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Israel and the threat of the "Mad Soldier" terror attacks

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Copyright: @ 2023 Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr) Publication date: 20 August 2023

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In May 2023, a member of the Tunisian security forces opened fire on worshipers leaving the synagogue in Djerba, killing two of them and two members of the Tunisian security forces and injuring others before being killed by the force that secured the synagogue. In June 2023, an Egyptian policeman from Sinai entered the territory of the State of Israel and killed three IDF soldiers. In both cases, the attack was carried out by a member of the security forces, *who acted alone*.

This article will discuss the phenomenon of the *lone terrorist belonging to the security forces* whose action is similar to a broader phenomenon of lone terrorist's attacks which has been nicknamed "lone wolf attacks".

In several cases where a member of the security forces carried out an attack, the authorities of the country to which he belonged chose to claim the terrorist's insanity and therefore I call these attacks the **"Mad Soldier" attacks**.

The "Mad Soldier" attack has serious implications both for the country that is the victim of the attack and for the country whose security forces the terrorist belonged to, and for the relations between the countries.

Attacks of this type have occurred in various parts of the world, but the article will discuss only attacks that were directed against the State of Israel or against Jewish targets in the world.

"The Lone Wolf" terror attacks

Terror attacks carried out by a terrorist acting alone are not a new phenomenon, but the number and impact of attacks has increased in the last decade and these attacks have been called "lone wolf" attacks.¹

This method of operation poses a serious challenge to the security services around the world and in Israel due to the difficulty of identifying, locating and arresting the terrorist before he carries out the attack. Over the past few years, many studies have been done in Israel and around the world in order to understand the phenomenon. Below are several examples of descriptions and definitions of the "lone wolf" terrorist:

A "lone wolf" or "lone wolf terrorist" is a person who commits violent acts (terrorist acts) alone outside the framework of a movement or organization and without receiving assistance and materials or instructions to carry out the attack from any group. Such a terrorist does not usually share his intentions with others. Although the "lone wolf" acts alone, he can be influenced and motivated by the belief and ideology of an external group.

The "lone wolf" terrorist is a terrorist who operates individually, does not belong to an organized terrorist group or network but may sympathize and share an ideology with them and whose modus operandi is conceived and directed by the individual without any direct outside command or hierarchy.²

"A lone wolf " is a person who acts on his or her own without orders from — or even connections to — an organization. A lone wolf is a standalone operative who by his very nature is embedded in the targeted society and is capable of self-activation at any time. The terms "targeted society" and "self-activation" imply that the lone wolf is acting in a rational way and that his acts are aimed against that society or parts

thereof. *These acts are politically or religiously motivated and aim to influence public opinion or political decision-making.*"³

The characteristics of "Mad Soldier" attacks

In the course of about 4 decades, a total of seven attacks in the "Mad Soldier" model were carried out against Israeli targets along the borders or in the territory of Arab countries, however, two of these attacks occurred in the last months (May and June 2023), and therefore an up-to-date examination of this phenomenon is required.

The attacks carried out by members of the security forces can be seen as a category within the broad phenomenon of "Lone Wolf" attacks, but there are characteristics that distinguish this category of terrorists and attacks that require a specific characterization of the phenomenon:

Similar to the "Lone Wolf" terrorists, most of the "Mad Soldier" attacks were carried out by young people in their twenties, most of them single. However, in the "Mad Soldier" attacks, they carried out the attacks during their military or police service.

It seems that the decision of a soldier or policeman to carry out an attack is the result of the combination between the influence of Islamic radicalization and personal circumstances.

Sometimes it is possible to point to the connection and influence of events related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a factor influencing the timing of the attack, but the connection is usually circumstantial and it is not possible to find a direct connection between the events.

Unlike the terrorists in the "Lone Wolf" attacks, that most of them lack formal military training, all the terrorists in the "Mad Soldier" category served in their country's security forces, underwent formal military training, and had a relatively high skill in operating their weapons.

The "Mad Soldier" carries out the attack in the area in which he serves and which he knows. The terrorist, by virtue of being a member of the security forces, is familiar with the operational routine and procedures,

knows the commanders and soldiers who serve with him, and therefore can plan the attack at the optimal timing and conditions for him.

The "Mad Soldier" can gather detailed and up-to-date intelligence on the adversary or on the civilian target of the attack, such as groups of visitors, tourists or vacationers.

The "Mad Soldier" attack is carried out using (standard) military weapons, the terrorist has at his disposal a considerable amount of ammunition which he has accumulated ahead of time and therefore the degree of lethality of the attack is usually high.

The terrorist, a member of the security forces, dressed in military or police uniform, operates on "a border of peace" where the parties cooperate, and this gives him a distinct advantage of surprise when he opens fire first, thus increasing the potential casualty rate and allowing the attacker to continue the attack or escape from the attack area back to the territory that he came from (Egypt or Jordan).

In some of the attacks, the terrorist was ready to kill his commanders and friends when they tried to prevent him from continuing the attack or arrest him after the attack.

In a number of attacks, the targets of the attack were Israeli military personnel who served in the area of the attack or arrived at it at the time of the attack, but the terrorist also killed civilians who randomly happened upon the scene of the attack.

In some of the attacks, the terrorist chose to attack civilians who had come to visit: the attack against the school girls at "Island of Peace" in Naharaim (1997) in Jordan, Israeli tourists in Ras Burka (1985) in Egypt or worshipers at the synagogue in Djerba in Tunisia (2023).

The attack on the Israel-Egypt border near Mount Harif (June 2023)

The Israel-Egypt border has been largely peaceful since the two countries signed a peace agreement in 1979. In the past decade, Israel built a large barrier along the border, largely aimed at keeping out African migrants and Islamic terrorists who operate in Egypt's Sinai.

Two IDF soldiers were shot and killed early on June 3, 2023 while an additional third soldier was killed by the same terrorist several hours later in an exchange of fire. The incidents occurred between Mount Sagi and Mount Harif in the Negev desert.⁴

An IDF soldier and a female soldier were killed at a guard position near the border fence with Egypt by an Egyptian policeman managed to infiltrate Israel from Sinai. The IDF estimated that the two were shot separately outside the position. They were found lifeless at an IDF guard post sometime after 6 a.m. by members of their team who had been sent to check on their well being after they failed to respond to their radios.⁵

Following the discovery of their bodies, additional reinforcements arrived and a search operation was carried out in order to locate the perpetrator, who was believed to have infiltrated Israel from across the border at some point during the night.

The terrorist was identified in subsequent scans, and the IDF forces were able to kill him at the end of an exchange of fire in difficult field conditions. In the exchange of fire, another IDF soldier was killed and an additional soldier was slightly injured.⁶

Egypt and Israel have agreed to form a joint committee to investigate the shooting incident that took place on the Egyptian-Israeli border.⁷

The terrorist

The Egyptian policeman who carried out the attack was Muhammad Salah Ibrahim, in his 20s, enlisted in 2022 for the three-year mandatory service and was stationed at the border line with Israel in Sinai. His father died a few years ago, and he did not finish high school and worked at the Public Transportation Authority to support his family. The policeman lived with his family in the Ein Shams area of Cairo.

The terrorist, Mohammed Salah, carried firearm and six magazines of ammunition and a knife that he used to cut the zip ties at the border barrier.⁸ He also carried a Koran and likely motivated by religious extremism.⁹

The Egyptian authorities forbade the family to hold a public funeral and he was buried in a modest ceremony with the participation of only a few relatives, in the al-Kalyubia district in northern Cairo, and condolence visits to his family were also reduced to the regime's demand.¹⁰

The Egyptian narrative

The terrorist act of the Egyptian policeman put the authorities in Egypt in a complex situation when on the one hand it was required to abide by its agreements and obligations with Israel and on the other hand it had to deal with public opinion in Egypt hostile to Israel.

The Egyptian army claimed that "one of the security personnel, from the force responsible for guarding the border, chased drug smugglers - and during the chase he crossed the border and was involved in an exchange of fire that caused the death of 3 Israeli soldiers." The Egyptian army noted that the security man was also killed in the same exchange of fire.¹¹

Contrary to the official position of the authorities in Egypt the social media networks in the country expressed sympathy for the terrorist, defined him as a hero and "shahid" (martyr) and emphasized his success in killing 3 Israeli soldiers. On social media, comparisons were made between the attack carried out by Muhammad Salah Ibrahim and previous terror attacks of Egyptian terrorists like the Egyptian policeman Suleiman Khater, who murdered seven Israelis in 1985 in an attack he carried out in Ras Burka in Sinai, as well as the Egyptian policeman, Ayman Muhammad Hassan, who killed five Israelis near Eilat in 1990.¹²

Support for the attack and its execution was also heard from the Muslim Brotherhood movement and entities affiliated with them, such as the Hamas movement and the World Union of Muslim Scholars, as well as from the Palestinian Authority and the Fatah movement.¹³

The authorities in Egypt denied that the policeman was motivated by an extreme Islamic ideology, but despite these the Egyptian security services launched an extensive investigation of his relatives and friends

to find out if he belonged to an extreme political or religious organization.¹⁴

The attack on the synagogue in Djerba in Tunisia (May 2023)

On May 9, 2023, Wissam Khazri, 30 years old, who served in the National Guard at the base of the Tunisian Navy on the island of Djerba, murdered another security man at the base where he served, took his weapon and ammunition, put on a protective vest and rode a motorcycle towards the El Gariba Synagogue. The attack took place when the traditional event on the occasion of Lag Ba'Omer (holiday) was held there, with the participation of hundreds of Jews and Israelis who came especially from the country. Two of those killed in the attack are Jews, and one of them - who lived in Tunisia - was also an Israeli citizen (and was later buried in Israel).¹⁵

The attacker fired at visitors who were near the synagogue and the Tunisian security forces. Two Jewish visitors and two other security personnel were killed in the shooting (another security personnel later died of his wounds), and at least four security personnel and four visitors were injured. The threat was eliminated in an exchange of fire with the local security forces.

The authorities in Tunisia made efforts to reduce as much as possible the resonance of the event and the media refrained from discussing the issue according to the authorities' demand. Tunisia avoided defining the event as a terrorist attack, and the Tunisian president defined it as a criminal act.¹⁶

The site of the attack, the synagogue, is about a 20-minute drive from the base where the attack was carried out, and therefore it appears that the victim was thoroughly planned and included the method of equipping himself with weapons (murder of a security guard at the base), means of transportation to reach the destination, information about the security procedures around the synagogue and choosing the wrong time at the time when many visitors were in the destination.

Following the attack carried out by a member of the National Guard, the commander of the National Guard was replaced on May 24. The new commander, General Hossein Jarbi, was in command until his new appointment as commander of the National Guard's special forces and has rich experience in fighting terrorism.¹⁷

The National Guard in Tunisia is a security force subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior and deployed all over the country and at the air ports, the sea and the land border crossings.

Al Gariba Synagogue was previously a target of Al Qaeda in 2002. A suicide bomber detonated a car bomb near the synagogue and in the attack 21 people were killed and dozens were injured.

Summary

In the countries where the "Mad Soldier" attacks took place (Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia), the authorities are waging a war against the Islamic terrorist organizations and are managing to significantly reduce the terrorist attacks against targets identified with the regime as well as against Israel.

Egypt and Jordan preferred to describe the military perpetrators of the attacks against Israel as people suffering from a mental illness - a "Mad Soldier". Such a description turns the attack into an event resulting from the perpetrator's mental illness, explains the inability to prevent such an event in advance and prevents the disclosure of the terrorist's political or religious motives that could cause embarrassment to the authorities at home or vis-a-vis Israel and the international system.

Despite the long years of peace between Israel and Egypt and Jordan, there is a significant gap between the governments' approach to the "Mad Soldier" attacks and their determination to prevent this phenomenon and large sections of the public in these countries who see the soldiers who carry out the attacks against Israel as national heroes.

In the last terrorist attack on the Egyptian border (June 2023), the Egyptians took a different approach and hurried to present a version according to which the policeman was an Egyptian patriot who was

allegedly involved in protecting the border of the homeland and dealt with drug smugglers and was killed while performing his duties.

The two "Mad Soldier" attacks that took place in the last two months (May and June 2023) raise concerns that they will be a source of inspiration for other people who will try to follow in the path of the perpetrators. Israel's security forces have to learn the lessons from the latest attack on the Israel-Egypt border in order to be better prepared to thwart "Mad Soldier" attacks if they occur in the future.

Notes:

¹ Extreme right-wing attacks in the US in the 1990s were the first to be called "lone wolf" victims.

² Ramon Spaaj, The enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: an assessment, Studies in conflict and terrorism, Volume 33, 2010 – Issue 9, September 2, 2009.

³ Fred Burton and Scott Stewart. The lone wolf disconnected. Terrorism Intelligence Report - STRATFOR, 2008.

⁴ Shira Silkoff, IDF to probe terror killing of three Israeli soldiers by Egyptian policeman, June 4, 2023.

⁵ יואב זיתון, שוטר מצרי חדר לישראל, הרג 3 לוחמים בגבול – וחוסל, 3, ynet, ביוני 2023.

⁶ שחר קליימן, "גיביתי את הירי, איימו לשחוט אותי": הפיגוע בגבול סיני מטלטל את מצרים, ישראל היום, 8 ביוני 2023.

⁷ Ahmed Eleiba, The Negev border incident, Ahram online, June 7, 2023.

⁸ Egyptian border terrorist was carrying Koran, likely motivated by extremism, the Jerusalem post, June 4, 2023.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Taher Mansour, fearing he could become a 'martyr', Egypt bans public funeral for soldier 'who killed three Israelis', The new Arab, June 7, 2023.

¹¹ Ahmed Eleiba, The Negev border incident, Ahram online, June 7, 2023.

¹² Taher Mansour, fearing he could become a 'martyr', Egypt bans public funeral for soldier 'who killed three Israelis', The new Arab, June 7, 2023.

¹³ הרשות הפלסטינית ותנועת פת"ח משבחות את השוטר המצרי מוחמד צלאח שרצח שלושה חיילים ישראלים, ממרי, 14 ביוני 2023.

¹⁴ שחר קליימן, "גינתי את הירי, איימו לשחוט אותי": הפיגוע בגבול סיני מטלטל את מצרים, ישראל היום, 8 ביוני 2023.

¹⁵ Tourism dreams and violence woes offer Tunisia's Djerba attack, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2023.

¹⁶ Simon Speakman Cordall, after synagogue attack, Tunisia ignores elephant in the room, foreign policy, June 23, 2023.

¹⁷ Tunisia: the former commander of the Special Forces heads the National Guard, Nova news, May 25, 2023.