The Israeli Response: Israeli Counterterrorism and Intelligence Gathering

We're going to switch now to Israeli counterterrorism, looking at the methods Israel has used over the years to fight Palestinian terrorism. And just as Palestinian terrorism had successes and failures, so too did Israeli counterterrorism. And in my view, Israeli counterterrorism succeeded in many ways at keeping the threat from terrorism limited. But it certainly did not succeed in stopping it altogether.

Now, the first thing I'm going to talk about is Israeli intelligence gathering. And Paul Pillar is going to talk about the importance of intelligence gathering overall for counterterrorism, and we can really see it here in the Israeli case. Israel has three main entities that collect intelligence on terrorist groups— the External Service, the Mossad, the Internal Service, the Shin Bet, which also collects intelligence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and also Aman, military intelligence. And these are extremely skilled intelligence services.

So how do they get information? One way is by trying to gain human sources, spies within Palestinian terrorist groups. And there are several different methods for this. One is to recruit informers. And at times, Israel might find someone who's genuinely disenchanted with Palestinian violence. But that's relatively rare. Much more frequently, it involves taking advantage of the weaknesses of individuals on the Palestinian sides. So you might have someone who's a criminal, someone who's a drug dealer, and Israel blackmauls them, exploits them, threatens them in order to get them to give information on terrorist groups.

Israel has also taken thousands of prisoners over the years from different Palestinian terrorist groups. And instead of just throwing them in jail, Israel also spends quite a bit of time interrogating them, trying to learn from these prisoners about how the different groups operate, who's important in them. So the prisoners themselves become an important source of intelligence.

Israel also gets information from ordinary Palestinians, people simply living their lives. I'm going to discuss this when I talk about the occupation, but it takes advantage of Israel's control of territory to gather information. Israel's intelligence services are very famous for recruiting spies and for derring-do, but also tremendously important is Israel's Signals Intelligence Service and its collection of information from phones, it's collection of information from computers. All of the communication individuals do electronically, Israel tries to hover up on the Palestinian side.

Now, why this is so important? Part of it is that terrorist groups simply must communicate. Operatives at a local level must talk to one another to do attacks. In order to be in touch with
leaders who are overseas or who are in neighboring states, they have to communicate with them regularly. And, so the day-to-day of group survival, the day-to-day of group operations often requires using phones or computers or other means of communication.

Now, of course, you don't have to use a phone. You don't have to use a computer in order to communicate with someone. You could send a courier. But a courier could be intercepted. He's likely to be much slower. And in today's world, if you avoid communication, you're simply not going to be effective. And so the Palestinian groups have a really difficult choice, which is, when they communicate, they're vulnerable to intelligence gathering, but when they don't communicate, their group can atrophy, and they can't control operations.

Now, what does Israel do with all this intelligence? Let's again go back to terrorism strategies. One of the goals of terrorist groups is to get the state, their enemy, to arrest or kill the wrong people. That often enrages the population. It creates sympathy for the group.

So with the right intelligence, you can avoid that fundamental mistake. You can know who's who in the group. You can understand the power relationships there. You can find the people to arrest them. You can find the people to kill them. And, as I mentioned, you can prevent the group from operating effectively by forcing it to use low-tech communication or to otherwise try to avoid your intelligence services, which is exceptionally difficult.