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**The “Double Game” in the Palestinian Arena:
A Platform for Increased Terrorism**

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Recent months have seen an increasing number of terrorist attacks in the West Bank, along with a greater number of attempted attacks that were foiled. On June 30, 2015, Yoram Cohen, head of Israel’s General Security Service (GSS), reported to the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that since 2012 there has been a 50 percent annual increase in “popular” terror attacks (683 in 2012 compared to 1,834 in 2014). The most significant increase in attacks occurred during Operation Protective Edge. Furthermore, in 2014, attacks by some 130 terror cells (mostly belonging to Hamas) were foiled, and to date, attacks in 2015 by some 60 cells have been foiled.

Most of the attacks that were not foiled have been described as “popular terrorism.” Most were carried out by “lone wolves” using a variety of methods (guns, Molotov cocktails, vehicles, knives) in different locations. The data supports the assessment that organized terrorism supported by networks and infrastructures is almost always foiled. However, the two recent shooting attacks in the Ramallah area seem to have been organized and carried out by a terrorist cell apparently affiliated with Hamas.

The growing number of lone wolf attacks indicates that people who are not members of a terrorist organization or established radical group can nonetheless be motivated toward terrorist activity. This motivation seems to involve a general atmosphere, a particular worldview, and personal reasons. Whatever the background, however, these terrorist acts, when considered in their increasing scope, can no longer be explained as individual acts of desperation or frustration, but must be seen as a growing sociopolitical phenomenon with broad social legitimacy that confers some personal or symbolic reward on their perpetrators, apart from the material and/or financial compensation given directly to them or their families. While the Palestinian public in the West Bank is mostly concerned with its economic wellbeing and is therefore relatively passive when it comes to terrorist involvement, demonstrations, and riots, and while it largely avoids potential confrontation with Israel, this does not connote that the public rejects terrorist activity.

The public certainly does not express sweeping condemnation or even reservations about this activity.

It is tempting to think that the month of Ramadan is the catalyst for the recent string of attacks, similar to the events that occurred at this time last year. The month of Ramadan, in which most Muslims experience a sense of heightened religious devotion, could clearly be an incentive. During Ramadan, many are particularly exposed to intensive sessions of religious preaching that often contain explicit anti-Israeli incitement, alongside encouragement of acts of selflessness in the name of Islam and the *nation*. Furthermore, one can explain the phenomenon as inspired by events in the Arab world and the ideas of radicals disseminated through the internet and social media. There is also systematic incitement in the Palestinian media and public discourse, to which the Palestinian Authority turns a blind eye; at times PA senior officials also engage in it. All of these elements create an atmosphere and psychological infrastructure providing a tailwind to the ethos of national and religious resistance and encouraging the execution of terrorist attacks.

The attacks are carried out despite the concerted efforts by the PA security apparatus both to prevent a wave of terrorism in the West Bank and to dismantle terrorist infrastructures, especially those belonging to Hamas. It is important to PA President Mahmoud Abbas to prove that he has control of the territory under his authority and that he is committed to fighting terrorism. Abbas openly says that terrorism does not serve the Palestinian interest and damages the image of the PA and his personal image as partners in the political process, which works toward the establishment of a Palestinian state. However, the PA here is playing a “double game”: at the same time that it attempts to uproot Hamas’ terrorist infrastructures and continue the security coordination with Israel, the PA is working overtime against Israel in the international arena. The PA’s double game is evident in its efforts to torpedo understandings between Hamas and Israel on the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and stop money transfers to Gaza – which harms the vital interests of the Gazan population. The PA leadership and some in the West Bank see Israel’s steps in the Gaza Strip as an effort to weaken the PA and President Abbas. This reading of Israel’s conduct strengthens the Palestinian public’s sense that violence against Israel generates substantial payoffs in the struggle. In turn, it also strengthens the militant Palestinian camp, joined by those who have despaired of the PA’s ability to generate any real change for the West Bank population.

For its part, Hamas is also playing a double game. It demonstrates its ability to operate concurrently according to two different – almost diametrically opposed – rationales, while distinguishing between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In the Gaza arena, Hamas tries to restrain the Salafist organizations and promote understandings with Israel to hasten the Strip’s reconstruction. To achieve this end state, Hamas is willing to commit

itself to a long term ceasefire. On the other hand, Hamas uses anything that looks like a strategic opportunity in the Palestinian arena to embarrass Abbas, weaken the PA, accelerate its dissolution, and replace it. Hamas is working hard to entrench its image as the leading resistance organization bearing the standard of the armed struggle against Israel, and to that objective, expanding and strengthening its terrorist infrastructures in the area. As such, Hamas is driving not only individuals but also organized cells to commit acts of terrorism orchestrated by the organization’s headquarters in Istanbul. Some experts estimate that in the long run, the PA’s security services will be unable prevent the chaos liable to develop if the rate of attacks accelerates (*in part* as a result of radical ideas penetrating the West Bank) or stop Hamas from taking over the region without Israel’s routine security presence and activity in the area.

Israel has recently done much to improve the economic situation in the West Bank and the fabric of Palestinian public life. Israel has significantly increased the number of Israeli work permits (some 100,000 Palestinians with permits are currently employed in Israel), reduced the number of roadblocks in the West Bank, allowed Palestinian buses to transport Palestinian laborers to Israel, improved the infrastructures and arrangements at the crossings, which reduces the crossing time substantially, and significantly eased the entry of worshippers to the Temple Mount. Still, the outbreak of two intifadas is evidence that improvements to the economy are not necessarily enough to prevent an escalation of violence. At this point, there is no indication of an intifada, but the increase in the number of attacks shows that lifting restrictions does not ensure peace and quiet on the security front.

Past experience has shown that a heavy hand against the Palestinian public and harm to the welfare and quality of life of those who are not involved in terrorism do not lead to better security. In addition, such measures generate international ire against Israel. This means that Israel is in a bind when it comes to the tools at its disposal to calm the situation and maintain the status quo. Therefore, Israel must avoid a kneejerk reaction of revoking the recent relief measures it has instated. Imposing renewed limitations on the Palestinians’ freedom of movement – even if framed by the Israeli security services as being security-driven – will be seen as collective punishment and a disproportionate response.

Like the PA and Hamas, Israel also engages in a type of double game by having separate policies regarding the Gaza Strip and West Bank. While Israel tries to promote reconstruction efforts in return for a long term ceasefire vis-à-vis Gaza, and is therefore willing to reach understandings with Hamas (albeit indirectly), in the West Bank it takes tenacious steps against Hamas infrastructures. Israel is also charged with playing a double game by talking about the need to renew the political process while at the same time establishing new facts on the ground by continuing its policy of construction in the

Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Some would say that jumpstarting the political process would stop the escalation of terrorism. However, in the past, it was precisely the renewal of the political process that sometimes spurred radical factions to take violent action in order to undermine the dialogue. Thus, the political process is not necessarily a restraining influence.

The double game is a tool used by actors in the Palestinian arena allowing vacillation on the pragmatism-ideology axis. However, this double game could result in the loss of control of the situation. In order to reduce that risk, Israel would do well to adopt an integrated policy. Vis-à-vis the PA, Israel must avoid canceling the relief measures it has granted toward better daily life in the West Bank, and strengthen security coordination with the PA. At the same time, it must act decisively in the international arena against the PA's confrontational policy and reveal the PA's true colors, emphasizing the latter's policy on undermining Gaza reconstruction efforts and its incitement to violence and encouragement of radicalism. When it comes to Hamas, Israel must avoid cooperating with the organization's double game in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, treat Hamas as a unified entity, be it in the Gaza Strip or the West Bank, and prevent it from establishing the rules of the game to suit itself. Israel must make it clear to Hamas that it will not promote any understandings that allow the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip if the organization continues to try to shift its main arena of terrorism to the West Bank and/or the Sinai Peninsula.

