Overview

During the past two weeks events focused on the first suicide bombing attack in Eilat, carried out by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Gaza Strip elements of Fatah. The attack killed three Israeli civilians. Since 2005 the PIJ, encouraged by Iran and Syria through the organization’s headquarters in Damascus, has been the leading organization in carrying out suicide bombing attacks against Israel.

During January 30 rocket hits were identified in Israeli territory (most of the rockets were fired by the PIJ). That marked another decrease in the number of rockets launched from the Gaza Strip. However, the ceasefire agreed upon in the Gaza Strip has not been maintained and the extent of rocket attacks has returned to its “routine” level of several dozen a month.

On January 25 a new wave of violence broke out in the Palestinian Authority, more serious and deadly than the previous ones. It was triggered by (another) failure to establish a national unity government, and the meeting conducted to that effect between Abu Mazen and Khaled Mashaal in Damascus did not bear fruit. During the current confrontations, in which approximately 33 Palestinians were killed, Fatah and the Palestinian security forces showed themselves to be more daring and enterprising in their encounters with Hamas’s Executive Force.
Important Events

The PIJ and elements of Fatah carried out the first suicide bombing attack in Eilat

On January 29 at 9:40 a.m. a suicide bomber blew himself up outside a bakery in the Isidore neighborhood of Eilat. The blast killed three civilians, two of them owners of the bakery and one an employee. There were no wounded, although a number of civilians went into shock. The body of the suicide bomber was found on the scene. An examination of the remains of the explosive device showed it was a satchel containing a 100 mm shell which the terrorist had detonated.

The Victims of the Attack¹

Israel Semolia, 26, resident of Eilat. Survived by his family in the United States.

Michael Ben-Sa'adon, 27, resident of Eilat. Survived by his wife and son.

Ami Almalih, 32, resident of Eilat. Survived by his wife and two daughters.

According to members of the suicide bomber’s family, he left the Gaza Strip on January 26. He apparently crossed into the Sinai peninsula, stayed in the region for a few days and then infiltrated into Israel north of Eilat during the night of January 28. In the early morning hours of January 29 he hitched a ride with an Israeli civilian. The civilian distrusted him and soon ordered him to get out of the car. The suicide bomber continued to Eilat on foot and randomly chose the bakery where he blew himself up.

¹ From the Website of the Israeli Foreign Ministry (www.mfa.gov.il)
A PIJ spokesman held a press conference in the Gaza Strip. He said his organization claimed responsibility for the attack and that it had been carried out in cooperation with Fatah/Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades elements (a faction calling itself “the army of the faithful”). The spokesman said that the suicide bomber was Muhammad Feisal al-Siqsiq, an operative belonging to the Jerusalem Battalions (the PIJ’s terrorist-operational wing), 21 years old and from the village of Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip (Al-Jazeera TV, January 29).2
Since 2005 the PIJ is the organization which has carried out the greatest number of suicide bombing attacks (until 2005 it was Hamas). The PIJ is encouraged and supported by Iran and Syria, and through the direction of its leadership in Damascus, it seeks to escalate the violence in the PA-administered territories and to sabotage every ceasefire attempt (as it previously sabotaged “the lull in the fighting”). During 2005 (the period of the “lull”) the PIJ carried out five lethal suicide bombing attacks in Israel and in 2006 two more, killing a total of 32 Israelis and wounding approximately 270.

This was the first time since the inception of the current terrorism campaign that Eilat was chosen as a target for a suicide bombing. In our assessment two main factors were responsible: first, the difficulties encountered by the terrorist infrastructures in Samaria, the area from which most terrorists were dispatched in the past, as a result of the effective counterterrorism measures taken by the Israeli security forces and the existence of the security fence (although it has not yet been completed). Second, the freedom of action enjoyed by the Palestinian terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip and the relative ease with which they – as well as smugglers – can cross the long Israeli-Egyptian border. In our assessment, the results of the suicide bombing attack in Eilat are liable to encourage the terrorist infrastructures in the Gaza Strip to use the modus operandi.

The Gaza Strip

A decrease in the number of rockets fired into Israel

During January 30 rockets hits were identified in Israeli territory (as compared with 50 during December). The PIJ, which was responsible for most of the launchings, announced that it intended to launch 100 rockets as of January 21 in an operation called “Operation Red Rose” (in effect, there has been no significant increase in the number of rockets launched).
The 30 rockets marked an additional reduction in the amount of rocket fire from the Gaza Strip, which has decreased significantly during the two months since the ceasefire agreement reached November 25, 2006. However, the agreement has not been adhered to and the rocket launchings have returned to their “routine” level of several dozen a month (See Statistical Data).

A multiple-barrel rocket launcher in the back of a pickup truck, displayed by the PIJ. The launcher, said the organization, would fire rockets at Sderot and Ashqelon as part of “Operation Red Rose” (Al-Jazeera TV, January 21)

Terrorist tunnel attacked

On January 30 the Israeli Air Force attacked a tunnel dug by terrorists near the Karni merchandise crossing in the northern Gaza Strip. It was apparently intended to be used in a terrorist attack within Israel. The tunnel was dug by the terrorist organizations with complete disregard for the needs of the Palestinian population for the goods which pass through the Karni crossing.

Israeli Counterterrorism Measures in Judea and Samaria

Nablus

The IDF continued its intensive counterterrorism activities in Nablus, which is a center of terrorist activity:
On January 25 IDF forces detained Omar Jawad Shaker Damra, a Fatah/Tanzim operative from Nablus. In the days before his detention he was planning a suicide bombing attack in Israel. His preparations included attempts to get explosive devices and explosive belts out of Nablus. In the past he was involved in a number of shooting attacks and the laying of side charges to attack IDF forces in the Nablus region.

On January 31 in the refugee camp Ayn Beil Elma Israeli security forces detained Nasr Fathi Ibrahim Jawabrah, a senior PIJ operative. Jawabrah spent four years in an Israeli prison, was involved in terrorist activities against the IDF, in manufacturing explosives and in planning suicide bombing attacks in Israel.

On the night of January 31 two Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades terrorist-operatives were killed in the Nablus Kasbah (the old quarter) after they opened fire on IDF forces. During a search of the Kasbah an explosives laboratory was uncovered. A device weighing five kilograms (11 lbs) and materials for the preparation of other devices were found. Elsewhere in a Kasbah, an explosive device weighing six kilograms (13.2 lbs) was found.

**Car with explosive bottles stopped**

On the night of January 29 a Palestinian vehicle arrived at a checkpoint south of Anabta (east of Tulkarm) and aroused the suspicions of the soldiers stationed there. The vehicle was searched and four 200 cc (seven-ounce) bottles full of explosives and three bullet proof vests (originally IDF equipment) were found.
Explosive devices uncovered in Jenin

On January 12 Israeli security forces uncovered two explosive devices in Jenin, each weighing 30 kilograms (66 lbs). During the action terrorists threw four devices at the soldiers and shot at them. The gunfire damaged an IDF vehicle.

One of the devices found in Jenin (Photo courtesy of the IDF spokesperson, January 17)

Lebanon

On January 25 and 26, during IDF searches to establish Israeli control along the Lebanese border, an Israeli patrol uncovered an underground bunker built by Hezbollah before the second Lebanon war on Israeli soil in the central sector near Wadi Katamon.

Remains of food and tools (hammers and nails) were found in the bunker. The
evidence would seem to show that Hezbollah operatives had been active in the region for a long time and that the bunker served the organization as a forward base of operations in Israel. The bunker was destroyed by the IDF in a controlled explosion.

Left: remains of food (Photo courtesy of the IDF spokesperson, January 26). Right: The opening of the bunker.

Digging tools found in the bunker

**Statements made by Hassan Nasrallah**

- In a speech made by Hassan Nasrallah before an enthusiastic mass audience to mark the end of the Ashuraa, the following points were made (Al-Manar TV, January 30):

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3 Every year the Shi’ites perform the fast of Ashuraa to commemorate the battle of Karbala in 680 AD, where Hussein Ben Ali, Muhammad’s grandson, was killed along with his family and supporters.
Israel’s weakness: Israel is weaker than “a cobweb,” the same image he used in his “victory speech” at Bint Jbeil on May 25, 2000, after the IDF left the security zone in south Lebanon.

The destruction of Israel: “The future of Israel is death and ruin!” (the crowd: “Death to Israel!”).

The myth of victory: According to Nasrallah, Hezbollah won the second Lebanon war and he described the IDF as a “ramshackle army” which could not overcome Hezbollah.

The “liberation” of the Shebaa Farms: Hezbollah has not forgotten the “occupied” Shebaa Farms even though today it is not deployed along the border. He called upon the Lebanese to proclaim a “genuine national resistance” for the sake of “liberating the Shebaa Farms,” saying Hezbollah would join them as a central element (Nabil Qaouk, in charge of south Lebanon for Hezbollah, said in another interview that the organization’s activity to liberate the Shebaa Farms would be renewed after diplomatic efforts had failed).

The internal Lebanese arena: Hezbollah would act with restraint and not be dragged into a civil war. It resisted the use of arms in the internal Lebanese arena and called for the murderers involved in the recent violent incidents to be brought to trial.

Improving conditions for the Palestinian population

As part of easing restrictions on Palestinian travel though the West Bank, the IDF removed 23 dirt and gravel barriers (in addition to those already removed) from the central roads between population centers in Judea and Samaria. Forty-four barriers were removed (of approximately 400 barriers and permanent roadblocks). The recent easing of restrictions has significantly improved travel for the
Palestinians throughout Judea and Samaria. Opening a goods crossing in the northern Jordan Valley has facilitated the passage of merchandise.

- At the same time, Abu Mazen’s bank account was credited with $100,000, as promised during his meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.
The Internal Palestinian Arena

A new wave of violence triggered by the failure of the Palestinian leadership to establish a national unity government

On January 25, after two weeks of calm, a new wave of violence broke out, more serious and deadly than the previous ones, between Fatah and the Palestinian security forces, and Hamas. The current wave, the fourth since Hamas came to power, focused on the northern Gaza Strip, especially in Gaza City and the Jabaliya refugee camp. Local residents reported that entire neighborhoods and mosques had turned into battlefields. In addition to trading gunfire, both sides carried out mass abductions of terrorist operatives and their families.

Behind the new violence is the collapse (once again) of contacts to establish a national unity government. The meeting between Abu Mazen and Khaled Mashaal in Damascus on January 20 and 21 did not bear fruit. Following the new wave of violence, Hamas announced that negotiations had been suspended. Abu Mazen announced that he intended to allot three more weeks for negotiations, and added that if no agreement were reached, he intended to move up the date for elections to the presidency and legislative council.
Abu Mazen’s first official visit in Damascus since July 2005 (Al-Jazeera TV, January 20)

- **During the recent wave of violence Fatah and the security forces showed themselves superior to Hamas. They demonstrated daring and initiative in the Gaza Strip and united their forces**, especially when facing Hamas’s Executive Force. During the clashes approximately **33 Palestinians were killed**, about half of them belonging to Hamas and Executive Force, and half to Fatah, the security forces and civilians who got caught in the crossfire. Scores of Palestinians were wounded and dozens were abducted. Fatah suffered fewer losses in this round of violence than it did in the previous ones.

- Fatah and the security forces showed their daring and determination in an incident which occurred in the Jabaliya refugee camp at noon on January 26. Hamas operatives and members of the Executive Force surrounded the house of Mansour Shallayl, a senior Fatah terrorist operative, and fired RPGs. Fatah operatives and members of the Palestinian security forces gathered an intervention force of approximately 70 armed men, equipped them with armored cars and personnel carriers, broke through the Hamas blockage, relieved the siege and rescued Shallayl. During the incident seven Executive Force members were killed and dozens were wounded.

- **Other salient events in the Gaza Strip:**

  - On January 25 an Executive Force jeep in the Jabaliya refugee camp was blown up by a side charge laid in its path on the road. Two Executive Force operatives were killed.
Other incidents in the Gaza Strip:

- On January 25, following the killing of the Hamas operatives, violent confrontations broke out between Hamas and Fatah.

- On January 26, armed men (who Hamas claimed belonged to Fatah) open fire on the Al Hada’ya mosque in the Tel al-Hawa district of the Gaza. A number of Palestinians were killed, among them the imam of the mosque, Zuheir al-Munsi, described as a local Hamas leader.

- On January 27 there were clashes at the Islamic University, during which two Palestinians were killed.

- On January 28 there were violent incidents between Fatah and Hamas Executive Force operatives in Khan Yunis. Three Palestinians were killed and more than eight were wounded.

- On January 30, the day after a ceasefire was agreed on, gunmen shot and killed a Hamas operative in Khan Yunis. Hamas blamed the Palestinian Preventive Security and threatened to respond.

- The violence in the Gaza Strip boiled over into Judea and Samaria, although with less severity. More than 20 Hamas operatives in Nablus were
abducted (and released). The abductees were forced to read an announcement calling upon Hamas and the Executive Force to stop the confrontations in the Gaza Strip so that the captors would spare their lives. In addition, there were violent confrontations in Nablus and in the Balata refugee camp.

The abducted Hamas operatives and their captors (Al-Jazeera TV, January 26)

As in the past, the violent outbreaks brought condemnations in the internal Palestinian arena and led to mediation by internal Palestinian elements (the various organizations, members of the establishment, public figures) and external elements (especially Egypt). After the suicide bombing attack in Eilat, the PIJ called upon the rival factions to stop fighting each other and to turn their weapons on “the Zionist enemy.” Communication between the sides has been renewed (including contacts in Damascus) but no significant progress has been made.

A demonstration in Ramallah against the confrontations and in favor of an internal Palestinian dialogue (Al-Arabiya TV, January 30)

The propaganda war

While armed confrontations were taking place on the ground, the war of propaganda and mutual mudslinging continued full force. Hamas continues to accuse Fatah of treason and to represent it as a tool of the United States. The
campaign continued to attack and delegitimize Muhammad Dahlan, who is accused of corruption and the use of his personal fortune to set up “armed gangs.” Abu ‘Abir, a spokesman for the Popular Resistance Committees, explicitly said that his organization planned to set up a joint war room with Hamas to “slay Muhammad Dahlan” (Radio Al-Aqsa, January 20).

A cartoon depicting Dahlan as an American pop singer from whose mouth issue songs of civil war (from the Palestine Mubasher Website, affiliated with Hamas, January 14).

Fatah spokesmen accused Hamas (which they called “bloodthirsty”) of planning to assassinate senior Fatah members of the Palestinian Authority (including Abu Mazen and Muhammad Dahlan) by digging tunnels under their houses and the main roads and using them to blow the men up. They claimed that Hamas had turned the Palestinian educational system into a factional tool, accused the organization of having stolen donations from abroad which were earmarked for the finance ministry and depositing them in the Hamas coffers. They condemned the “cowardice” of firing rockets at Israel from the houses of Palestinian residents, and represented Hamas as Iranian proxies serving a “Shi’ite agenda.”
The PA pays its employees their December salaries

The PA recently paid the members of the security forces half of their December salaries, paid prisoners their allotments and gave civilian employees what was owed to them. That complemented the funds they recently received from the government and from international aid. During the first week of February the PA intends to pay December salaries to all its employees in accordance with the agreement signed at the end of the strike.

The funding, which is being jointly carried out by the Palestinian presidential office and ministry of finance, is apparently coming from aid received by Abu Mazen (about $52 million from the Emirates and Qatar) and from local revenues. At this point the money received from Israel is not being used to pay salaries.

Paying the salaries enables the Hamas government to keep to its agreement with PA employees and thus to preserve quiet in that sensitive sector, at least for another month. However, the Hamas government will continue to be dependent on money received from Abu Mazen and international aid to pay salaries as long as the funds promised Ismail Haniya, especially by Iran, is not forthcoming.