

First Suicide Bombing in over a Year Strikes Israel

On 4 February, a suicide bomber detonated his explosive belt in the Israeli town of Dimona, killing one person and wounding ten. A second suicide bomber was shot in the head by an Israeli policeman before he could detonate his explosive device. Both bombers were Palestinians.¹

Dimona is the location of Israel's heavily guarded nuclear reactor. However, the reactor facility was not the target of either bomber.²

Conflicting Claims of Responsibility

As of 5 February, there were two competing claims of responsibility for the attacks. Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade in the Gaza Strip claimed that one of the bombers was a member, and identified the man as 22 year-old Gaza resident Luay Aghwani. The group claimed the second man was a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), another Gaza resident in his twenties named Musa Arafat. Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade claimed that the men had infiltrated Israel from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, and that they entered the Sinai along with thousands of other Palestinians after the border fence between the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula was blown open by militants in Gaza.³ The border fence remained open and unguarded for 11 days, allowing thousands of Palestinians to travel unhindered and unchecked between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade claimed to have infiltrated more militants from the Sinai into Israel via the porous border that separates them, and that these militants were preparing additional attacks.⁴ Dimona, where the suicide bombing occurred, is 35 miles from the Israel-Sinai border.

Hamas disputes this account and claims that its own militants, not the two Gaza men, were behind the attack. A representative of the group told Reuters that the two bombers were from the West Bank town of Hebron, and had entered Israel from the West Bank, not Egypt.⁵

Al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade supplied a video tape which it claimed depicted the two bombers making their final statements before the attack. However, Israel has not verified whether the men in the video are the same two who targeted Dimona. An Israeli news station cast doubt on the video by comparing images of the attempted bomber before he was killed to the men who appeared in the video, and noting that the attempted bomber did not appear to match either of the men in the video.⁶

¹ Boudreaux, Richard. "Suicide Bomber Strikes in Israeli Desert Town," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 February 2008. http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-israel5feb05_0.5875598.story

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ " Hamas Armed Wing Says Carried Out Israel Bombings," *Reuters*, 4 February 2008.

<http://africa.reuters.com/wire/news/usnL041333422.html>

⁶ Boudreaux, 5 February 2008.

Israel's Vulnerable Border

The incident has heightened Israeli fears that terrorist groups infiltrated the Sinai undetected while the border was open in order to cross into Israel from Egypt. The Egyptian/Israeli border extends roughly 300 kilometers and is not nearly as heavily guarded as its borders with the Palestinian Territories. Bedouin tribes living in the sparsely-populated Negev desert, which lies astride the border, have been known to smuggle people into Israel for a fee.⁷

This would not be the first time a bomber from Gaza has crossed into Egypt in order to enter Israel's Negev desert from the Sinai Peninsula. In January 2007, a suicide bomber killed three people in a bakery in Eilat after crossing from Gaza into the Sinai and then into Israel.⁸ Recent reports from Egyptian authorities have given Israelis additional reason for worry. The day before the Dimona attack, Egyptian security forces arrested two brothers from Gaza wearing explosive belts. Hours after the Dimona attack, Egyptian authorities arrested another Palestinian in the Sinai with an explosive device.⁹

Following the bombing and the news that the bombers may have entered the Negev desert from the Sinai Peninsula, local officials in the Negev called upon the Israeli government to erect a border fence along the Israel-Egypt border.¹⁰

Egypt Also Faces Threat

Militants who entered the Sinai Peninsula from Gaza are not only a danger to Israel, they also threaten tourist facilities and other potential targets in the Sinai. Terrorists have targeted Sinai resorts repeatedly during the last few years, killing both foreign tourists and Egyptians.

Most terrorist groups operating in the Gaza Strip restrict their operations to Israeli and Palestinian territory. These groups are focused on the nationalist struggle and are not part of the global Jihadist agenda. However, Jaish al-Islam ("the Army of Islam"), a Gaza-based Salafist organization, has targeting priorities and terrorist objectives in line with those of al-Qaeda. If its militants entered the Sinai, they can be expected to plot attacks against venues where Israeli or western tourists congregate. Further, the terrorist group responsible for the Sinai resort bombings, *Tawhid wal Jihad fil-Sinai*, obtained support and training from unknown entities within Gaza. The border opening presents an opportunity for that group to link up with its Gazan supporters who can provide weapons or bomb-making expertise for future attacks.

Olmert: Terrorism Will Not Derail Peace Talks

⁷ Mandel, Roi. "Local Council Heads in Negev Worried about Infiltration from Egypt," Ynet News, 4 February 2008. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3502759,00.html>

⁸ Katz, Yaakov. "Analysis: A Tale of Two Fences," *The Jerusalem Post*, 5 February 2008.

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1202064582390&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The attack in Dimona, the first suicide attack in Israel in over a year, cast a pall over the peace talks which began afresh in December. In a peace summit in Annapolis Maryland on 27 November, top officials from the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority agreed upon a schedule for negotiations which would produce a comprehensive peace plan by the end of 2008. Following the suicide bombing in Dimona, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert promised that the talks would continue, but warned militants that the Israeli military would retaliate for acts of violence.¹¹ Additional terrorist bombings or Israeli retaliatory measures that yield civilian casualties could imperil the progress of peace discussions, delaying the final peace agreement.

Accountability

Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade is technically a militant branch of the Fatah party. However, Fatah lost control of al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade in the Gaza Strip, which now operates as a largely autonomous group. Israel is therefore not expected to hold Fatah responsible, and is indeed carrying on peace discussions with the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority as planned. However, Israel will hold Hamas responsible, because the bombers are either Hamas members from the West Bank or other terrorist operatives from the Gaza Strip, which Hamas controls, even if they are not Hamas members. On 6 February, Israeli media reported that Israeli Defense Forces killed nine Hamas members in the Gaza Strip in response to the bombing.¹² Israel's retaliation will probably not be limited to this one incursion, but Israel will have to walk a fine line in its response to the attack in order to keep peace negotiations on time and maintain minimum acrimony between the two sides.

¹¹ Boudreaux, Richard. 5 February 2008.

¹² Harel, Amos, Avi Issacharoff and Mijal Grinberg, "IDF Kills Nine Men in Gaza, Qassams Rain on Sderot," Ha'aretz, 6 February 2008. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/951526.html>