TARGETED KILLINGS IN THE AL-AQSA INTIFADA:
AN EXAMINATION OF CHANGES IN HAMAS’ OPERATIONAL CAPACITY

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ABSTRACT

Targeted killings have become a key tool of counterterrorism strategy, despite its controversial nature. The debate over targeted killings mainly focuses on four arguments: legality and legitimacy, consequences on innocent civilians, alternative means to fighting terror, and effectiveness in actually reducing terror. In this paper, I argue that an important variable I define as “operational capacity,” or a terrorist group’s ability to carry out attacks, is largely overlooked in the study of targeted killings. Operational capacity is influenced by a host of other variables, including the ease, frequency, sophistication, and success rate of attacks. I come to the conclusion that Israeli targeted killings simultaneously reduced and bolstered Hamas’ operational capacity with the latter impact likely exceeding the former. This is because it was ultimately a diminished operational capacity, along with other socio-political issues like peace talks and land settlements that convinced Hamas to lessen the violence. Even though targeted killings often triggered an increased desire to engage in terrorism, thereby increasing Hamas’ operational capacity, it can be deduced that its capacity to inflict real harm was not overwhelming because Israeli casualties and Palestinian suicide bombings still declined.
The research and writing of this thesis
is dedicated to everyone who helped along the way.

Many thanks,

JESSICA GOLDINGS
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INTRODUCTION

Targeted killing is a counterterrorism tactic many people prefer not to discuss openly. The practice is messy, controversial, and costly. For Israel, however, targeted killing is a key piece of its counterterrorism strategy. During the course of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, for example, Israel carried out over 250 targeted killings against suspected Palestinian terrorists.¹ People in favor of the tactic argue that it serves as a deterrent to future attacks, impedes the capacity and leadership of terrorist groups, and saves countless unknown Israeli lives. Critics assert that the practice is illegal, immoral, and ineffective. The debate over targeted killings tends to revolve around four central arguments: legality and legitimacy, consequences on innocent civilians, alternative means to fighting terror, and effectiveness in actually reducing terror.² Much of the literature concerning targeted killings focuses on normative issues, such as their legal and moral implications, or whether their use succeeded in reducing Palestinian violence or not. I argue that an important variable I define as “operational capacity,” or a terrorist group’s ability to carry out attacks, is largely overlooked in the study of targeted killings. Operational capacity is influenced by a host of other variables, including the ease, frequency, sophistication, and success rate of attacks. In this paper I make the argument that Israeli targeted killings both weakened and strengthened Hamas’ operational capacity, as annotated in the following plausible hypotheses:

Hypothesis I: Targeted killings weakened Hamas’ operational capacity by creating disincentives that raised the cost of militancy and deterred Hamas from planning more attacks, thus decreasing violence.

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¹ Hillel Frisch, “Motivation or Capabilities? Israeli Counterterrorism against Palestinian Suicide Bombings and Violence,” The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Middle East Security and Policy Studies, no. 70 (Dec. 2006), pg. 7.

Hypothesis II: Targeted killings strengthened Hamas’ operational capacity by enraging Hamas operatives and producing a backlash effect, thus increasing violence.

Hypothesis I is based on the premise that targeted killings also deprive Hamas of valued commanders and force the remaining members to concentrate more on their personal security and less on recruiting and organizing attacks. Hypothesis II assumes that targeted killings trigger retaliation attacks and attract potential recruits due to anger over the lost leader and any resulting collateral damage. In exploring targeted killings’ impact on operational capacity I will attempt to answer: what effect, if any, did targeted killings have on cycles of Hamas violence during the Second Intifada? Did they contain, deter, and ultimately lessen rates of violence, or did they intensify anger and increase motivation to attack with more deadly force? Most importantly, were they conducive in combating Hamas terror?

By examining existing literature on targeted killings as it applies to the Al-Aqsa Intifada and relying on several case studies, I come to the conclusion that Israeli targeted killings simultaneously reduced and bolstered Hamas’ operational capacity with the latter impact likely exceeding the former. This is because it was ultimately a diminished operational capacity, along with other socio-political issues like peace talks and land settlements that convinced Hamas to limit its violence. This period of calm ushered in the end of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2005, and contributed to Hamas’ ability to win the 2006 PA elections. After all, if the impact of Hamas’ strengthened operational capacity exceeded its weakened operational capacity the violence would continue unabated at record levels in the most lethal forms. This, however, was not the case—violence eventually slowed and the number of Israelis killed per attack decreased. While conditions between Hamas and Israel still remain tense, the effects of a strengthened operational capacity, such as retaliation attacks and massive amounts of embittered recruits following a
targeted killing, subsided. This paper will explore the dueling relationship of a simultaneously weakened and strengthened operational capacity on Hamas violence in the Second Intifada as a result of targeted killings. I will also briefly reflect on what policy implications and lessons can be learned from the Israeli experience as applied to the U.S. experience with targeted killings in the Afghan-Pakistan Theater.

DEFINITION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

While there is no universal definition of the word “targeted killing,” Thomas B. Hunter, author of “Targeted Killing: Self-Defense, Preemption, and the War on Terrorism,” offers a compelling description: “the premeditated, preemptive, and deliberate killing of an individual or individuals known to represent a clear and present threat to the safety and security of a state through affiliation with terrorist groups or individuals.” The goal, he notes, is to eliminate the terrorist threat before it can be launched. The process entails identifying, locating, and then killing alleged terrorists with helicopter gunships, fighter aircraft, tanks, car bombs, booby traps, or bullets. Successful attacks require a heavy investment in intelligence, rapid response capabilities, and an efficient system of information sharing. In Israel, a four-pronged set of criteria is applied by its intelligence services, defense forces, and military lawyers to determine whether a targeted killing should be sanctioned. First, arresting the terrorist proves nearly impossible. Second, the terrorist is considered a high-value target because of his ability to inflict harm on Israelis. Third, resulting collateral damage is unlikely. Fourth, the terrorist resembles a

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4 Ibid.

5 Hafez and Hatfield, pg. 362.
“ticking bomb” because he is in the process of planning or executing an operation.

Recommendations for targeted killings are then sent to the chief of staff and Israeli cabinet, including the minister of defense and prime minister, for approval.\(^6\)

Israeli government officials view targeted killings as a last resort, according to one senior Shin Bet (Israeli Security Agency) officer, since arresting terrorists can yield valuable information, while also avoiding much of the collateral damage associated with targeted killings.\(^7\) Yet arresting suspected terrorists is not always possible since the Palestinian Authority (PA) often refuses to give up suspected terrorists, sometimes even informing the perpetrators of Israel’s plans so that they can escape safely.\(^8\) Also, arrests in densely populated areas can sometimes trigger mass scale retaliatory violence and chaos. Supporters of targeted killings argue that relying only on arrests and passive defensive measures would likely lead to mass casualty attacks in Israel, and greater pressure on the Israeli government to respond more forcefully.\(^9\)

Targeted killings are by no means a recent phenomenon for Israel. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s Israel used mail bombs against Egyptian military officers who were training a Fedayeen force to attack Israel, as well as against former Nazi scientists who were developing missiles that could reach Israel.\(^10\) Following its victory in the 1967 war, Israel’s use of targeted

\(^6\) Ibid.


\(^9\) Ibid.

killings increased; most notable were those against the terrorists behind the Munich Massacre in 1972. Targeted killings were also used as a response to the increased violence in the late 1980s and 1990s following the outbreak of the first Intifada. For example, in 1996 Israel ordered a targeted killing against Hamas’ Yahya Ayyash also known as “the Engineer” because of his superior bomb-making skills. In retaliation, Hamas launched four suicide attacks against Israeli buses and other targets, which killed 48 Israelis. Then in 1997, Mossad agents botched an attempt to poison Khaled Mashaal, a senior Hamas leader then based in Jordan. King Hussein was livid, and demanded that Israel restore Mashaal to health and release Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, another prominent Hamas leader (who died later in a targeted killing), in exchange for the two Israeli combat officers that were captured during the attack.

EXISTING EXPLANATIONS

As previously mentioned, targeted killing, especially as it relates to the Israeli experience, is well documented. People in favor of the tactic argue that it serves as a deterrent to future attacks, impedes the capacity and leadership of terrorist groups, and saves countless unknown Israeli lives. Critics assert that the practice is illegal, immoral, and ineffective. To some degree, all of these claims are true—making the decision whether Israel’s use of targeted killings significantly weakened Hamas’ operational capacity exceptionally difficult. Here I have divided the literature by the three most commonly cited reasons in favor of targeted killings: A. targeted killings incapacitate the leadership of terrorist organizations; B. targeted killings deter additional

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12 Ibid.
terrorist violence against the state; and C. targeted killings signal the determination of the state to fight terrorism.\textsuperscript{13}

A. Incapacitation Effects of Targeted Killing

The role of leadership in the incapacitation of terrorist groups is a frequently explored topic within the literature of targeted killings. Kent Oots argues that leadership is fundamental in the development of terrorist organizations, and that a loss of leadership can lead to the demise of an organization. “In many instances, if the authorities can remove the leadership, an organization will cease to function,” he adds.\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, counterterrorism organizations will continually attempt to weaken terrorist groups through the elimination or threat of elimination of key leadership. In testing the effectiveness of this decapitation strategy in reducing terrorist activity, Aaron Mannes concludes that, “Terrorist groups rely heavily on the abilities and charisma of their top leaders. When these leaders are removed, the organizations lose effectiveness and focus, become prone to infighting, and collapse.”\textsuperscript{15} Steven David points to the importance of hard to replace charismatic leaders, referencing the diminished “effectiveness of Palestinian terrorist organizations where leadership, planning, and tactical skills are confined to a few key individuals.”\textsuperscript{16} Daniel Byman echoes this sentiment, citing that the removal of key leaders also eliminates the individuals who possess the knowledge of operations, resources, financing, and


\textsuperscript{14} Kent L. Oots, “Organizational Perspectives of the Formation and Disintegration of Terrorist Groups,” \textit{Terrorism} 12, no. 3 (1989), pg. 141.

\textsuperscript{15} Aaron Mannes, “Testing the Snake Head Strategy: Does Killing or Capturing its Leaders Reduce a Terrorist Group’s Activity?” \textit{The Journal of International Policy Solutions}, vol. 9 (Spring 2008), pg. 40.

\textsuperscript{16} David, pg. 7.
organization of attacks.\textsuperscript{17} Essentially, the destruction of human capital impedes the operational capacity of terrorist organizations. Byman continues that it is difficult for Hamas to “replace their lost cadres with equally skilled substitutes” because frequent targeted killings “force surviving terrorists to spend more and more of their time protecting themselves. This leads some theorists to conclude that it is more advantageous to eliminate highly qualified personnel, rather than simply large numbers of militants.\textsuperscript{18} To avoid elimination, these highly skilled terrorists must constantly change locations, keep those locations secret, and keep their heads down, all of which reduces the flow of information in their organization and makes internal communications problematic and dangerous.”\textsuperscript{19}

According to Isaac Ben-Israel, Oren Setter, and Asher Tishler, the number of key Hamas operatives actively “engaged in preparing an act of terror” number in the low hundreds, so Israel only needs “to neutralize 20-30 percent of them for the organization’s ‘production’ of acts of terror to drop significantly.”\textsuperscript{20} Terrorism, then, is a process that requires a “production line” of activity—from scouting targets to preparing bombers—if coordinated attacks are to occur. All along this “production line,” key members fulfill particular roles and serve different functions, which depend on the interaction of a variety of semi-autonomous parts and processes.\textsuperscript{21} Brian Jenkins and Paul Davis deduce that “the terrorist problem occurs in a rich context with many

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Byman, pg. 104.
\item Byman, pg. 104.
\item Isaac Ben-Israel, Oren Setter, and Asher Tishler, “R&D and the War on Terrorism: Generalising the Israeli Experience” in \textit{Science and Technology Policies in the Anti-Terrorism Era}, Andrew D. James, Ed. (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2006), pg. 56.
\item Marc Sageman, \textit{Understanding Terror Networks} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004), pg. 137.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
interacting entities and processes.”

While disrupting these entities and processes by eliminating a leader will not wholly eradicate the threat of terrorism, according to Alex Wilner, “the selective removal of central players does restrict the terrorism process and degrades an organization’s overall capability to plan, coordinate, and carry out acts of violence.”

Several quantitative studies provide substantial statistical data to support or refute many of the analytical claims made in the existing literature concerning targeted killings as it relates to leadership decapitation. Drawing from a database of almost 300 incidents of leadership targeting, Jenna Jordan comes to the conclusion that decapitation does not lower the life expectancy of the decapitated group, and if anything, may have the opposite effect. Specifically, she found that decapitated groups have a significantly lower rate of decline (17%) than groups that have not had their leaders removed in her study (83%), leading her to conclude that leadership decapitation is not an effective counterterrorism strategy. When leadership decapitation does occur, such as in the form of targeted killings, her research states that killing members belonging to a terrorist group’s upper echelons, rather than simply lower-level leaders, is most effective. Specifically, “when only the leader was removed, the organization fell apart 33.33% of the time, and when members of the upper echelon were removed 54% of the

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26 Ibid, pg. 735.
Also, decapitation is more likely to be counterproductive in larger, older, religious, and separatist organizations, like Hamas. Along the same lines, Avi Kober argues that the targeted killings of military leaders proved ineffective, but the decapitation of Hamas’ political and spiritual leaders—those primarily comprising the group’s upper echelons—seemed to have accounted for the terrorist group’s decision to suspend hostilities against Israel. Jordan also cautions against putting too much importance on the elimination of charismatic leadership, similar to Oots, Mannes, David, and Byman, because charisma can be “transferred” and if this occurs successfully, “then the removal of a leader would not necessarily result in the collapse of an organization.”

Mohammed Hafez and Joseph Hatfield’s empirical research on Palestinian violence during the Al-Aqsa Intifada presents a more neutral conclusion to the examination of targeted killings’ effectiveness in debilitating a terrorist group. Their research indicates that “targeted assassinations show no promise for either increasing or decreasing the levels of Palestinian violence.” Similar to Byman, the authors assert that targeted killings “cause the “bench strength” of the militant organization to decrease as militants spend less time training, gathering intelligence, and organizing attacks and more time protecting themselves,” but they caution that the negative consequences of targeted killings can sometimes outweigh the advantages that the

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27 Ibid, pg. 736.
28 Ibid, pg. 754.
30 Ibid.
31 Hafez and Hatfield, pg. 371.
They cite a backlash effect, which Mannes describes in a similar piece as including “greater radicalization of the targeted terrorist group, elimination of possible negotiating partners, and the triggering of retaliatory attacks.” Along these lines, David Jaeger et al. purport that Israeli targeted killings provoke grievances within the Palestinian community and generate hostility between the population and governing authority. Targeted killings sometimes have the deleterious effect of forcing the Palestinian population to move away from more moderate positions. Similarly, Mia Bloom asserts that targeted killings “make Hamas’s rhetoric appear valid and prescient,” observing that “the Israelis and Palestinians appear to be in a dead-locked battle of assassination-suicide bombing-assassination-suicide bombing in an unending casual loop…encouraging yet more martyrs.” She concludes that this will have a devastating long-term effect since Palestinians will use violence as their main source of recruitment and mobilization.

B. Deterrence Effect

Another commonly cited reason in favor of targeted killings is that it produces a deterrent effect which discourages and reduces terrorist activity. Research from Jaeger and Daniele Paserman, for example, reveal that “targeted killings of Palestinian leaders have a short-term deterrence or incapacitation effect: the overall number of Israeli fatalities and the number of

32 Ibid.

33 Mannes, pg. 40.


35 Mia Bloom “Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding,” Political Science Quarterly (Spring 2004), pg. 80.
Israelis killed in suicide attacks fall in the first week after a targeted killing.”  

While initially successful in reducing Palestinian violence, the deterrent effect for targeted killings appears to diminish after the first week.  

David also believes targeted killings deter Palestinian terrorist organizations, but for an unspecified longer duration. In his view, “there are skilled, capable Palestinians who do not engage in terrorist operations for fear of Israeli reprisals.”  

Similarly, Byman concludes that targeted killings may discourage terror because “behind every suicide bomber are others who might not be as ready for martyrdom.”  

For example, when Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon met with several Palestinian leaders on January 30, 2002 he asked what Israel could do to mend the peace. The first thing they mentioned was to stop the targeted killings.  

Also, the high number of Palestinian military leaders who surrendered following large-scale Israeli military attacks in Operation Defensive Shield suggests that some operatives do not want to die for their cause.  

Operation Defensive Shield was launched in April 2002 in response to a suicide bombing on March 27, 2002 at a Netanya hotel during a Passover seder which killed 30 Israeli citizens and injured 140. This was the deadliest attack in all of the Second Intifada. The  

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37 Ibid.  

38 David, pg. 12.  

39 Byman, pg. 100.  


41 David, pg. 7  

operation consisted of an Israeli incursion into six Palestinian cities, which killed 240 Palestinians, and led to massive economic losses due to destruction of property and a limitation on Palestinian movement and activity.\(^{43}\) This does not mean targeted killings were enough to make the terror stop completely, or even significantly according to Byman, but it does indicate that targeted killings were clearly a major source of concern that may have persuaded some Palestinians to not engage in terror.

Moreover, Gal Luft asserts that despite targeted killings’ shortcomings, they are often the most effective and least injurious way to deter and prevent terrorist groups from perpetrating terrorist attacks, especially in light of the PA’s reluctance to fight terror.\(^{44}\) He concludes that not enough credit is given to targeted killings and their profound cumulative effect on terrorist organizations, such as leaving them in a constant state of confusion and disarray, as well as their ability to save countless lives spared by prevention of terrorist attacks. However, other authors like Hafez, Hatfield, and Kober dispute these claims, alleging that other defensive counterterrorism measures, like the security barrier, increased military operations, Operation Defensive Shield, and improved intelligence may have been more responsible for decreased violence rather than targeted killings.\(^{45}\) For instance, by early 2002 the majority of all public institutions and private businesses in predominantly Jewish areas in Israel had security guards. Some buses also had security guards on board.\(^{46}\) More importantly, the security barrier, which reached the construction phase in the summer of 2002, also helped in containing the violence by restricting Palestinian movement. According to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, between August

\(^{43}\) Ibid.


\(^{45}\) Hafez and Hatfield, pg. 374 and Kober, pg. 77.

\(^{46}\) Frisch, pg. 21.
2003 and the end of 2006 terrorist organizations operating from Samaria carried out 12 attacks, killing 64 Israelis and wounding 445. Before the construction of the fence, however, from September 2000 to August 2003, they carried out 73 attacks, killing 293 Israelis and wounding 1,950. In September of 2005 Israel also withdrew from Gaza which brought a relative calm to the violence. The gesture was welcomed by the Palestinians, which may also indicate why the violence level subsided during this time.

In addition, the notion that leaders killed in targeted killings are perceived as martyrs sometimes inspires violent behavior, rather than deters it. The decapitation of terrorist leadership creates “mythologies of martyrdom” which can radicalize the population and strengthen enemy morale and resolve. “Rather than dealing a mortal blow to the terrorist organization, it is more likely that the targeted individuals will be replaced by others,” adds legal expert, Michael P. Scharf. In acknowledgment of this fact, an unnamed Israeli official likened Israel’s targeted killing policy to “cutting the lawn—a task that must be carried out routinely.” This leads security experts to worry whether Hamas could morph into a Hydra-like organization, similar to al Qaeda, with numerous deadly cells operating independently of a central leadership, thus diminishing the potential effectiveness of assassinating Hamas leaders.

C. Targeted killings signal the determination of the state to fight terrorism

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50 Ibid.
Increased terror places great pressure on a state to react, and targeted killings often “satisfy domestic demands for a forceful response to terrorism,” according to Byman. From 2000-2005 Palestinians reportedly killed 1,074 Israelis and wounded 7,520, according to the Israeli military—a shocking number for such a small country. The proportional equivalent to this in the U.S. would total more than 50,000 dead and 300,000 wounded. Responding to this high rate of violence is necessary and inevitable, and also helps to bolster public morale. Bloom argues that targeted killings “showed that the government was being proactive, counteracting the chaos brought about by the bombings and bringing precision and order back to the conflict.” David goes a step further and states that even though targeted killing may have increased terrorist attacks in Israel, targeted killings are effective in “providing retribution and revenge for a population under siege and may, over the long term, help create conditions for a more secure Israel.” David adds that “withstanding repeated attacks without responding can lead to a sense of impotence and malaise that ultimately weakens a society’s ability to protect itself.” Targeted killings, therefore, are “a way for the government to combat the social and psychological effects of terrorism—to give the population a sense of efficacy in the face of a relentless threat,” according to Avery Plaw. Hafez and Hatfield agree that that targeted killings signal the state’s determination to fight terrorism, but also conclude using quantitative analysis that the elimination of capable terrorist leaders does not impact either the number or success of

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51 Byman, pg. 100.
52 Ibid.
53 Bloom, pg. 74.
54 David, pg. 2.
55 Ibid, pg. 17.
56 Avery Plaw, Targeting Terrorists: A License to Kill? (MPG Books Ltd.: Bodmin, Cornwall, 2008), pg. 182.
According to Nir Gazit and Robert J. Brym, the Israeli public understands that targeted killings of political leaders are counterproductive, since they often incite retaliatory attacks, attract international condemnation, and lead to a decline in the Israeli stock market. Therefore, targeted killings of political leaders are not a response to an immediate threat; rather, the policy exists “because it helped to achieve a political goal to which much of the Israeli leadership was committed—forestalling the founding of a viable, independent Palestinian state” led by the more radical Hamas, and not the more moderate Fatah.

**CASE STUDIES**

To determine the extent to which targeted killings impacted Hamas’ operational capacity (i.e. weakened or strengthened), I will now focus on three case studies: the targeted killings of Salah Shehade, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, and Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi. First, however, it is necessary to understand the organizational structure of Hamas. An acronym for “Harakat al-Muqāwamat al-Islāmiyyah” meaning “Islamic Resistance Movement,” Hamas is a three-tiered Palestinian terrorist organization. The first tier is the religious command, which is followed by the socio-political division and the military wing, respectively. Founded in 1987 during the First Intifada as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas aims to liberate Palestine from Israeli occupation and to establish an Islamic state in the area that is now Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. As the largest and most influential Palestinian militant movement, Hamas

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57 Hafez and Hatfield, pg. 378.
59 Stahl, pg. 60.
is dedicated to the destruction of Israel as stated in its charter. Often this commitment is pursued violently through rocket attacks or suicide bombings. Hamas’ leadership consists of the Supreme Guide, the Shura Council, the Political Bureau, and the Da’awah Network.\textsuperscript{61} Up until his death, Yassin acted as Hamas’ Supreme Guide, serving both as the top spiritual and political authority of the movement. In this capacity, Yassin directed terrorist operations, including setting targets, approving tactical methods and appointing commanders. The Shura Council, or the Consultations Council, comprises the top politico-religious clergy of the movement who serve as an additional body to operational decision-making. The Political Bureau, which is based in neighboring countries, is tasked with maintaining contact with the military cells in the West Bank that lost communications with the Gaza command; the smuggling of weapons and explosives, and the coordination with Iranian Military Intelligence (MOIS) and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Da’awah Network is Hamas’ civilian network, but often blurs with its military wing since funding is used for military purposes instead of purely civilian purposes. This organizational backdrop provides a good foundation for examining targeted killings’ effect on operational capacity as it relates to improving security in Israel.

\textbf{A. Salah Shehade}

Shehade was an influential military leader who had directed up to 52 terrorist operations against Israel, killing 220 Israeli and Palestinian civilians and 16 Israeli soldiers.\textsuperscript{62} This was all within two years of his death when an Israeli F-16 dropped a 2,000-pound bomb on his apartment building on July 22, 2001. As one of the founders of Hamas, Shehade was also

\textsuperscript{61} “Unmasking Hamas’ Hydra of Terror,” \textit{Simon Wiesenthal Center}, Aug. 2003, \url{http://www.wiesenthal.com/atf/cf/%7B54D385E6-F1B9-4E9F-8E94-890C3E6DD277%7D/SWC%20HAMAS%20REPORT.PDF}

\textsuperscript{62} Byman, pg. 95.
suspected of financing laboratories for the production of Kassam missiles. Israeli security forces viewed him as a “ticking bomb” because, according to intelligence reports at the time of his killing, he was in the midst of planning at least six different attacks on Israelis, including one designed as a “mega-attack” involving a truck loaded with a ton of explosives. Before killing Shehade, Israeli government officials approached the PA repeatedly demanding his arrest. When the PA refused, Israel’s former Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), Moshe Ya’alon, gave the orders for the targeted killing. The operation proved difficult since Shehade was always accompanied by his young daughter. After calling off eight attempts, Israeli intelligence indicated that he would be in an apartment alone without innocents nearby. Yet the intelligence was incorrect, and when the IDF launched the massive bomb it not only killed Shehade, but also 14 civilians, including his daughter and eight other children. According to IDF Major General Giora Eiland, the decision to use a bomb instead of a more precise missile was made because Shehade had escaped a previous assassination attack by a helicopter missile. The IDF also did not know where Shehade was in the house, so it used a larger, deadlier weapon to ensure the targeted killing succeeded this time. Since Shehade’s assassination, the IDF has not used an air-dropped bomb in a targeted killing.

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65 Byman, pg. 95.

66 Ibid.

The attack sparked an uproar in the Palestinian community as hundreds of thousands of Palestinians turned out to mourn the victims and protest Israeli brutality. Hamas warned that it would fight until “Jews see their own body parts in every restaurant, every park, every bus and every street.” Despite the outcome, a former Israeli senior military officer said the killing was productive because “one of the keys of counter-terrorism is to take the key players out of the game” and following Shehade’s death “Gaza became an operational vacuum [because] no one was able to rise to the leadership position. This type of disarray was beneficial to us.” Prime Minister Sharon even referred to the attack as “one of our greatest successes.” Yet many people who traditionally supported targeted killings, including Israelis and non-Israeli Jews, expressed moral outrage over Shehade’s death since high collateral damage attacks often “provoked calls for revenge and contributed to an ever-escalating cycle of violence.”

The international community strongly condemned the attack. Amnesty International and similar human rights organizations call Israel’s use of targeted killings “a policy of state assassination” that is “overtly breaching humanitarian law.” Much of the international community, including the European Union, Britain, Russia, China, Africa, and all Arab states share this view, calling the tactic “a violation of international law and an obstruction to the peace process.” International law prohibits assassinations (although the Israeli government refuses to

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68 Byman, pg 96.

69 Stahl, pg. 62.

70 Luft, pg. 62.


72 David, pg. 3.

define them as such) both in times of peace and in war. Infringement on the sovereignty of other nations, “especially by the imposition of extrajudicial punishment of their citizens, is a gross violation of international law.”

At the same time, however, the resolution states that countries should not allow their territory to become a safe haven for terrorists who might bring harm to another country. In defending Israel’s policy of targeted killings, then Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said in a statement released by the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 2002, “We don’t have retaliatory action. Nothing whatsoever. We have preventative action. We don’t punish, we try to prevent. And even the killing of Shehade was killing what one may describe as a local bin Laden.”

According to press reports in *Ha'aretz*, Israel’s daily English newspaper, Shehade’s pivotal role in the operational success of Hamas’ terrorist activities could not be overstated:

Shehadeh, 49, was not just a terrorist. He was a commander. Senior IDF officers eulogized him as a worthy opponent, a professional, a kind of peer, a “genuine ticking bomb.” He was No. 1 on the wanted list. There may be heirs…who hold a rank similar to Shehadeh’s on a regional level. But there has never been a terror chief like him, orchestrating operations in both Gaza and the West Bank, in addition to serving as Hamas’ foreign liaison man. Shehadeh knew more about manpower, arms, training and financing than any of his colleagues…

The death of Shehade came soon after a ceasefire was agreed upon, which stated that the Palestinians would stop the violence in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal from West Bank cities. As in the past, the ceasefire ended promptly following the targeted killing and violence

74 Ibid.
75 De Wijze, pg. 314.
77 David, pg. 9.
resumed, which included a suicide bombing attack on Hebrew University where seven people died, including five American students.\textsuperscript{78}

Statistically, it is difficult to claim that the targeted killing of one of Hamas’ most influential military leaders was successful in sufficiently reducing the organization’s operational capacity. From the start of the Al-Aqsa Intifada (approximately September 28, 2000) to Shehade’s death (July 22, 2002), Hamas carried out nearly 40 attacks according to the RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents (RDWTI).\textsuperscript{79} These attacks resulted in over 900 injuries and over 200 deaths, and included non-suicidal terrorism tactics like sniping, rocket fire, and knifings. Suicide terrorism, however, stood out as the most effective weapon, both in terms of cost and fatalities. For instance, 17 suicide attacks were carried out during this time period and produced almost 72\% of the total deaths (148 out of 206). Comparing the 12 months following Shehade’s death to the 12 months prior to his death, the RDWTI reports that Hamas attacks rose by 20 (49), and injuries, deaths, and number of suicide attacks dropped by approximately 40\% (to 439, 94, and 8 respectively). Thus, while the overall number of attacks increased following the targeted killing, the number of injuries, suicide attacks, and deaths declined. The number of Israelis killed per attack also dropped by a third in this time period, from six to two. This figure indicates that the attacks became less lethal, and therefore less effective, following the targeted killing. These results suggest that the targeted killing of Shehade weakened Hamas’ operational capacity because although the terrorist group amped up its violence by carrying out more attacks, these attacks were not nearly as deadly or effective as they used to be before Shehade was killed.

\textsuperscript{78} Byman, pg. 99.

\textsuperscript{79} RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents (RDWTI), \url{http://smapp.rand.org/rwtid/search_form.php}
B. Sheik Ahmed Yassin

The targeted killing of Sheik Ahmed Yassin on March 22, 2004, even more than Shehade’s, drew criticism because he was a wheelchair-bound religious figure, not a strong military leader. In his late sixties, Yassin was an easy target because he rarely left home except to go to the mosque. AH-64 Apache gunships fired three missiles at Yassin while on his way to prayer, instantly killing the crippled man, along with seven bystanders.\(^{80}\) According to former director of the Mossad, Shabtai Shavit, Yassin still posed a significant threat because he “was not only a preacher, but also the visionary” since he “gave the blessing for nearly each and every terrorist attack.”\(^{81}\) Jenkins points out that “there are individual leaders whose charisma and organizational skills keep a group together. If they are eliminated, they are not easily replaced.”\(^{82}\) In other words, Yassin’s diatribes and indirect military involvement against Israelis were just as deadly as any physical weaponry or attacks carried out by a Hamas soldier. His death would prove a huge setback for Hamas because he was an influential and well-respected leader. The fact that he was a paraplegic was of no concern to Israel, even if it raised eyebrows in the international community. Prime Minister Sharon jubilantly exclaimed that Israel had eliminated “the greatest arch-murderer of Palestinian terrorism” who sought to “kill Jews everywhere and eliminate... Israel.”\(^{83}\) The IDF justified its operation against Yassin because it


\(^{81}\) Luft, pg. 4.

\(^{82}\) Brian Michael Jenkins, *Should Our Arsenal Against Terrorism Include Assassination?* (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, 1987), pg.4.

\(^{83}\) “Israel defiant over Yassin killing,” *BBC* 22 March 2004, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3557451.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3557451.stm)
dealt “a significant blow to a central pillar of the Hamas terrorist organization, and a major setback to its terrorist infrastructure.”

Yet some argue that because Yassin was not involved in Hamas’ day-to-day affairs, his death would not disrupt its functioning. The death of this old, sickly man could even be looked at as “a gain for Hamas, as the outpouring of admiration, throughout Palestine and far beyond, for his fearlessness and uncompromising defense of Palestinian rights could only reflect on the movement he founded, even while making him even more of an inspiration for Hamas itself and for Palestinians in general.” Khalid Mishal, currently the main leader of Hamas, called Yassin’s assassination, “a blessing from God! A miracle!” exclaiming that “our people pray to be martyrs.” According to Hamas expert, Peter McGeough, “the jihadi logic here was that Yassin was too old, too ill, and too incapacitated to have had any real hope of martyrdom, but now the Israelis had obliged him.”

Similar to Shehade, it is problematic to assert that the targeted killing of one of Hamas’ most important political and spiritual leaders was successful in sufficiently reducing the organization’s operational capacity. From the start of the Al-Aqsa Intifada to Yassin’s death (March 22, 2004), Hamas carried out over 120 attacks according to the RDWTI. These attacks resulted in nearly


86 McGeough, pg. 287.

87 Ibid.

88 RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents (RDWTI), http://smapp.rand.org/rwtid/search_form.php
1500 injuries and over 350 deaths. Comparing the 12 months following Yassin’s death to the 12 months before his death, the RDWTI reports that Hamas attacks nearly increased fivefold (271), and injuries, deaths, and number of suicide attacks dropped by over 50% (to 158, 38, and 4, respectively). Thus, while the overall number of attacks increased following the targeted killing, the number of injuries, suicide attacks, and deaths declined. The number of Israelis killed per attack also dropped more than tenfold third in this time period, from 1.5 to .14. This figure indicates that the attacks became less lethal, and therefore less effective, following the targeted killing. These results suggest that the targeted killing of Yassin weakened Hamas’ operational capacity because although the terrorist group intensified its violence by carrying out more attacks, these attacks were not nearly as deadly or effective as they used to be before Yassin was killed.

C. Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi

The targeted killing of Yassin’s successor, Rantissi, which occurred just one month later represented an “unmitigated loss” for Hamas since he was “energetic, dynamic, still relatively young” and was known as a skillful organizer, field leader, and talented orator. Rantissi was killed when he broke from his routine and decided to pay a visit to his wife and children. The IDF took advantage of this opportunity, when he was not in hiding and not around civilians, by killing him, along with two bodyguards and one of his sons, while en route to his family. In retaliation, Hamas fighters killed eleven IDF soldiers and paraded their remains in front of

89 Hroub, pg. 31.
90 Byman, pg. 100.
television screens—a real blow to Israel.\textsuperscript{91} As one of Hamas’ original founders, he possessed great popularity and legitimacy as the organization’s new leader. More than Yassin, Rantissi was considered a combative hardliner who actively encouraged violence, urging Hamas militants that “the door is open for you to strike all places, all the time and using all means.”\textsuperscript{92} Also, unlike the ailing Yassin, Rantissi was more involved in the daily operations of Hamas so his death represented the greater loss, at least from an operational point of view.\textsuperscript{93}

Similar to Shehade and Yassin, it is difficult to conclude that the targeted killing of Rantissi was successful in sufficiently reducing the organization’s operational capacity. From the start of the Al-Aqsa Intifada to Rantissi’s death (April 17, 2004), Hamas carried out over 125 attacks according to the RDWTI.\textsuperscript{94} These attacks resulted in nearly 1500 injuries and over 350 deaths. Comparing the 12 months following Rantissi’s death to the 12 months before his death, the RDWTI reports that Hamas attacks nearly quadrupled (269), and injuries, deaths, and number of suicide attacks dropped by over 50\% (to 156, 35, and 4, respectively). Thus, while the overall number of attacks increased following the targeted killing, the number of injuries, suicide attacks, and deaths declined. The number of Israelis killed per attack also dropped more than tenfold third in this time period, from 1.5 to .13. This figure indicates that the attacks became less lethal, and therefore less effective, following the targeted killing. These results suggest that the targeted killing of Rantissi also weakened Hamas’ operational capacity because although the

\textsuperscript{91} Sergio Catignani, \textit{Israeli Counter-Insurgency and the Intifadas: Dilemmas of a Conventional Army} (Routledge: New York, 2008), pg. 128.

\textsuperscript{92} McGeough, pg. 289.

\textsuperscript{93} Hroub, pg. 31.

\textsuperscript{94} RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents (RDWTI), \url{http://smapp.rand.org/rwtid/search_form.php}
terrorist group intensified its violence by carrying out more attacks, these attacks were not nearly as deadly or effective as they used to be before Rantissi was killed.

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

Following Rantissi’s death, Hamas discontinued its long practice of making public the names of its top leaders.⁹⁵ Hamas leaders, who were traditionally very accessible to their supporters, began taking extra security precautions—becoming less visible, more difficult to reach by the media and those outside their close circle, and frequently relocating to keep their whereabouts unknown. Hamas shifted to a secret collective leadership, suggesting that targeted killings had contributed to difficulties of coordination and motivation, and perhaps a weakened operational capacity.⁹⁶ According to Hamas expert, Khaled Hroub, “on the ground, there is no question that Hamas has been seriously weakened by the decimation of its ranks through assassination…structurally, however, the movement has remained surprisingly intact.”⁹⁷ This can be attributed to its integrated functioning structure, which performs at various levels, including religious preaching, charitable work, political activities, and military operations.⁹⁸ This multilayered network proves difficult to dismantle, according to Hroub, because “these

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⁹⁵ Ibid, pg. 32.

⁹⁶ Byman, pg. 104.

⁹⁷ Ibid, pg. 33.

⁹⁸ Ibid.
layers support each other, immediately filling gaps created by assassinations, arrests, or clampdowns.”

At the same time, the continual targeted killings of prominent terrorist group leaders often leave the group in a state of confusion and disarray as it searches for a replacement. The process of finding and replacing Hamas leaders with equally skilled substitutes is long and arduous. The killings also force the surviving terrorists to spend more time protecting themselves, for fear of elimination, rather than the planning of future attacks. This entails constantly changing locations, keeping those locations secret, staying away from loved ones, and generally keeping a low profile—all of which reduces the flow of information among their group, making internal communications problematic and dangerous. This reclusive lifestyle can become a difficult adjustment, since the individual is forced to live a very solitary and restricted lifestyle. As previously mentioned, Rantissi was killed when he broke from his routine and decided to pay a visit to his wife and children.

According to the Palestinian Information Center, Hamas lost an average of two men a week from assassinations, ranging from low or middle ranking members or cadres to top leaders, both military and political. And while Hamas seemed to be operating more or less at full capacity in 2002, its operational capacity was noticeably impacted by Israel’s continued targeted killing campaign. For example, although Hamas threatened to retaliate for the killings of Shehade and Yassin, it was unable to do so on a large scale. At Yassin’s funeral, for example,

99 Ibid.
100 Byman, pg. 100.
101 As cited in Hroub, pg. 28.
102 Byman, pg. 99.
hundreds of militants led the crowd to chanting their readiness to die for the Palestinian cause. Men and boys called out, “Who is our God? Allah! Which is our Party? Hamas! What is our goal? To die for God!”

Mahmoud Al-Zahar, Rantisi’s deputy, even said that retaliation was “the only way to stop the Israelis killing more of our people. Armed struggle is the only option we have, so the Israelis must pay the price.”

The number of Israeli fatalities following Yassin’s death was especially lower than most observers expected. In the month between Yassin and Rantissi’s deaths, for example, there were only five attacks, which produced six injuries, and four fatalities.

The weapons used in these attacks were explosives and firearms, and none were suicide bombings, the most advanced and lethal weapon in Hamas’ terrorism arsenal. Had Hamas’ operational capacity not been weakened at this point, perhaps it would have executed more suicide attacks. And similar to Shehade’s targeted killing, attacks increased following the deaths of Yassin and Rantisi. However, when comparing the year before their deaths to the year after their deaths, injuries and fatalities dropped by over 50% (54% and 59%, respectively).

These results imply that the targeted killings of Yassin and Rantissi weakened Hamas’ operational capacity because although the terrorist group executed more attacks, these attacks were not nearly as effective as they used to be before the targeted killings.

Moreover, while Israeli targeted killings attracted additional Palestinian terrorist recruits, it is not certain that Hamas’ popularity increased directly as a result. According to Byman, the killings seemed to have had only a short-term impact on Palestinian public opinion, particularly

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103 McGeough, pg. 287.

104 Ibid, pg. 289.

105 RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents (RDWTI).

106 Ibid.
compared to the impact of even more unpopular Israeli policies like the closing off of large ports of the West Bank to travel.\textsuperscript{107} Polls indicated that most Palestinians favored continued negotiations with Israel and cared most about issues like economic growth and political reform. So while Palestinian support for violence may briefly increase after a high-profile killing like Yassin’s, it oftentimes depends more on whether the public has faith in the peace process and the course of negotiations.\textsuperscript{108}

Statistically, diminished Hamas operational capacity can be demonstrated by a continual decline in the total number of Israeli civilian deaths from Hamas attacks since 2002 (see figure 1). And while targeted killings can certainly not take all the credit for Israel’s improved security situation, they certainly contributed to Hamas’ weakened operational capacity. The lethality rate of Hamas attacks, for example, declined by over 98\% from its highest point in 2002 to its lowest point in 2005. And while the number of attacks grew, the total number of Israeli civilian deaths plummeted, suggesting that the attacks themselves became far less effective. Indeed, after 2002 retired career IDF officer David Eshel observed an uptick in failed suicide bombings that “showed signs of poor planning and less-than-adequate preparation” such as when bombers “failed to activate their charges, gave away their intentions by behaving in a nervous manner sufficient to rouse suspicion, and in some cases even aborted or gave themselves up rather than detonate their explosives.”\textsuperscript{109} Eshel added that targeted killings contributed to “a lack of professional explosives-handling skills, [which] has led to a number of ‘work accidents,’ where

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{107} Ibid, pg. 100.
  \item \textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
less-experienced bomb-makers have prematurely detonated their explosive charges, causing a drop in morale among operatives.”

Figure 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Hamas Attacks</th>
<th>Israeli Civilian Deaths</th>
<th>Lethality Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures 2 and 3

Failed Suicides | Successful Suicides | Total Suicides | Ratio of Successful to Failed Suicides

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110 Byman, pg. 102.


112 “Palestinian Terrorism in 2005,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies, 31 Dec 2005, pgs. 20-22, [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/palestinian_terror_e.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/palestinian_terror_e.pdf)
In Figures 2 and 3 one observes a spike in violence in 2003, but a considerably low ratio of successful to failed suicide attacks, 0.14, which also suggests that the attacks became less effective. The statistics also show that there was an 89% decline in Israeli civilian fatalities from Hamas violence from its highest point in 2002 to its lowest point in 2005, as well as an 87% decline in Hamas suicide bombings over those three years. And from its peak in 2003 to one year after, suicide attempts declined by over one-third, and successful suicide attacks decreased by over 40%.\textsuperscript{113} Even though targeted killings often trigger an increased desire to engage in terrorism, it can be deduced that the retaliation was not overwhelmingly significant because Israeli casualties and Palestinian suicide bombings still declined. For example, after the killings of Yassin and Rantissi there was only a slight increase in total terrorist acts from 2003-2004 (from 3,841 to 3,941).\textsuperscript{114} Also, while the total number of suicide attacks (failed and successful) reached its highest in 2003 totaling 210, the ratio of successful to failed suicide attacks was disproportionately low coming out at 0.14, which suggests that Israeli counterterrorism tactics reduced terrorist group operations. This upward trend remained largely consistent, showing that there was a 75% drop in the efficiency of suicide bombings from 1.6 fatalities to attempted suicide bombings in 2001, to 0.4 fatalities to attempted suicide bombings in 2004.

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
2000 & 0 & 4 & 4 & \\
\hline
2001 & 20 & 35 & 55 & 1.8 \\
\hline
2002 & 112 & 60 & 172 & 0.5 \\
\hline
2003 & 184 & 26 & 210 & 0.14 \\
\hline
2004 & 119 & 15 & 134 & 0.13 \\
\hline
2005 & 15 & 7 & 22 & 0.47 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{113} Frisch, pg. 7.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
In addition, targeted killings of political leaders like Yassin and Rantisi, more than military leaders like Shehade, are especially costly because they enrage the Palestinians, increase their motivation to retaliate violently, and make them more uncompromising in the long run. This is because political leaders enjoy a higher status than military leaders, are typically better known to the Palestinian public, and are considered “beyond the rules of the game.” Thus, targeting political leaders radicalizes Palestinians and undermines ceasefire agreements. For example, the targeted killing in 2001 of Abu Ali Mustafa, Secretary-General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), sparked the revenge killing of Israeli Minister of Tourism Rehavam Ze’evi two months later. While Mustafa was not a Hamas member, it is realistic that the same outcome would result if the target was Hamas. Targeted killings against Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s (PIJ) Muhammad Seeder and Hamas’ Ismail Abu Shanab in 2003 also led Hamas to rescind ceasefires with Israel, prompting additional violence.

While some analysts argue that targeted killings of political leaders contribute to an operational vacuum, thus weakening operational capacity, others point to what they consider to be more plausible and sufficient explanations, like Israel resuming control of the West Bank in 2002 through Operation Defensive Shield and beginning construction of the security barrier one year later. “These actions alone may account for the failure of Hamas to retaliate for the Yassin and Rantissi assassinations,” affirm Gazit and Brym. But because targeted killings of political leaders help fulfill political goals, like forestalling the creation of an independent, strong, Hamas-led Palestinian state, they satisfy internal Israeli demands and create conditions for a longer

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115 Gazit and Brym, pg. 8.
116 Ibid.
lasting peace. The head of Israel’s anti-terror unit, for instance, pointed out that targeted killings of Hamas political leaders takes a toll on its political popularity, and promotes unrest and chaos among its leadership:

It is very important to use [political assassination] in a particular way. You have masterminds, master terrorists, including the ideologists, Yassin for example. Yes, I would use targeted killings against the ideologists. Send a message to the [Palestinian] population. I know that in the short term it might increase their popularity, but not in the long run... [And] in the short run, the assassinations might increase the motivation [to engage in terrorism], but not in the long run. It brought the organization to chaos. They were forced to calculate their moves. No one can deny the fact that Hamas started to moderate its moves after we targeted Yassin and Rantissi, not before.117

While targeted killings certainly weakened Hamas’ operational capacity, Hamas did not collapse. Far from it, Hamas won the 2006 PA elections, and even when the newly elected Hamas government was overthrown by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the West Bank—with U.S. and Israeli help—it prevailed in Gaza. The Gaza War (2008-9), according to Middle East Scholar, Juan Cole, was “another attempt to destroy Hamas, which failed miserably.”118 Israeli military leaders were surprised at how little resistance Hamas put up, which proves that they do not understand movements like Hamas, says Cole. “Movements can afford to lie low during attacks, because they have the resources and support to reemerge once the heat is off,” he explained. If the movement has a strong social base in a compact population like Hamas, assassinating leaders is “usually worse than useless” he added.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S.

117 Ibid.

My research suggests that there is a large debate surrounding the effectiveness of targeted killings in the policy community. People in favor of the tactic argue that it serves as a deterrent to future attacks, impedes the capacity and leadership of terrorist groups, and saves countless unknown Israeli lives. Critics assert that the practice is illegal, immoral, and ineffective. To some degree, all of these claims are true—making the decision whether Israel’s use of targeted killing has improved or worsened security during the Al-Aqsa Intifada exceptionally difficult. From a policy standpoint, among the most important issues are the normative and legal reasons for continuing a policy of targeted killings.

As U.S. targeted killings (in the form of Air Force Predators and other UAVs) increasingly become a centerpiece of U.S. national security policy, I think examining the effects of these attacks is especially crucial. While first employed in the Bush administration, drone attacks continue now in the Obama administration unabated. In fact, drone attacks have increased to two or three strikes a week, approximately fourfold from the peak reached during the Bush presidency.\footnote{David Ignatius, “Leon Panetta Gets the CIA Back on its Feet,” Washington Post, 25 April 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/23/AR2010042303346.html} Since Americans often look to Israel for lessons in counterterrorism, given its vast experience dealing with airline hijackings and suicide bombings, it is important for the U.S. to not blindly follow Israel’s lead in targeted killings. Because targeted killings are not widely accepted as a legitimate counterterrorism tool, the U.S. risks tarnishing its reputation as an upholder of the rule of law if it embraces them, at least to the extent that Israel already has. Arguably the American public’s tolerance for targeted killings may have increased as drone attacks become more common, especially the successful ones; however, the security situation in the U.S. and Israel differ markedly from each other, with one facing an enemy on the other side.
of the world that has only relatively recently become a serious terrorist threat, and the other
confronting a long-time adversary living in its own backyard that continues to threaten its very
existence. Notably, the more diffuse and global threat the U.S. faces often operates in territories
that are friendly to the U.S. and actively oppose the terrorists, unlike the Palestinian Authority.
And because arrest is preferable to killing, it is logical for the U.S. to arrange for local security
forces to apprehend the terrorist rather than take him out with a Predator drone. Of course there
are certain countries, like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Yemen, which do not exercise full
control over their territory or lack the capacity to arrest key suspects. In these cases, targeted
killings may be an option since there is no “sovereignty” to violate.\textsuperscript{120}

For the rare instances the U.S. decides it has no better option than launching a drone attack, it
would benefit from following Israel’s standard operating procedures concerning targeted
killings. According to Daniel Byman, “much of the success Israel has enjoyed in the use of
targeted killings owes to the fact that it has matched its policy with good intelligence and better
defensive measures; the United States should do the same.”\textsuperscript{121} Specifically, this entails
developing clear, transparent, and legitimate procedures for deciding when targeted killings are
appropriate. In Israel, for example, Shin Bet (Israeli security agency) works with the local media
to ensure awareness of what the operations involve.\textsuperscript{122} Nongovernmental organizations also
track the number of targeted killings and the policy is challenged in the media and the courts.
“By highlighting the policies risks and difficulties and educating the public about its practical

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, pg. 102.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, pg. 103.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
and moral tradeoffs,” says Byman, “mistakes in implementation have not shaken the Israeli public’s support for the policy.”

A substantial vetting process with regards to diplomatic, political, and moral issues should also be implemented. In Israel, proposed targeted killings go through a lengthy process before being approved, which includes: intelligence officials suggesting a target, military officials reviewing all the information, and then senior military leaders, the minister of defense, and the prime minister signing off on the action. In the U.S., a similar process should be adopted also involving senior political leaders and Justice Department officials. Nonetheless, the only solution to the terror that confronts both Israel and the U.S. is a political one; until such a settlement is reached, however, targeted killing—when cautiously weighed against other counterterrorism tactics—should be an available option in very rare instances.

**CONCLUSION**

So what effect, if any, did targeted killings have on cycles of Hamas violence during the Second Intifada? Did they contain, deter, and ultimately lessen rates of violence, or did they intensify anger and increase motivation to attack with more deadly force? Most importantly, were they conducive to combating Hamas terror? In reflecting on the three case studies and the hypotheses below, it is apparent that the effects of a weakened and strengthened operational capacity are occurring at the same time.

**Hypothesis I:** Targeted killings weakened Hamas’ operational capacity by creating disincentives that raised the cost of militancy and deterred Hamas from planning more attacks, thus decreasing violence.

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123 Ibid, p. 104.
Hypothesis II: Targeted killings strengthened Hamas’ operational capacity by enraging Hamas operatives and producing a backlash effect, thus increasing violence.

As the data from the case studies indicate, the number of overall attacks increased as the number of suicide attacks, injuries, deaths, and number of Israelis killed per attack decreased. This conclusion supports Hypothesis I, which is based on the premise that targeted killings also deprive Hamas of valued commanders and force the remaining members to concentrate more on their personal security and less on recruiting and organizing attacks—thus decreasing operational capacity. At the same time, Hypothesis II is accurate because targeted killings triggered retaliation attacks and attracted potential recruits due to anger over the lost leader and any resulting collateral damage—thus increasing operational capacity. Therefore, Israeli targeted killings simultaneously reduced and bolstered Hamas’ operational capacity.

Nonetheless, I believe that the impact of Hamas’ weakened operational capacity exceeds the impact of its strengthened operational capacity. This is because it was ultimately a diminished operational capacity, along with other socio-political issues like peace talks and land settlements that convinced Hamas to lessen the violence. Even though targeted killings often triggered an increased desire to engage in terrorism, thereby increasing Hamas’ operational capacity, it can be deduced that its capacity to inflict real harm was not overwhelming because Israeli casualties and Palestinian suicide bombings still declined. This period of calm ushered the end of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2005, and contributed to Hamas’ ability to win the 2006 PA elections. If the impact of Hamas’ strengthened operational capacity exceeded its weakened operational capacity, the “dead-locked battle of assassination-suicide bombing-assassination-suicide bombing” that Bloom described would continue today.\textsuperscript{124} While conditions between

\textsuperscript{124} Bloom, pg. 80.
Hamas and Israel are by no means perfect, the effects of a strengthened operational capacity in which enraged Hamas operatives waged countless retaliation attacks and attracted recruits by the hundreds over the damage spawned by a targeted killing, are thankfully not as apparent as they once were in the Al-Aqsa Intifada.
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