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**Attacks on Israel's Southern Borders Kill Eight**

On Thursday, a series of coordinated terror attacks killed eight Israelis. The attack was planned in the Gaza Strip by the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) and perpetrated by terrorists who crossed from Gaza into Sinai via smuggling tunnels. They then traveled some 200 kilometers to reach an area of the border protected only by a tattered wire fence, about 15 kilometers north of Eilat.

The attacks began around noon, when three terrorists armed with rifles, grenades and explosives entered Israel from Egypt and stationed themselves at intervals of about 200 meters along the highway to Eilat, Route 12, at a stretch of road that runs very close to the Egyptian border. At 12:30 P.M., they opened fire on an Bus, wounding seven passengers, causing light to moderate injuries. Most of those injured were soldiers. A few minutes later, an empty bus and several cars arrived. The terrorists opened fire again, and when the bus stopped, one of the terrorists ran up to the bus and activated his explosive belt, killing himself and the driver. A rocket was fired at another vehicle. Killing four of its five occupants. At the same time, mortars were fired at a civilian work crew repairing the fence nearby, but caused no casualties.

At that point, soldiers travelling in two civilian vehicles arrived at the scene. One vehicle ran down one of the terrorists, killing him. Soldiers in the second vehicle opened fire. Staff Sgt. Moshe Naftali of Ofra, was killed in the ensuing gun battle. Additional police and army forces killed a third terrorist. They also opened fire on two terrorists waiting on the Egyptian side of the border. Assault helicopters joined the battle. A rocket-propelled grenade was fired at one of the helicopters, but missed. The two terrorists waiting on the Egyptian side of the border were pursued and killed. The Egyptian army later reported it had killed two additional terrorists in Sinai. The IDF maintained close contact with the Egyptian army throughout the event. Later, bombs planted along the road were discovered and dismantled by IDF forces. Israel Defense Forces estimates that 15 to 20 terrorists participated in the attack. IDF officials believe the goal of the attack was to kidnap a soldier. The IDF had previously responded to warnings of a planned attack, beefing up its forces in the area.

That day, around 6:45 P.M., senior Israeli defense officials were briefing reporters at the site of the attack, when terrorists opened fire at a Special Forces unit of the police, patrolling the border nearby. One policeman was killed and another was wounded. In all, 8 Israelis were killed and 30 wounded in the two attacks. These attacks were planned in the Gaza Strip by the PRC. The terrorists crossed from Gaza into Sinai via smuggling tunnels, and traveled some 200 kilometers to an area of the border protected only by a tattered wire fence, about 15 kilometers north of Israel's most southern city, Eilat. Egypt's defense forces said they were combing the area on the Egyptian side of the border to ensure no terrorists were at large.

Thursday's attack required the cooperation of the Bedouin in Sinai and groups identified with World Jihad acting in the peninsula. The attack consisted of at least three different sites, a large number of terrorists and coordination with observation and intelligence teams. The chaos in Sinai since the revolution in Egypt, and the ongoing arms and fugitives' smuggling from Sinai to and from Gaza, made it easier to carry out the attacks than it would have been before the revolution. This is the most problematic issue for Israel - the security vacuum in Sinai, as Defense Minister Ehud Barak described it. What was

Israel's quietest border for many years has become the deadliest. Cairo is investing considerable efforts to reinstate order in Sinai. One thousand, accompanied by tanks and armored vehicles, are engaged in these efforts.

A weapons plant was discovered in El Arish area and several arms smugglers have been killed. Israel has no choice but to rely on the Egyptian army's activity. Police said they found hand grenades, machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades and ammunition in the operation that targets Sinai "terror cells" suspected in attacks on a gas pipeline to Israel and a police station in the border town of el-Arish. Since the overthrow of the Mubarak regime, the security situation in Sinai has dramatically deteriorated. Senior Egyptian officials said several weeks ago that more than 23,000 prisoners escaped from prisons in Egypt in late January and February because of the breakdown in regime authority.

About one-third of the escapees were recaptured, but many apparently traveled to the Sinai to take advantage of the relative absence of state security. Many of the weapons looted from police stations ransacked during the revolution ended up in the Sinai.

A suicide bomber blew himself up on Friday morning next to a group of Egyptian soldiers on the Israeli-Egyptian border. He is thought to be part of the group that perpetuated the attacks on Thursday. Some soldiers were injured. It is unclear how many were hurt and to what degree. On Thursday, three Egyptian soldiers, one of them an officer, were killed in firefights with the group. The Egyptian army stated, "an Israeli helicopter was chasing the terrorists, and three security personnel were caught in the line of fire."

### **The Israeli Response**

In response, the Israel Air Force (IAF) attacked a group of senior PRC officials in Rafah, a Gazan town on the border between Gaza and Sinai. Six were killed, among them Kamel Nirab, the head of the PRC; Imad Hamed, who was responsible for its military activity in Gaza; Khaled Shaath, a leading member of the PRC's military wing, involved in multiple rocket attacks against Israel; and Khaled Masri, who was involved in kidnapping the Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, in 2006. Israel's security service suspects Hamed was responsible for planning yesterday's attacks. In all the IAF aircraft attacked seven sites in the Gaza Strip. An IDF Spokesperson reported that the targets included two terror activity sites, a weapons storage in north Gaza, two smuggling tunnels and a terror activity site in south Gaza.

The Palestinians responded by firing two Grad rockets at Ashkelon. The trajectory of the first was detected by Israel's Iron Dome Anti-Missile System to be lead to an open area near the city, and was allowed to fall. It caused no casualties and no damage. The other was seen to liable to fall on a populous area of and was shot down by the system. Two other rockets were fired at Ashkelon at about 10 P.M., and one at Ashdod, causing 6 casualties. Three Qassam rockets were shot at the western Negev communities overnight. A number at Kiryat Gat and Be'er Sheba. Emergency sirens were sounded, but no damage or injuries were reported. Townships further to the north and the east have also suffered rocket attacks (among them Gedera, where Bracha and I live). No damage or injuries were reported. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is preparing for further escalation.

### **Who Perpetuated the Attacks?**

The Popular Resistance Committees is an umbrella group composed of former activists of different armed factions which was created in the Gaza Strip in 2000. It operates independently from the Islamist rulers of Gaza, Hamas, and sometimes contrary to Hamas' wishes. More often, its activities are coordinated in advance with Hamas or enjoy Hamas' *de facto* support. Like Hamas, the PRC opposes the Palestinian Authority's professed willingness to negotiate peace with Israel.

In its early years, the group staged dozens of attacks against Israeli troops and Jewish settlers, among these, a 2003 strike against a US diplomat that killed three security guards, and the 2004 fatal shooting of a pregnant Israeli settler and her four daughters. In June 2006, the IAF killed PRC founder Jamal Abu Samhadana in a targeted strike in Gaza. Shortly afterwards, the PRC, with three other groups, claimed responsibility for the cross-border abduction of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, believed to be held in Gaza, with Hamas connivance.

### What Next?

There is an angry atmosphere in Israel. Unless Hamas reins in the PRC, and if PRC attacks continue, they will receive an appropriate response. Such a response is likely to draw other armed splinter groups into a cycle of violence that will force Hamas to either suppress them or join the fray. Hamas does not have a fighting force equal to the Israeli army, but a major Israeli operation in Gaza may well be in the offing if the present round is not quickly brought to an end.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is also hard-pressed by temperate but continuous social protests that threaten to topple his Government. He may well be tempted to take advantage of the PRC attacks to seek to divert the attention of the Israeli public from his social policies by initiating an attack which, however justified, might not be well timed. The Prime Minister stated on Friday that the targeted killing of the PRC heads was "only the beginning of Israel's response" to the attacks in Southern Israel. "We have a policy of extracting a very high price from anyone who causes us harm, and this policy is acted upon," Netanyahu said. Netanyahu's statements come a day after he said that Israel will respond firmly "when Israeli lives are hurt."

Israel is not itching for a fight, but cannot sit idly by while its borders are violated and its citizens attacked. Regardless of irrelevant political considerations, no Israeli Prime Minister will be allowed by the public to ignore PRC's attacks, however inopportune an all-out response might be considered.

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