

Israel's Lethal Weapon of Choice

As Assassinations of Militants Increase, Citizens' Uneasiness Grows

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JERUSALEM -- Nazih Abu Sibaa, 35, died seconds after he opened the trunk of his booby-trapped car. Abdel Rahman Hamad, 33, was shot dead by a sniper as he sat on his roof reading the Koran. Mohammad Abayat, 27, was killed when he picked up the receiver of a pay phone that blew up outside a hospital where he was visiting his sick mother.

All three men, whose deaths were described by witnesses and Palestinian officials, were suspected Palestinian militants marked for assassination -- one of Israel's primary weapons in its effort to curb suicide bombings and other attacks against Israelis. These "targeted killings," as they are known here, were described by Israeli officials two years ago as "rare and exceptional" measures. But now they are carried out with regularity, using missiles, bombs, tanks, booby traps and gunfire, and they are stirring increasing disapproval from the Israeli public.

Their frequency increased as Palestinian militants sent a wave of suicide bombers to attack Israelis, intensifying the level of violence in the 33-month-long Palestinian uprising, in which approximately 2,950 people have been killed.

The number of suspected Palestinian militants tracked and killed by Israel more than doubled from 35 in 2001 to 72 last year. The toll of civilian bystanders and others killed who were not intended targets of the missions increased 2 1/2 times during the same period, according to studies of the cases by The Washington Post, which were based partly on research by two Israeli human rights groups, B'Tselem and the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel; and three Palestinian organizations, the Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment (known by its Arabic acronym, LAW), the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group and the Palestinian Center for Human Rights.

The figures exclude incidents that were not targeted killings -- such as gunfights, street fights or other shootings that appeared to be random -- or in which suspected militants were killed during general arrests or military operations.

According to the data, Israeli military forces and undercover operations teams have killed at least 249 Palestinians during targeted attacks since the fall of 2000.

Of that total, 149 were the targets and 100 were civilians or, in some cases, bodyguards or members of militant groups who were not the primary targets. Slightly more than one of every 10 Palestinians who has died in the conflict was killed during a targeted killing operation, the data show.

"Targeted killing is not only very valuable," Maj. Gen. Giora Eiland, chief of planning and policy in the Israeli military and one its most senior officers, said in a recent interview. "If we

could not use this method in areas like Gaza, where we do not control the territory . . . we could not fight effectively against terrorist groups."

"In 2003, the main weapon the Israeli army has in its arsenal against terrorism is the assassination policy," said Michael Sfard, a Tel Aviv attorney representing LAW and the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, which are challenging the policy as a violation of international law and human rights standards in a suit now before the Israeli Supreme Court. "Today we execute people without trial. It's so simple. That's what we're doing. No one shows evidence to anyone."

'New Rules' of the Conflict

Israel's increased use of targeted killings, and the civilian deaths that have accompanied them, has sharpened debate here on a critical question: Should a Jewish state that describes itself as the only true democracy in the Middle East refrain from conducting assassinations, or does Palestinian use of suicide bombers to attack Israelis in cafes and on buses justify extreme measures to protect Israeli citizens?

"Terrorism has introduced new rules into the game," said Yaron Ezrahi, a Hebrew University professor and one of Israel's leading political scientists and philosophers, "and therefore the situation for a state like Israel, and the United States, is how to maintain its constitutionality in the face of terror."

Today in Israel, he said, "what we're seeing is a process of erosion of democratic norms."

Although Israelis have suffered more than 2 1/2 years of suicide bombings and other attacks, Israeli society is becoming increasingly opposed to the tactic of assassination.

In a recent public opinion poll by the daily newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth, large numbers of Israelis who were questioned expressed doubts about both the tactics and the motives of such operations. A majority of Israelis polled -- 58 percent -- said the military should at least temporarily discontinue targeted killings. Two of every five Israelis polled said they believed the government had used targeted killings to sabotage a new, U.S.-backed peace process.

Israel's policy of targeted killings has become one of the most divisive issues in the debate over a U.S.-backed peace plan known as the "road map." Palestinian militant leaders have said they will honor a cease-fire agreement with Israel only if the practice is ended. Israelis have insisted that they reserve the right to go after militants that they consider imminent threats if Palestinian security forces don't detain them or prevent the attack after being advised about it.

The United States, which last year killed suspected al Qaeda operatives in Yemen using a Hellfire missile fired from a remote-controlled Predator aircraft, has criticized Israel's policy of assassinations as "unhelpful" to the peace effort but has not issued strong condemnations. In deference to Israel's arguments that assassinations are necessary to prevent terrorist attacks, the United States reportedly has pushed Israeli officials to limit their targets to "ticking bombs" --

individuals who can be tied to impending threats -- though critics argue that such limits are open to broad interpretation.

History of Assassination

In the spring of 1973, a group of Israeli commandos guided a speedboat up the Mediterranean coast and scrambled ashore in Beirut. Their covert mission: to assassinate three of the Palestine Liberation Organization's top officials in their downtown apartments.

The leader of the team, Ehud Barak, commander of Israel's special forces, wore a long, dark wig, false breasts and women's clothing. He and his men gunned down all three targets, according to accounts confirmed by Barak, who later became Israel's prime minister.

Israel's history of assassinations stretches back decades. In the early 1970s, prominent members of Palestinian organizations were killed in rocket attacks and car bomb explosions in Lebanon. Prime Minister Golda Meir authorized hit squads to locate and kill members of the Black September cell responsible for the kidnapping and murder of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. Israeli undercover squads, dressed as Arabs, hunted down suspected militants in the Palestinian territories during the first uprising, or intifada, from 1987 to 1993.

In the fall of 2000, as the second intifada began, Barak was prime minister and authorized security forces to assassinate Palestinian militants suspected of planning or conducting attacks against Israelis.

Just before noon on Nov. 9 of that year, Hussein Abayat, a 37-year-old father of four, was driving his gray Mitsubishi through the West Bank village of Beit Sahur on the eastern edge of Bethlehem when antitank missiles fired by Israeli gunships slammed into his car. Neighbors found his charred body melted to the driver's seat. Two women, Aziza Jubran, 58, and Rahma Hindi, 54, who had been standing on the roadside, also died, their bodies burned black by the missiles.

Abayat, identified by Israelis as an activist with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement who allegedly organized shooting attacks on the nearby Jewish community of Gilo, became the first known targeted killing of the current conflict. After the hit, Barak vowed to "continue with such operations."

As the intifada intensified under Barak's successor, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the military's reliance on assassinations and the scope of the targets expanded, buttressed by advances in intelligence gathering and adaptations of high-technology military equipment and weaponry.

The Israeli government has not released official data on targeted killings. In some cases, the government says Palestinians were killed because Israeli security forces had to fire in self-defense. Details about evidence gathered by Israel on suspects, and facts about the decision to assassinate them, usually remain secret after the attacks.

In carrying out the targeted killings, Israeli forces have lifted some of their tactics from the murky world of covert operations and integrated them into the daily missions of regular troops. Frequently, several types of security units participate in a single operation: The mission will be directed by Shin Bet, the country's civilian security agency, with military commandos providing the muscle and army tanks and air force helicopters supplying the firepower.

In an example of such a coordinated hit, three suspected Islamic Jihad militants driving on an isolated road north of the West Bank city of Jenin last October were ambushed by eight undercover Israeli operatives, four armored personnel carriers and three helicopters. Two of the suspects were killed.

Palestinian hospital officials said one of the men, Wassim Ahmed Sabana, 23, was shot seven times. Israeli security officials later said intelligence reports indicated the men were en route to a suicide bombing inside Israel.

Other missions have relied more on finesse. In 16 known incidents, Israeli operatives or Palestinian agents cooperating with Israelis have planted explosive devices in telephone booths, cars and other locations where they were detonated by remote control, sometimes from unmanned drones or helicopters. Because such operations are often carried out in secret by security services, Israeli officials usually deny involvement and attribute the explosions to accidents caused by Palestinians building or carrying explosive devices that detonated prematurely.

Military officials said they used targeted killings when they were unable to arrest the wanted militant, which officials said was always their first choice. But human rights officials argue that Israel has made thousands of arrests under difficult circumstances since the intifada began, challenging the claim that some targets must be killed rather than arrested. Israeli officials say the justification for targeted killings is self-defense: "a means to prevent in-progress and future terrorist attacks that will kill Israeli civilians," according to court documents recently filed to the Israeli Supreme Court by the Israeli government in response to the human rights groups' suit.

Human rights officials argue, however, that the practice of targeted killings is a denial of due process in a country that grants its own citizens accused of crimes extensive judicial rights and does not have a death penalty.

Increasingly, in the past two years, proposed operations have been screened by military lawyers. The most important targets are sent to Sharon for approval, according to civilian and military officials.

"Did we make some mistakes?" the military's Eiland said. "Yes. Did we sometimes miss the target? Yes. Did we sometimes cause collateral damage? Yes." But he also said operations have been delayed or canceled "hundreds of times" because of concerns over civilian casualties and other factors.

Unintended Victims

Abdel Aziz Rantisi said he never heard the helicopters coming. He didn't realize a missile had slammed through the engine block of his car until the blue Mitsubishi filled with white smoke.

"It took me three seconds to realize we were being targeted," said Rantisi, 60, one of the most senior and most strident Gaza leaders of the Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, "and I started to think, 'How are we going to survive the second rocket?' "

He leaped out a back door and his 19-year-old son, Ahmed, who was driving, crawled out a window. As the car rolled into a nearby intersection, AH-64 Apache gunships spit five more missiles at it.

Amal Jarosheh, 8, was standing in the gate leading to her family's house a few feet away when the first missile punched through the hood of the Rantisi car at 11:50 a.m. on June 10.

"I gave her some money to buy candy," said her father, Nimer Jarosheh, 46, a mechanic. "She never got a chance to eat it."

Rantisi, the target, survived the operation. But five other people, including Amal, died from their wounds.

"The thing that makes me angry is they mean to kill as many people as they can," Rantisi, still nursing a leg injury from the attack, said in an interview in Gaza City. "Their assassinations all occur in very crowded areas. This was one of the most crowded areas of Gaza.

"I'm sure I was monitored and observed from the time I left my house. They could have tried to assassinate me in a place that was not crowded and avoided spilling civilian blood."

About one-third of all the suspected militants killed in targeted assassinations have been hit with missiles fired from aircraft and, in one case, a 2,000-pound bomb dropped by an F-16 fighter plane. But more than two-thirds of all unintended victims were killed in these airstrikes, making them the most controversial of the targeted killings.

"Israel fails to apply the principle of proportionality," said Donatella Rovera, who monitors Israeli and Palestinian human rights issues for Amnesty International, the London-based rights group. "So many bystanders have been killed in pursuit of this policy."

The largest number of fatalities occurred last July when an Israeli fighter jet dropped a one-ton bomb on a house in a central Gaza City neighborhood where concrete apartment buildings are packed together. The target was Salah Shehada, the founder and leader of Hamas's militant wing in Gaza. He was killed. So were 14 other people, including Shehada's wife.

While the international backlash over the bombing did not surprise Israeli officials, they were stunned by the reaction from their own public.

"The bomb in Gaza that killed 14 innocent people left a very profound impact on Israelis," said Ezrahi, the Israeli political scientist. "There is a certain kind of agonizing over events where there is killing of civilians."

After the attempted assassination of Rantisi, public opinion responded even more severely, according to the newspaper poll that showed 40 percent of those questioned believed the attack was an attempt to disrupt the peace initiative.

Though Israeli officials defended the targeting of Shehada and Rantisi, both had prompted vociferous debates within the military and intelligence communities before they were carried out, according to military officials.

In the case of Shehada, some officers argued that more precise missiles, rather than a one-ton bomb, should have been used. But Shehada had escaped a previous assassination attempt and had shown an ability to outwit Israeli security forces, according to Eiland. "We didn't know exactly where he would be inside the house," Eiland said. "If we attacked him with a helicopter [using a missile], the probability that we would kill him was considered too low."

The military has not used an air-dropped bomb in a targeted killing attempt since the Shehada bombing.

The attempted killing of Rantisi was also vigorously debated within the government. Many officials, including one of the country's top military and intelligence officials, believed it would be too provocative at a time when the United States was attempting to launch a new Middle East peace process. Final authorization for targeting Rantisi came from Sharon, according to Israeli officials.

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