

Suicide Car Bombings in Israel Highlight Gaza Dilemma

Summary

Hamas suicide bombers detonated two explosive-laden jeeps at the Kerem Shalom crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip on Saturday, 19 April. The attack targeted Israel Defence Forces (IDF) soldiers manning the crossing. Thirteen of the soldiers were wounded, but none were killed. The Kerem Shalom crossing is the main entrance from Israel into the Gaza Strip, and has been the primary conduit for humanitarian supplies for Gaza residents during the economic embargo Israel has imposed on the Strip since October, 2007.¹

Israel believes that the objectives of the attack were three-fold. The immediate tactical objective was to not only kill IDF soldiers, but also to kidnap one or more soldiers following the explosions.² The third objective was to provoke Israel to close the crossing and stop the flow of humanitarian supplies into Gaza. This would quickly bring about a humanitarian crisis, thereby increasing international pressure on Israel to lift the current embargo.³

Tactics

Hamas used three vehicles in the attack. First, an operative driving an Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) brought down the fence surrounding the crossing, allowing two vehicles disguised as IDF jeeps to enter the area. The first jeep detonated near a watch tower, but did not harm any of the soldiers in the tower. As the second jeep approached an area with a number of soldiers, the deputy battalion commander, thinking that the jeep was an IDF jeep, attempted to establish contact with the driver. When he failed, he immediately gave out the warning that the vehicle was an explosive device and most IDF personnel were able to take cover in their own armoured jeeps. Thirteen soldiers who were not able to get into armoured vehicles were injured.⁴

A second APC was blown up by an Israeli tank as it approached the Kissufim border crossing near Kerem Shalom. In a statement to the press, a Hamas spokesperson confirmed that four vehicles had been deployed in the attack (although he also claimed that three had detonated explosives while a fourth withdrew).⁵

It is not currently clear how Hamas planned to kidnap soldiers. The group may have positioned a second group near the site to perform a raid, or intended to use the APC to extract a hostage or hostages. In June 2006, Hamas successfully carried out a raid at the

¹ Kershner, Isabel. "Palestinian Suicide Bombers Attack Gaza Crossing," the New York Times, 20 April 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/world/middleeast/20mideast.html>

² Harel, Amos. "Analysis/Keeping Gaza Quiet Until Israel's Independence Day," Ha'aretz, 21 April 2008. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/976474.html>

³ Katz, Yaakov. "IDF Braces for more Attacks on Gaza Israel Border," The Jerusalem Post, 21 April 2008. <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1208422645429&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Kerem Shalom checkpoint, capturing Israeli Cpl. Gilad Shalit, who has not yet been recovered.

The deputy commander of the Bedouin Desert Battalion, who quickly ascertained that the vehicle was a bomb and warned his men in advance, is credited with saving lives and preventing additional casualties. Yet, the IDF has ordered a probe into the attack to figure out how the APC was able to ram the fence without being intercepted.⁶

Weapons

Hamas obtained APCs following its violent coup in the Gaza Strip to expel the Palestinian Authority. Along with APCs, it obtained Grad rockets, anti-tank weapons, anti-aircraft weapons, machine guns, ammunition, explosives, and even ships which formerly belonged to the Palestinian naval police.⁷ The use of an APC in the attack also called into question Israel's current plan to give APCs to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, out of the fear that the situation in Gaza, with Hamas wrenching control from the PA and taking their equipment, could be replicated in parts of the West Bank.

In addition to taking equipment from the PA, Hamas has also expanded its smuggling networks since seizing control of the Gaza Strip in mid-2007. Between June 2007 and early 2008, the group has smuggled in an estimated 80 tons of explosives, according to a report released by the Israeli Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center. An unknown amount of arms and equipment could have been brought in from the Sinai while the border between Gaza and Egypt was opened wide for eleven days in January, 2008. Israel is concerned that such a surplus of weapons and supplies, stockpiled by Hamas, will lead to an escalation in the frequency and intensity of attacks.

Timing

The attack took place the day after former US President Jimmy Carter met with exiled Hamas leaders in Damascus to discuss a possible ceasefire and prisoner exchange. Following the attack, Israeli media reports speculated on why such an operation, which would have likely had approval from the leadership in Damascus, would have taken place so close to this meeting, making Damascus-based leader Khalid Meshaal appear as if he were out of synch with the organization in Gaza and undermining his ability to speak for the organization as a whole. One media report speculated that the Meshaal and the Damascus leadership had approved the operation, but had been unaware of the timing.⁸

The attack also coincided with the eve of the Passover holiday, one of the most important Jewish holidays and also a favorite time for terrorist groups to carry out large-scale

⁶ Greenberg, Hanan. "IDF Must Change Operational Strategy, Says Senior Officer," Ynet News, 20 April 2008. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3533708,00.html>

⁷ "Hamas's Military Buildup in the Gaza Strip," Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (Gelilot, Israel), 8 April 2007. http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/hamas_080408.pdf

⁸ Harel, 21 April 2008.

operations. There was some concern in Israel that this operation at Kerem Shalom was designed to serve as a distraction while a larger attack was executed in Israel proper, but this fear was not realized.⁹

Hamas's "Humanitarian" Activities

Hamas is widely known as a terrorist group that is as popular among the Palestinian population for its humanitarian activities as it is for its terrorist actions. This image conflicts with Israel's claim that Hamas is attempting to bring about a humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. However, Hamas has repeatedly attacked the border crossings through which trucks carrying vital supplies – in the case of Kerem Shalom, up to 200 a week – bring their cargoes to needy residents of Gaza.¹⁰ Since Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip by violently expelling the Palestinian Authority, Israel has imposed a blockade, effectively closing the borders of the Gaza Strip on all sides.

Hamas may want to cause a temporary humanitarian crisis in order to bring about intense international pressure on Israel to lift this blockade. As long as the Israeli government continues to allow the shipment of humanitarian supplies into Gaza, the international community is unlikely to act decisively against it. Hamas itself is unlikely to be harmed by such a crisis because it supplies itself via smuggling routes from the Sinai Peninsula.

Following the attack, the Israeli government insisted that the crossing would remain open to humanitarian shipments.¹¹ Hamas' spokesman Sami al-Zuhri promised that the border crossings would be repeatedly targeted.¹² There have been several skirmishes and incidents in the past month, including an attack on 9 April on the border fuel terminal which serves as the Gaza Strip's only fuel source. That attack killed two Israeli civilians.¹³

Kidnapping Soldiers

Hamas's successful hostage-taking in June 2006 put immense pressure on the Israeli government. The terrorist group, which is believed to be keeping Gilad Shalit alive, is demanding the release of hundreds of imprisoned Palestinians in return for the single IDF soldier. While talking to Hamas leader Khalid Meshaal in Damascus about a possible prisoner exchange, Jimmy Carter proposed Israel release a total of 400 Palestinians in return for Shalit.¹⁴ If such an exchange took place, it would represent a major victory for Hamas. Just the discussion of a hostage exchange on such terms – one soldier for hundreds of Palestinians – provides a strong incentive for Hamas to attempt to take more hostages. Israel has in the past agreed to exchanges on similar terms.

⁹ Oren, Amir. "Foiled Again / An Important Success," Ha'aretz, 21 April 2008.

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/976450.html>

¹⁰ Kershner, New York Times, 20 April 2008.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Katz, Jerusalem Post, 21 April 2008.

¹³ Harel, 21 April 2008.

¹⁴ Almeghari, Rami. "Hamas's Mash'al: A Referendum on a Palestinian State is Welcomed," International Middle East Media Center, 22 April 2008.

No End in Sight

“We have a wealth of bad options to choose from,” said one Israeli official a couple months ago, when asked the best way to resolve the standoff over Gaza.¹⁵ Israeli Defense Minister Gaza Ashkenazi has indicated that a large-scale ground offensive has become likely, and some commentators have called it inevitable.¹⁶ But such a mass offensive is likely to lead to high Palestinian casualties – and thus more support for retaliatory terrorist attacks as well as an increase in international pressure on Israel. Moreover, the IDF is not sure how it will extricate its troops from Gaza and maintain security. Presumably, once the IDF leaves, Hamas will begin to rebuild from the damage of the ground incursion and the attacks will resume.

Another option is to try to negotiate a cease-fire. Moderates within Hamas have indicated that they are prepared to discuss a two-way ceasefire, meaning they promise to stop operations against Israel, but Israel must also cease all operations against Hamas. Israel has thus far been reluctant to agree to such terms. A ceasefire would provide militants with breathing space, an opportunity to improve and stockpile weapons and plan future attacks.

¹⁵ Shalev, Chemi. “Israel Stuck Between a Rocket and a Hard Place,” the Jewish Daily Forward, 20 April 2008. <http://www.forward.com/articles/12749/>

¹⁶ Frykeberg, Mel. “Upping the Ante,” Middle East, Issue 386 (February 2008) p. 16-17 .