ISRAEL AND COUNTERTERRORISM OPERATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, 2009-2014

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Introduction

Since the first international recognition of the state of Israel in 1949, that nation has been embroiled in a constant state of conflict, not only in overt wars between itself and its Arab neighbors, but also against numerous terrorist organizations seeking its demise as a nation. Regardless of the political landscape by which one views the conflict, the United Nations has recognized Israel's right to exist as a country, as well as its right to self-defense. In this latter aspect, the nation has been forced to adapt to virtually all forms of armed conflict in the defense of its borders.

With regard to terrorism, Israel has faced two primary enemies: Hamas and Hezbollah, though numerous other groups have surfaced over the years to take part in hostilities against that state. Some of these groups have been short lived, while others, including the aforementioned, have proven resilient and posed a constant threat to the safety and security of Israel. Such has been the variation in groups and their own specific goals, tactics, and weapons, Israel has been forced to impose strict controls over its borders, and nowhere more so than in the southern region around the Gaza Strip.

In 2005, however, Israel formally declared a unilateral withdrawal of its military forces from the Gaza Strip, thus ending its de facto occupation. This had the effect of more clearly transferring control of the area to the Palestinian Authority, thereby transforming it into a self-governing territory. Since 2007, the Gaza Strip has been government by Hamas, an elected entity that has been recognized both as a legitimate political organization as well as a terrorist group by various nations and international bodies since its formation. Attacks against Israel have been carried out by, among others, the Izz ad-

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Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, involving suicide bombings and rocket and mortar attacks, in addition to small arms fire, to include sniping actions.

Regardless of how one defines Hamas or other anti-Israeli terrorist groups today, in 2012 the United Nations recognized the Gaza Strip as part of the State of Palestine. It has therefore, ostensibly, enjoyed the same rights as other nations, with United Nations protections over access to humanitarian conditions and supplies in order to sustain its population. Today, the Gaza Strip has a population of approximately 1.76 million people.

Terrorism and Arms Procurement

In order to support its ongoing terrorist campaign against the state of Israel, Hamas and other terrorist organizations have sought to clandestinely obtain weapons of all types, to include small arms ammunition, hand grenades, land mines, explosives, and related equipment necessary for the production of improvised explosive devices (IED). Moreover, indigenous production of these devices, as well as other weapons, has long been undertaken to both provide and supplement the stockpiles of terrorist groups. While suicide vests and devices have proven a preferred weapon for individual attacks, the primary threat to southern Israel from the Gaza Strip has been the various rockets employed by terrorists both in Lebanon to the north and in the Gaza Strip to the south.

The Qassam rocket, for example, which was first fired in 2001, has undergone numerous modifications in an effort to increase range, accuracy, and payload. To date, at least three versions have been identified, though the handmade nature of the weapon makes each rocket essentially unique. These rockets have proven to be one of the most effective weapons in terms of sowing fear and actual casualties among the Israeli population.

Methods of Illicit Smuggling

Yet, while indigenous production of IEDs and other weapons both in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere has provided terrorists with the means to carry out ongoing attacks, this limited production has been insufficient, on its own, to enable terrorist groups to conduct attacks on a level conducive to a sustained unconventional war fighting campaign.

To this end, groups have long been supplied via external sources sympathetic to the Palestinian people as well as antagonistic to the existence of Israel as a state. Of these benefactors, Iran has proven a consistent ally to these terrorist groups, providing advanced weaponry via a clandestine network, to virtually any group willing to undertake such attacks. Yet, despite their willingness (and that of other sources) to provide weapons and equipment, such has been the ever-increasing robustness of Israel border security that infiltration of this war material has become correspondingly difficult.

Clearly, given the nature of the terrain of Israel, overland transportation of these materials has been the primary method of weapons smuggling. Whether by clandestine tunneling from Egypt into Israel, or overland means, terrorist groups have never stopped attempting to smuggle every manner of weapon and equipment via maritime means, specifically, via

ships and boats claiming to be innocent commercial fishing, cargo, or other legitimate vessels.

It is for this reason that Israel imposed, on 3 January 2009, an official naval blockade of a specific maritime boundary around the shores of the Gaza Strip – to deter and, if necessary, intercept any illicit attempts to smuggle terrorist-bound weapons and equipment into that territory. Since that time, the Israeli Navy has conducted hundreds of boarding operations, resulting in rare but sometimes spectacular quantities and types of weapons and equipment, bound for terrorist groups targeting Israel.

Maritime Counter-Smuggling Operations

The Israeli Navy has conducted hundreds of maritime interdictions of vessels it deems in violation of its self-imposed quarantine zone (and even some far from its shores, as distant as the Red Sea, for example. The majority of these boardings have proven innocent, devoid of any materials usable by terrorists, and been permitted to continue their legitimate massage through these waters. However, some major seizures in the eastern Mediterranean have also resulted from these actions, to include the following:

Shayetet 13

Many decades before Israel implemented the Gaza blockade, it formed its own maritime commando unit, known today as *Shayetet 13*. Roughly equivalent to the US Navy's SEAL Teams, S13, as it is better known, has conducted the vast majority of "high risk" boardings of vessels attempting to enter the blockade zone, and even some outside that zone. It has also conducted many well documented operations on land targeting terrorists and terrorist leaders in Israel as well as in neighboring countries.

Shayetet 13 is comprised of three primary units, each roughly company-sized:
- **Raids** (counterterrorism direct action, hostage rescue, etc.)
- **Above water** (small and high-speed boat operations)
- **Under water** (hydrographic reconnaissance, underwater offensive and defense operations, etc.)

Of these, the first two are those primarily responsible for boarding operations targeting ships suspected of smuggling weapons and arms into the Gaza Strip and throughout the region, to include the Red Sea (see following examples). It should be noted that S13's Raids unit also contains a smaller direct action team, similar to the US Navy's *Naval Special Warfare Development Group* (known more popularly as *SEAL Team Six*).

While a detailed examination of the original formation of this unit, its development of the decades, as well as its weapons, equipment, and other aspects is beyond the scope of this paper, it is sufficient to note that training and selection for S13 is rigorous, generally considered the most challenging in the Israeli military. The dropout rates for candidates are high, though those who make it through this training and on into S13 as full-time operators are considered among the best in the world. Given their high level of experience and training, they often share these skills in joint training operations

conducted with the US Navy SEALs and Special Boat Units (SWCC), as well as other nations.

Maritime Interdiction Operations

Following is a partial list of major maritime countersmuggling operations conducted by the Israeli Navy, utilizing S13 commando teams as the primary boarding force:

- March 2014 – The most recent major maritime operation involving S13 and the Israeli Navy occurred on 5 March, when the M/V *Klos C*, a Panamanian-registered cargo ship, was boarded by S13 in the Red Sea. The vessel had been suspected of carrying Iranian weapons bound for militant groups in the Gaza Strip. This was proven true when, several days later, the ship was docked in Eliat and inspected by the IDF. Beneath a heavy cargo of Portland cement, inspectors discovered a cargo of long-range missiles, 181 mortars, and 181,000 rounds of small arms ammunition.
- March 2011 – Acting on intelligence that Iran might be attempting to smuggle weapons into Israel en route to Hamas, the M/V *Victoria* was stopped by Israeli missile ships, then boarded by S13 via high-speed boats approximately 200 miles from the Israeli coast. The *Victoria*, under Israeli control, was directed to the port of Ashdod for inspection. Upon arrival, it was discovered that the ship carried some of the most advanced weaponry ever seized in a maritime operation. This included: 6 Chinese-made C-704 anti-ship missiles, 2 British-made radar systems (for use in missile guidance), and 2 missile launchers. Other weapons included 2,270 mortar rounds, and almost 67,000 rounds of small arms ammunition.
- November 2009 – M/V *Francop*, an Antiguan-flagged vessel, was intercepted by the Israeli Navy, utilizing S13 boarding teams, approximately 160 km (100 miles) off the Israeli coast, near Cyprus. The vessel was then towed to the port of Ashdod for inspection. Upon arrival, a thorough inspection of the *Francop* revealed 320 tons of weapons, including 9,000 mortar shells, thousands of 107mm Katyusha rockets, and hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition. Israeli officials later stated they had determined the cargo was destined for Hezbollah militants.
- January 2002 – The M/V Karine A was seized in the Red Sea in a long-range operation conducted by the Israeli Navy and spearheaded by S13 boarding teams, though backed by the Israeli Air Force, given the distance to the target. Once taken under control, the ship was sailed to the port of Eliat for inspection. Most notable with regard to this seizure was not only its size (at 50 tons of weapons, one of the largest yet encountered by the Israeli Navy), but by the variety and quantity of weapons. These included, in addition to the standard small arms, two and a half tons of raw explosives (almost certainly destined for use in suicide bombings), Katushya rockets, anti-tank mines, and advanced AT-3 Sagger anti-tank missiles.

The Gaza Flotilla Raid

Not all Israeli Navy boarding operations, however, have met with such success. In fact, one such recent action caused significant backlash with regard to public relations for the state of Israel, in addition to the loss of life of unarmed civilians. On 31 May 2010, the so-called "Gaza Freedom Flotilla", a collection of six unarmed civilian vessels set out from various ports in the region to provide, ostensibly, humanitarian aid to Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip by the *Free Gaza Movement* – its ninth attempt to break the blockade.

Given the proven history of arms smuggling, however, and the fact that a well-known naval blockade was in place around the Gaza Strip, the flotilla of six ships was an obvious target for boarding by the Israeli Navy and S13 commandos. This fact was not lost on the flotilla organizers, who were intent on bringing global attention to their assertion that the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip were living under a virtual stranglehold by the Israelis. It was their intention, as a later United Nations report concluded, that they intended to exploit this military blockade for their own public relations campaign.

As the convoy neared the established coordinates for the blockade, the Israeli Navy warned the vessels not to violate the established maritime boundaries surrounding the coastline. Both the Israeli Navy and the flotilla organizers' own video and audio crews documented this effort, ostensibly to verify the conditions of the confrontation that was bound to ensue. Despite these warnings, the flotilla of six ships continued towards Gaza and were then deemed legitimate targets for military boarding operations, and Israeli military vessels converged on the scene.

While most of the boardings by 71 S13 commandos, broken down into independent teams targeting specific ships, went relatively without incident, the boarding of the largest ship, M/V *Mavi Marmara*, quickly turned into a worst-case situation. As fifteen S13 commandos fast roped onto the topmost deck of the ship from a hovering Blackhawk helicopter, they were immediately set upon by activists, who attacked them with non-lethal and potentially lethal weapons, such as Molotov cocktails and steel pipes. This incident was fully documented by an IDF vessel moving adjacent to the *Mavi Marmara*, using infrared nightvision video equipment.

What happened immediately prior, however, remains in dispute. The activists claimed that the S13 commandos opened fire with live ammunition, and their actions were simply in self-defense. What is not in dispute is the fact that nine activists were killed during the boarding action by S13 utilizing their close quarters weapons. All of the dead were shot multiple times, according to the UN after-action report, indicating purposeful use of their firearms by S13. The report, however, in part based on reviews of reports filed by the Turkish and Israeli governments, could not resolve which actions took place first, nor if the shots were fired in self-defense.

Regardless of what actually occurred on that vessel during the boarding, the political fallout was swift and largely focused on the Israeli military's use of force against unarmed activists. The UN report, as stated, while finding fault on both sides, failed to make a conclusive determination as to who was actually to blame for the deaths and injuries that resulted. Inspections of all vessels revealed no weapons or equipment that could be used by terrorists; however, the UN report also revealed that the ships were also not carrying enough humanitarian aid cargo to justify their actions in entering a well-known blockade zone, casting some question as to their true intentions in entering the quarantined maritime area.

Conclusions

Every nation, according to the United Nations and other international institutions, has the right to self-defense. Despite this, the admittedly unique example of pro-Palestinian terrorism set against the Israeli military intent on preventing the introduction of illicit weapons into the hands of local terrorist groups provides a demonstrable need for maritime counterterrorism forces capable of conducting such operations. S13 has proven its value in conducting high risk, at sea boardings – notably, though with the cited exception, using non-lethal force when possible.

It is also clear that even the most highly trained forces will never operate without the reality that they will be called on to undertake the mist risky of actions, nor can it be guaranteed that lethal force may not be necessary. Yet, the Israeli example has shown, strictly from a maritime interception perspective, that such a capability is critical for those states seeking to keep their shores safe from enemies seeking to do their population harm, particularly in this modern era of terrorism and counterterrorism.