Fatah: Cross-Border Raids

The Palestinian strategy of provoking an uprising in the West Bank and Gaza fails. But they have more success with the second approach: cross border raids. After the 1967 war, but even before it, there's a large Palestinian refugee presence in Jordan and in Lebanon. And from these camps, from these areas, there are repeated raids on Israel itself. And in 1968, you have roughly 1,500 of these raids.

Now, the Palestinians take advantage of the weakness of the governments in Lebanon and Jordan. And this weakness is both military-- that the Palestinians are well armed, it's hard for these small governments with small armed forces to quash them-- but it's also a political weakness.

The Palestinian cause is seen as legitimate and supported by many people within these countries, so it's hard for these governments to crack down. And this is a problem we're going to see again and again for counterterrorism-- we see it even today in Pakistan-- which is the militant side has some popularity and some legitimacy, and it makes it politically hard for the government to take action.

These raids are a mixed success for the Palestinians. Again fundamentally, they don't change Israeli perceptions. If anything, they harden them. They convince Israelis that the Palestinians are bloodthirsty. But they do have a big impact on the strength of the Palestinian resistance movement, the strength of the Palestinian terrorist movement itself.

Now, perhaps, the best example of this is the 1968 battle of Karameh. Now, Karameh is a small town in Jordan, where Arafat and Fatah were based. And Israel decided to do a raid to wipe out this base. Now, the base was exceptionally important for Fatah, because again, let's go back to the West Bank and Gaza experience, where Israel was easily able to take out the Palestinian presence.

Because however, it's on the other side of the border, it's far harder for Israel to go after leadership, to go after recruiting, to go after logistics, to go after all these things that make a terrorist group effective. So by doing these raids, Israel was trying to dent Fatah as an organization. And the military outcome of this battle is one-sided. Israel goes in and there are roughly 30 Israelis who die. And you have 150 Palestinians, more taken prisoner. And you even have main Jordanians who are killed. Jordanian army officials who are killed in the fighting as well.

But even though it's a military victory for Israel, it's a tremendous political victory for Fatah. And why is this? Part of it is the number of casualties on the Israeli side. From an Israeli point of view, 30 casualties was a disaster. It was a huge number. And from the Palestinian point of view, it was also a huge number, because they were not expected to win. They were seen as weak. They were seen as a ragtag group of forces. So the fact that they gave credible
resistance was very important.

And this contrast is even stronger, given the disastrous performance of Arab armies in the 1967 war. Here you have what seems to be a small, motivated, determined group that's standing up to Israel. And because Israel leaves the battle scene, Israel effectively surrenders in the view of Palestinians, because it has to go back to Israeli territory. Fatah is able to parade captured Israeli equipment and otherwise declare it victory.

So what we see here is a disjuncture that's very common in terrorism, which is a difference between military victory and political victory. And there's another victory for Fatah, and this is in the terms of identity.

And here I'm going to read you a quote. In 1969, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir says, "There were no such thing as Palestinians. When was there an independent Palestinian people with a Palestinian state? It was either southern Syria, before the first World War, and then it was Palestine including Jordan. It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people. And we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist."

After Karameh, after repeated Palestinian cross border raids, it is increasingly impossible for Israel to say that the Palestinian people do not exist because their identity is too strong. Fatah is doing cross border raids, but over time, these become less and less effective.

I mentioned that, in 1968, there were roughly 1,500. These numbers start to fall and, at times, fall very dramatically. So by 1972, we have only 200 cross border raids. And this is due to a mix of successful Israeli coercive pressure on Jordan and also better and better Israeli defenses.