

No Easy Solution to Lone-wolf' Palestinian Attackers

Would a deluge of raids and arrests really help when the 'terrorist infrastructure' consists of teenagers armed with kitchen knives?

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Monday, the fifth straight day of multiple stabbing attacks inside Israel, added an extra portion of atrocity to the daily dose: Two Palestinian teens critically wounded an Israeli teen in Jerusalem, in a kind of local version of “Lord of the Flies.”

Over the past five days, there have been no fewer than 17 stabbing attacks, including Monday's four (but excluding the two that occurred a few days earlier, on October 3). More than half of these attacks were in Jerusalem.

The profile of the attackers is becoming clearer as the sample size regrettably continues to grow. Almost all are teens, including four females. None has a record of involvement in terror, and only a handful have even the slightest connection to any terrorist organization. Several, however, are devout Muslims.

Most of them have another salient common denominator: They are residents of East Jerusalem, meaning they have Israeli identity cards that enable them to move freely around the city and the country. Two of the others were Arab citizens of Israel.

All of the above underscores how hard it is for the security services to thwart these attacks. It also underscores the illogic of some of the claims being made by the right flank of the governing coalition, including several cabinet ministers.

First, it's hard to blame the Palestinian Authority for attacks emanating from territory under full Israeli control, in light of the fact that the PA is making an effort to prevent such attacks. That, according to both the Shin Bet security service and Military Intelligence, and now accepted even by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In addition, the politicians who are calling for a large-scale counterterrorism operation and warning against Israeli passivity in the face of terror have little to offer in the way of convincing.

Would a deluge of raids and arrests really help when the “terrorist infrastructure” consists of teenagers armed with kitchen knives? It's not like the second intifada, when the threat consisted of gun workshops, expert bomb makers and suicide bombers dispatched from West Bank refugee camps.

There's nothing sophisticated about the current Palestinian onslaught; they've gone back to the most primitive means at their disposal. Even the thwarted explosion near Ma'aleh Adumim on Sunday used a simple gas canister, not an explosives vest.

Nevertheless, the current wave of attacks has sufficed to undermine Israelis' sense of personal security, laboriously rebuilt after the second intifada. It's not the number of fatalities that makes the difference; only four Israelis have been killed, less than the death toll in a single suicide bombing a decade ago. Rather, it's the frequency of the attacks and the feeling that the defense establishment is still casting about for ways to curtail them.

But the political debate isn't making the police's work any easier. And it's the police that are on the front lines now, more than any other security agency.

In the West Bank, despite successive demonstrations the PA is continuing its efforts to prevent direct clashes between protesters and Israel Defense Forces soldiers. Within Israel, in contrast, the police are trying to cope simultaneously with the wave of stabbings and a large number of violent demonstrations in Jerusalem and various Arab towns.

So far, the police have met the challenge admirably. They have repeatedly managed to identify terrorists before they stabbed civilians, leading the terrorists to attack them instead. In other cases, they have arrived quickly and managed to catch or kill the terrorist immediately after the attack.

But it's clear the force is stretched to the breaking point, and signs of burnout are already evident among Jerusalem police officers and their reinforcements from outside the city, all of them working long hours under high stress. Soon, the frontline units will have to be given a rest, and their replacements will be less skilled and experienced.

This week, 12 companies of Border Police reservists were called up to ease the police's burden. But due to budgetary constraints, these reservists don't train frequently. A few years ago, the state comptroller issued a scathing report about their level of training and equipment.

If the wave of violence, and the focus on Jerusalem, continues, the IDF will presumably have to provide more assistance — mainly, but not only, in the capital. The army has already loaned the police an intelligence-gathering unit to help staff observation posts along Route 6, a main north-south highway where stones and firebombs have been thrown at passing cars on several occasions. But under the circumstances, it seems the IDF could do more to help, for instance by deploying along the "seam line" between Israel and the West Bank.

On a brighter note, it seems the joint intelligence work by the police and the Shin Bet is improving. Previously, violent demonstrations and stabbing attacks by lone-wolf terrorists were low on the Shin Bet's priority list. Now the agency is making more effort to collect what little intelligence there is about the perpetrators.

The IDF, meanwhile, is on high alert along the Gaza border, where daily demonstrations near the border fence are continuing, alongside a drizzle of rocket fire at Israel. On Monday, for the second day in a row, some 20 Palestinians broke through the fence into

Israel. Since the start of the year, even before the current escalation, more than 200 Palestinians have managed to cross the fence, which has been deteriorating steadily since its last upgrade 10 years ago.