The Israeli Response: Deterrence

A third method Israel has used to fight terrorism is deterrence. Now occupying territory is costly. Going after terrorist leaders can be exceptionally difficult or at times impossible. So what Israel has tried to do is to force governments or whoever's in control of territory to police their own people.

This could be in the case of Jordan, pushing it to stop Palestinian cross border raids in 1970. And we see it now in the case of Hamas, which has controlled Gaza since 2007 where Israel has tried to punish Hamas, to put pressure on Hamas, in order to convince it to stop attacks from Gaza into Israel.

One of the best examples of a deterrent approach is the 2008 operation that the Israelis called Operation Cast Lead. Now after Hamas takes power in Gaza in 2007, you have a series of rocket attacks on Israel proper. And these start out as a minor nuisance, but they become near constant. And there's no single rocket attack that is devastating, that forces an Israeli response in a political point of view. But people are living under the shadow of rockets, lives are disrupted within the range of rockets, and there's an Israeli fear, a correct fear, that the range of the rockets is growing, that more and more Israeli territory is going to be under the threat of rockets.

Israel in 2008 launches a massive operation and goes into Gaza and does an extensive bombing campaign. And we see 13 Israelis die in ground operations and almost 100 times as many Palestinians die so there's a massive disparity in terms of casualties. And Israel is roundly condemned for being brutal, for this disproportionate response, but it's very effective.

Hamas doesn't end rocket attacks completely, but we see a dramatic decrease in rocket attacks after Cast Lead because Hamas doesn't want that devastation again. It feels it's responsible for the Palestinian people. It feels its own credibility suffers when it can't fight back effectively against the Israelis.

Now deterrence is an exceptionally difficult thing to achieve against a terrorist group. First of all, there's an intelligence issue. Can you find the right people? Can you hit the right people? Can you hold the right people accountable?

But also terrorist groups are often much less casually sensitive than the governments they're fighting. So again, go back to Fatah and the battle of Karameh where Israel takes far fewer casualties than Fatah, but from Fatah's point of view this is a victory because Israel still suffered. Israel took 30 casualties, which was significant.

So in order to avoid that problem, the casualty ratios often have to be in disproportion. But this creates a new problem, which is when the casualty ratios are disproportionate, you lose legitimacy. "Just war theory," Israel's self-image as a just Western democracy, relies on the idea of proportionality. And this is directly challenged by the logic of deterrence, which relies on a

disproportionate response, which relies on making the other side pay much more.

This problem of reputation is compounded in today's world because of the media. What happens in Israel shows up on every television screen around the world. And it's very difficult for Israel to avoid having the horrors of modern combat be broadcast everywhere, and ironically, including within Israel itself. And so what you had during Cast Lead were some of the victims of what was going on within Gaza were actually appearing on Israeli television. So you had this odd mixture of Israelis cheering, be delighted when their government was taking a strong stand against terrorism. But at the same time, a concern for the welfare of the people who were suffering because of these Israeli response.

Other problems with deterrence come from the group side. One is that groups like Hamas, groups like Fatah in the past, have relatively few means of achieving their goals. So if they are not able to do attacks they're often effectively giving up. They feel that they have no peaceful alternative so if they can't do attacks, they have to give up their broader political objectives.

And even when they don't feel this, there is often group competition. There will be rival groups that criticize Hamas, for example, for not doing rocket attacks on Israel. And as a result, Hamas has to worry that it will lose followers, it will lose money to more radical groups that are willing to carry on the fight despite Israeli pressure.