrupt civilian life, and the acute sensitivity to the terrorist threat probably produces psychological stress. Militarily, countering terrorism represents a major diversion of resources from the primary objective of meeting the conventional threat from the Arab states and historically has caused attrition among Israel's best combat units.

(C/NF) Politically, the costs have perhaps been the greatest. The severity of particular counterterrorist operations, beginning as early as 1953 with the retaliatory raid on Qibia, Jordan, and the attendant collateral damage, has severely tarnished Israel's image abroad. This was compounded by the IDF attacks on West Beirut in the summer of 1982. No matter how expertly conducted from a military perspective, IDF operations against terrorists operating from bases in civilian areas damaged Israel's prestige, the image of its military, and its relations with friendly states.

(C/NF) There were other costs as well. Since Palestinian terrorism and Israeli counterterrorist measures are inextricably linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict, specific actions have had a substantial effect on that conflict. This relationship can be seen in the circumstances leading to the 1956 and 1967 wars and the 1982 war in Lebanon.

(C/NF) Another cost, one much more difficult to measure, is the extent to which Israel's confrontational approach for dealing with terrorism contributed to its perpetuation. Israel's large-scale actions satisfied the Palestinian goal

of eliciting a strong Israeli response, bringing attention, and sometimes sympathy, to the terrorist cause. Furthermore, the Israeli approach does not appear to have hampered recruitment of Palestinians willing to die for their cause. It is an unresolved issue whether a more conciliatory policy toward the Arab states and Palestinian people would have been more effective in the long run. There are Israelis who would argue that it would have, although many past and present Israeli leaders are convinced that a confrontational approach makes terrorists more hesitant to conduct operations, and their supporters less ready to provide assistance.

Outlook

(C/NF) Given that Palestinian terrorism is an expression of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel will continue to face a serious problem despite its sustained and costly efforts to combat terrorism. With a few exceptions, senior Israeli officials and security experts acknowledge that this is the case. They expect to accomplish little more than to keep the problem from disrupting the fabric of life in Israel. In this they are likely to be successful, although the price in economic, social, military, and political terms will remain high.

(C/NF) The Israeli experience also provides a number of lessons. The first is that an approach to terrorism that relies primarily on force creates a dynamic of stimulus and response, rather than a clear end to the problem. A second lesson is that once begun, this dynamic may not be easy to stop. When both sides settle into a pattern of largely standardized actions and counteractions, the casualties pile up without any decisive resolution of the problem. A third lesson is that effective application of a military approach to combating terrorism requires sustained national effort. The proper political framework must exist if there is to be public support or the measures taken and acceptance of the inevitable casualties, especially among civilians.

(C/NF) Proper procedures must be created to allow smooth and rapid movement from incident to decision to implementation of the decision. In the absence of such procedures, there is a substantial probability of breakdown and ineffectiveness. Counterterrorist action must be considered within an appropriate conceptual framework. Decisionmakers must be able to explicitly link the type of action they are considering with the objective (deterrence, compulsion, preemption, prevention, or defense) they seek.

(C/NF) Finally, the appropriate types of forces must be available to implement counterterrorist operations. This entails more than just a body of elite troops. Proper intelligence support and command and control are also critical. Counterterrorist forces must be given opportunities to obtain experience. This is necessary for their own confidence and for that of decisionmakers weighing their use. Accordingly, there must be a willingness to pay the costs of acquiring such experience. Israel's success in combating terrorism suggests that this cost can be high and that developing a national approach to the problem is not easy.

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