

# **Intelligence challenges due to the changing face of Israel's non-state adversaries: From Ramadan to Operation Breaking Dawn 2022**

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Publication date: 31 August 2022**

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## **Introduction**

Israeli police and security services expected an increase in domestic unrest during the Muslim month of Ramadan as is normal every year. There is always friction on the Temple Mount / Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and this has the potential to spread throughout the country as it did last year in 2021.

However they were unprepared for the violent domestic events that started in March 2022 just prior to Ramadan. This year there were terrorist attacks in the heart of Israeli cities and the intelligence services didn't have any prior information. Some of the attacks were perpetrated by those affiliated with the Islamic State (ISIS), even though it doesn't have a recognized affiliate in Israel. This was a first even though the scenario had been considered for over a decade due to the presence and activities of ISIS in neighboring states.

Until now terrorist attacks in Israeli cities have been by those almost solely associated with the Palestinian liberation struggle for example various Palestinian liberation organizations such as the PLO/FATAH factions in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria).

Similarly later in the year in August the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) conducted a limited operation against the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Gaza. Until now Hamas has been viewed as the main adversary in Gaza. It is clear that 2022 will go down in history as a watershed for intelligence challenges due to the changing face of Israel's non-state adversaries both in Israeli cities, Gaza and the West Bank.

## **The Palestinian cause or the Islamic Caliphate?**

Handling security and defence in Israeli cities and the West Bank the challenging question for the intelligence services is whether ISIS and the PIJ have joined the Palestinian liberation struggle and are working with other groups or whether they are acting in their own capacity and intent to further and promote chaos, anarchy and an Islamic Caliphate. At the fore of such analysis is whether an

Islamic Caliphate is the goal and if so then will the Palestinians have a territorial dimension within it?

Gathering data and analyzing the results to such questions, and all associated and linked to them, is going to be a challenge for the Israel intelligence services and more so for the police, defense and security forces who will need to be both proactive and reactive against all threats.

An insight to the challenge is that ISIS like Al Qaeda is a franchise with no central control. Individuals take it upon themselves to act and engage in terror. There is usually no prior warning as no-one else is involved in the planning and implementation of the terror attack.

Such challenges are exemplified and was evident on 27 March 2022 when, two Islamic State gunmen opened fire at a bus stop in the Israeli city of Hadera, Israel, killing two people and injuring twelve. Both were Arab Israeli citizens and cousins.

The brother of one is an Arab Israeli citizen who is a policeman serving at a police station in a Israeli city. This highlights the extreme dichotomy in the same family and the challenge of the intelligence and security forces. He was totally unaware of his brother's and cousin's affiliations and intentions and was shocked. One of those killed was a Druze border policeman and a close relative of a Judge. Such is the diversity of those affected by the wave of violence.

Without going into the lengthy details of each terror attack in Israeli cities and the West Bank, the details of the first six months of 2022 can be summarized as 21 Israeli civilians murdered, leaving behind 43 orphans, and 316 were injured. The bulk of the incidents occurred in the months of March, April and May. This does not include hundreds of attacks against Israeli security forces. The Palestinian cause was not in any manner advanced by these and the known Palestinian liberation organizations were less involved than in previous years.

### **The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood**

Another watershed for 2022 has been the increased threat posed by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). The PIJ was formed in 1981 as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, that is a transnational Sunni Islamist organization founded in Egypt by Islamic scholar and schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna in 1928. The PIJ's operations have included suicide bombings, attacks on Israeli civilians, as well as the firing of rockets into Israel. PIJ has been designated a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Israel.

Although the PIJ promotes Palestinian liberation it is at odds with the Palestinian Authority who has control over West Bank Muslim areas since the 1994 Oslo Accords and with Hamas who has control over Gaza since Israel's unilateral withdrawal in 2005. For example it has dozens of religious organizations that are registered as NGOs and operate mosques, schools, and medical facilities that offer free services in the West Bank however like other Islamic associations, these are heavily scrutinized by the Palestinian Authority who has shut some of them down.

Until August 2022 Gaza was seen by Israeli intelligence, defense and security forces as being under the control of Hamas who was the main perpetrator of terror attacks from there with Palestinian liberation as a main goal. The PIJ was seen as a smaller element that could be controlled by Hamas yet more Islamist and less Palestinian liberation orientated.

## **Israel Defence Force's Operation Breaking Dawn**

In July 2022 due to the rise of activities and threats by the PIJ Israeli intelligence changed this threat perception placing the PIJ as an organization that posed a significant threat and that was not under the control of Hamas. In doing so it is clear that 2022 will go down in history as a watershed for intelligence challenges also in Gaza due to the changing face of Israel's non-state adversaries.

As a consequence Israel undertook a limited military operation against the PIJ infrastructure in the Gaza Strip that came to a formal close at 11:30 PM local time on August 7. It was called Operation Breaking Dawn and was launched on August 5 when the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) mobilized pre-emptively to thwart imminent revenge attacks, after Israel arrested PIJ chieftain Bassam al-Saadi in the West Bank city of Jenin on August 1.

The Operation was an Israeli tactical success. The balance sheet after three days of battle substantiates accounts of Israel's resounding victory over the PIJ. For example Tayseer Jabari and Khaled Mansour—commanders of PIJ's Northern Gaza and Southern Gaza divisions, respectively—were targeted and eliminated, along with additional members of the organization's top echelon.

No serious casualties were suffered in Israel. Of the more than 1,100 rockets which PIJ fired on the country, 96 percent of those deemed capable of exacting significant damage were intercepted and destroyed by the Iron Dome defense system. Israel also managed to delicately thread the needle, effectively neutralizing the PIJ threat in Gaza while ensuring, at the same time, that Hamas—which dominates Gaza—remained outside the fray, thus, containing the potential for escalation into a broader conflict.

The same holds true for what would have been a dangerous spread of the violence to the Palestinian population in the West Bank or, more perilously, to Israel's Arab citizens. The August 7 visits of a record 2,200 Israeli Jews to the Temple Mount—where they marked the annual commemoration of the destruction of the First and Second Temples—proceeded without incident as well.

Critically, from Israel's standpoint, the Operation was brought to a swift end, before a seemingly inevitable miscalculation could occur and bring about some catastrophe that might have caused Israel's allies' relative support for the offensive to dissipate.

Events unfolded in Israel's favor for multiple reasons. Beyond its superior firepower, Israel was able to collect and employ high-quality intelligence that enabled precision strikes against PIJ objectives. Caretaker Prime Minister Yair Lapid resisted intense public pressure to lift the preventive lockdowns on areas adjacent to Gaza, biding his time until the circumstances aligned for the IDF to spring into action. The assault against Jabari was synchronized purposefully to coincide with a fictitious fuel shipment to Israel's Kerem Shalom border crossing with Gaza.

Also contributing to Israel's resilience was a rare display of unity between its political leaders. Opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu appeared for—and was photographed at—his first proper consultation with Lapid. Defense Minister Benny Gantz—another contender for the premiership in Israel's upcoming November 1 election—and Lapid displayed harmony of function as well. Consensus allowed military planners to focus on their mission without the distraction of dissenting voices.

## Conclusions

Israel's intelligence services are challenged by a huge amount of potential terrorist activity from Gaza, the West Bank, in Israel itself and from the northern front in southern Lebanon and southern Syria. Previous rounds of fighting have historically concluded with an expectation of the one to follow next. This is no different from the first eight months of 2022.

What is different is that during 2022 the main acts of terror and the main non-state adversaries have not openly identified with the Palestinian liberation struggle or the largest of its organizations and terror groups. ISIS and the PIJ have been the main protagonists that Israel's intelligence, defense and security forces have tackled so far in 2022.

This gives rise to a set of questions and challenges. For example: Will this hold the seeds of a different future amid the shifting sands of the Middle East? Issues stand out are: Who is the force to be approached with for peace in Gaza – Hamas or the PIJ? Does Teheran pull the strings of the PIJ as it does with Hamas? And indeed how can ISIS terror be tackled in Israeli cities and the West bank?

Other important issues have still to be resolved for example: There are Israeli's being held in captivity in Gaza – how will their release be achieved with the PIJ or Hamas? And wider – can pragmatism be cultivated with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah to resolve the Palestinian quest for independence?

While this may sound pessimistic there is also optimism for in a few weeks there will be the second anniversary of the signing of the Abraham Accords, the normalization deals signed between Israel and an array of Arab countries across the Middle East and Africa. Statements by the United Arab Emirates and Morocco—two kingdoms that are forging new diplomatic relationships with Israel—pointedly refrained from criticizing Israel's Operation in Gaza against the PIJ, attesting to the robust nature of these contacts.

Will this example of these mutually beneficial ties eventually, persuade Palestinian decision-makers in both the West Bank and Gaza to also favor constructive engagement with Israel over an alternative fate of increased isolation and despair? And if so will they assist in tackling the threat posed by ISIS who seek more of a Islamic Caliphate than a State of Palestinian? And what will happen with the PIJ?