

# The End of the Second Intifada?

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## Introduction

Researchers, pundits, politicians, and other interested parties have suggested various start and end points for the second (al-Aqsa) intifada. For its launch, many have focused on the last week of September 2000, while others see the seeds of violence having been planted months earlier, surrounding the collapse of negotiations between Ehud Barak and Yasir Arafat at Camp David in July of that year.<sup>1</sup>

As controversial as the second intifada's starting date may be, there is much less agreement about its closing date, or whether it has indeed ended. Among those who believe that it is behind us, some seem to think that it ended, or began to end, with the death of Arafat in November 2004, while others see its conclusion in the truce reached by Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas shortly after the latter's election in early 2005.<sup>2</sup> Yet without a consensus on the definition of intifada (i.e., what are its essential characteristics? popular revolt? armed struggle?), it is difficult to identify its boundaries with any precision. Thus, some analysts see no conclusive end to the second intifada, rather an evolution in its various manifestations and in the interests of its respective players.

Rather than endeavor to formulate an authoritative definition of intifada, this article attempts to identify the end of the second intifada by focusing on the incidence of suicide bombings, arguably the most important element of second intifada-related violence. As noted elsewhere in this volume, suicide bombings are of particular interest because of the central and emblematic role they played during the first five years of this specific uprising.<sup>3</sup> Unlike its predecessor, the second intifada is (or was, depending on one's point of view) characterized by

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frequent and widespread terrorist violence, both within Israel proper and in the West Bank and Gaza. Suicide bombings, almost all of which took place in the first half of the decade, caused more fatalities than any other terrorist tactic in the 2000–2009 period, accounting for 43 percent of the total.<sup>4</sup> They enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) considerable Palestinian public approval,<sup>5</sup> and were the focus of Palestinian terrorist groups competing for public support.<sup>6</sup> The frequent occurrence of suicide bombings in cities throughout Israel played a significant role in establishing and maintaining the urgency of the second intifada between 2000 and 2005; this was not a “territories” problem or one that affected only soldiers or settlers. For most Israelis, the day-to-day concerns of intifada-related violence waned and essentially ceased when suicide bombings did the same. Other Palestinian violence, particularly rocket attacks of limited range and effectiveness, has had far less impact on life, economics, and politics in Israel.

### **Why and When Did the Bombings Stop?**

Multiple factors have influenced the use and non-use of the suicide bombing tactic among Palestinian terrorist groups. The decision making behind such attacks and the ability to carry them out defy simple explanations. Rather, political (internal and external) and operational factors interact to render such attacks more or less likely and more or less likely to succeed.

Three turning points in the decline of suicide bombings during the second intifada are noteworthy, each coming in response to different operational and/or political developments. The first came in March 2002: after 30 people were killed by a suicide bomber at a Passover meal at the Park Hotel in Netanya (the second intifada’s 53<sup>rd</sup> suicide bombing, according to Israel Foreign Ministry statistics), the Israel Defense Forces launched Operation Defensive Shield. The operation included the re-entry of Israeli forces into the major cities of the West Bank (Bethlehem, Jenin, Nablus, Qalqilya, and Ramallah), which had been under Palestinian civil and security control since the Oslo accords and follow-on negotiations during the 1990s. The operation resulted in the death or capture of numerous terrorists and terrorist suspects and the discovery of 23 explosives workshops.<sup>7</sup>

The effects of Operation Defensive Shield, like other factors influencing the development of the second intifada, are difficult to isolate and appear to have unfolded over time. Ten suicide bombings took place while the operation was ongoing, perhaps in an attempt to demonstrate its ineffectiveness in preventing such attacks as well as to exhibit the continued potency of the groups under attack. Indeed, more suicide bombings took place during the month after the Park Hotel attack than had taken place in the preceding month. The following month saw seven attacks, six of them coming within nine days (May 19-27). The rest of 2002 saw a significant decline in attacks. While suicide bombings peaked at 53 in 2002, about two-thirds (36) of those attacks occurred in the first half of the year.

It appears that Operation Defensive Shield contributed to the decline in suicide bombings both directly and indirectly. The arrest and death of terrorist operatives and the disruption of terrorist group infrastructures caused by the operation are likely to have made carrying out suicide bombings more difficult over time. Moreover, the redeployment of the IDF in and around the West Bank's major cities allowed for greater opportunities to develop and exploit intelligence to disrupt terrorist attacks before they were carried out (Israeli targeted killings reportedly also peaked in 2002 at 78).<sup>8</sup> The desire to avoid a repeated head-to-head confrontation with the IDF, particularly as exemplified by the comprehensive operations in Jenin, may have served to deter some terrorist activity as well.

Though it is impossible to gauge accurately the influence of the various factors independently, the statistical trend at the time is noteworthy. The number of suicide bombings fell by 50 percent from 2002 (53) to 2003 (26).<sup>9</sup>

In 2004, a second milestone led to a further drop of more than half (to 12 bombings). The year was characterized by more frequent IDF operations in the West Bank and Gaza, including the targeted killing of Hamas leaders Ahmad Yassin and Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, and, probably more significantly, the completion of substantial sections of the separation barrier between Israel and the West Bank. Given that Gaza has been effectively fenced off since 1994 (the same year suicide bombings first appeared in Israel, and a year after the first such attack in the West Bank), most Palestinian suicide bombers have launched their operations from

the West Bank. Though the West Bank barrier has been controversial because of the de facto demarcation it created, its effectiveness in making it more difficult for bombers to reach their targets appears beyond dispute; even Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad leaders have said as much.<sup>10</sup>

The third milestone is actually a collection of Israeli and Palestinian political decisions made or carried out in or around 2005, when the number of successful suicide bombings fell to eight, and the number of attempted (but prevented) suicide attacks fell by 71 percent, from 159 to 46.<sup>11</sup> In 2005, Hamas escalated its non-violent, institutionalized political activity, which may have substituted for its terrorist activity. Specifically, Hamas participated – and fared well – in municipal elections that year, and though it abstained from the February presidential elections, it decided to join the legislative elections scheduled for January 2006.

While in 2005 Hamas saw in Fatah a political rival, the violent schism between the two groups and their respective territories was still two years away. Hamas' increasing inclination at the time to participate in organized Palestinian national politics appears to have led at least part of the group's leadership to recognize the need to moderate its relationship with the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority and even to announce that it would abide by the Sharon-Abbas truce signed in February 2005. Considering the bad blood between the two Palestinian factions since then, it is striking that in justifying Hamas' intended adherence to the truce, Mahmoud al-Zahar claimed at the time that if Israel would "continue the quiet, then we [Hamas] are going to continue, *because we are committed to Abu Mazen.*"<sup>12</sup>

2005 was also the year Israel unilaterally disengaged from Gaza, a step announced by Ariel Sharon in December 2003. It is likely that part of the reduction in attacks in 2004, and especially in 2005, can be explained by the Palestinian groups' desire not to provide Israel any reason to delay its withdrawal or to change its mind.

In addition to the three identifiable milestones described above, throughout the period under review Israel engaged in an intensive campaign of targeted killings intended to disrupt terrorist operations, dismember terrorist organizations, and distract terrorist personnel. Though controversial and ultimately subject to restrictions handed down by the Israeli Supreme Court in 2006, targeted killings took a significant

toll on Hamas' middle management and thereby impeded the group's ability to act.<sup>13</sup>

Though this article has presented various milestones and other considerations individually in the order they developed, their effects were, and continue to be, cumulative. By 2005, Hamas was faced with increased IDF and General Security Service activity in the West Bank, a largely effective separation barrier, a desire to limit the threat posed by targeted killings to life and limb of middle and senior level personnel, an inclination to become more active in the official Palestinian political arena, and a desire to not delay the IDF's forthcoming exit from Gaza. The dramatic reduction in the number of successful and attempted attacks, therefore, reflects a mix of Israeli efforts to limit the group's capability and the creation of internal and external incentives not to attack. In short, Hamas suicide bombings declined because carrying them out was difficult and because it was in the group's interest not to do so. Other groups acted differently, based on their particular circumstances, objectives, and considerations.

It should be noted that the numerous, mostly American, efforts to arrive at a ceasefire, especially during the early years of the second intifada, failed to deliver. This is not to say that external mediation is necessarily doomed to failure. At the end of the day, Hamas and other terrorist groups act according to their interests. Mediation and negotiation will only work when they create disincentives to the use of terror, as was the case in 2005 and arguably since then as well.

In the years since 2005, the number of attempted attacks has fluctuated, but has not returned to 2004 levels. At the same time, the number of successful attacks has continued to drop, to six in 2006, one in both 2007 and 2008, and zero in 2009. One can argue whether the second intifada ended in 2005, but the widespread suicide bombings associated with it clearly did.

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### **Different Groups, Different Interests**

The aggregate numbers of attacks do not tell the full story, however. In terms of suicide bombings, Hamas has largely held its fire since 2005. According to the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hamas has

not claimed responsibility for a single suicide bombing since August of that year.<sup>14</sup> This, perhaps more than anything else, suggests that Hamas' leadership made a strategic decision to move away from suicide bombings. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), alone or in cooperation with al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, has claimed responsibility for almost all of the eight suicide bombings that have taken place since then.

It is telling that even these attacks appear to be considered "post-second-intifada," insofar as al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and other Fatah officials threatened to launch a third intifada already in 2005.<sup>15</sup> It is unlikely that they would make such a threat if they thought the second intifada were still in progress. Put simply, in both word and deed there seems to be a measure of agreement, at least between Hamas and Fatah, that the second intifada ended in 2005.

The disparity in PIJ and Hamas activity can be interpreted in a number of ways. The two groups differ significantly. PIJ has always been smaller, more extreme in its positions, less subject to public pressure (in part because of its limited political aspirations), and closer to Iran. Its calculations regarding when and when not to attack, therefore, differ as well. It is also possible that Hamas sees in PIJ a proxy, allowing for occasional strikes at Israel, but without the burden (and potential benefits) of claiming responsibility. For its part, Israel has tried to limit this possibility by holding Hamas in word and in deed responsible for any terrorist activity originating in Gaza. This approach has borne some fruit in recent years, as Hamas has acted to limit rocket launching from Gaza by PIJ and other groups.<sup>16</sup>

Given that the increase in rocket attacks from Gaza corresponded with the decline in suicide bombings (and attempted bombings) in 2005, it is perhaps tempting to argue that the second intifada went through a metamorphosis, but is nonetheless ongoing. The emphasis on rockets does represent a tactical evolution, necessitated by the difficulties encountered in carrying out suicide bombings, much as suicide bombings were to some extent driven by earlier successful measures taken against planted explosives. Obviously this evolution away from suicide bombing is of little comfort to residents of Sderot and other communities within rocket range. Nevertheless, in terms of their effect on life in Israel – and throughout Israel – the rocket attacks from Gaza pale in comparison with the suicide attacks of 2000-2005. At least so far, these tactics differ

qualitatively to such an extent (and regressively, in terms of their potency) that it is difficult to consider one a continuation of the other. The idea that even the thousands of rockets fired to date constitute an extension of the second intifada is unconvincing.

### Conclusion

Israel was largely successful in putting a stop to the second intifada's deadliest tactic, and it is significant that Hamas has not claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in over five years. Nevertheless, the underlying conflict persists and Hamas, PIJ, and other groups remain diplomatically marginalized and opposed to a peace agreement with Israel. There is little reason to believe that suicide bombings are no longer a threat or that the tactical evolution that led to rocket attacks has ceased. Though there were no successful suicide bombings in 2009, three dozen attempted attacks were prevented. The performance of the Israeli security services is remarkable, but it is probably unreasonable to expect a 100 percent success rate preventing such attacks moving forward. At the same time, Hamas and other groups continue to invest in acquiring rockets of increasing range, threatening to put Israel's major cities back in harm's way.

Suicide bombings undoubtedly were an effective terrorist tactic and a symbol of the second intifada, but they are hardly essential for a third. A new uprising could be marked by widespread rocket attacks, a currently unanticipated form of violence, or as some have suggested, by pervasive non-violent forms of protest.<sup>17</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Giora Eiland, "The IDF in the Second Intifada," *Strategic Assessment* 13, no. 3 (2010): 27-37.
- 2 Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre, "Second Intifada," <http://www.jmcc.org/fastfactspag.aspx?tname=88>; Sever Plocker, "2<sup>nd</sup> Intifada Forgotten," *ynetnews*, June 22, 2008, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3558676,00.html>.
- 3 Yoram Schweitzer, "The Rise and Fall of Suicide Attacks in the Second Intifada," *Strategic Assessment* 13, no. 3 (2010): 39-48.
- 4 General Security Service, "Analysis of Attacks in the Last Decade," n.d., [http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/Hebrew/TerrorInfo/decade/DecadeSummary\\_he.pdf](http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/Hebrew/TerrorInfo/decade/DecadeSummary_he.pdf), p. 3.

- 5 See, for example, Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre, "Poll No. 39 Part I, December 2000 - On Palestinian Attitudes Towards Politics including the Current Intifada," <http://www.jmcc.org/Documentsandmaps.aspx?id=460>; Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Palestinian Territories: Support for Suicide Bombing," <http://pewglobal.org/database/?indicator=19&country=168>.
- 6 Anat N. Kurz, *Palestinian Uprisings: War with Israel, War at Home* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2009), p. 58.
- 7 "Operation Defensive Shield (2002)," *ynetnews*, March 12, 2009, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3685678,00.html>.
- 8 The Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, cited in Hillel Frisch, *Motivation or Capabilities?: Israeli Counterterrorism against Palestinian Suicide Bombings and Violence*, Mideast Security And Policy Studies no. 70 (Ramat Gan, Israel: The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2006), p. 15.
- 9 General Security Service data on attacks prevented is available from 2004.
- 10 Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "The Leader of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad again Admits that the Israeli Security Fence Built by Israel in Judea and Samaria Prevents the Terrorist Organizations from Reaching the Heart of Israel to Carry Out Suicide Bombing Attacks," March 26, 2008, [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/html/ct\\_250308e.htm](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/ct_250308e.htm).
- 11 General Security Service, "Analysis of Attacks in the Last Decade," n.d., [http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/Hebrew/TerrorInfo/decade/DecadeSummary\\_he.pdf](http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/Hebrew/TerrorInfo/decade/DecadeSummary_he.pdf), p. 2.
- 12 Other Hamas officials rejected the ceasefire. Molly Moore, "Palestinian, Israeli Leaders Pledge to End Attacks," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2005. Emphasis added.
- 13 Daniel Byman, "Do Targeted Killings Work?" *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2006): 103.
- 14 Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Suicide and Other Bombing Attacks in Israel since the Declaration of Principles (Sept 1993)," <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-+Obstacle+to+Peace/Palestinian+terror+since+2000/Suicide+and+Other+Bombing+Attacks+in+Israel+Since.htm>. The annual numbers of attacks provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the GSS differ slightly, though the trends they indicate do not.
- 15 Ali Waked, "Third Intifada almost Here," *ynetnews*, September 28, 2005, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3148681,00.html>.
- 16 "Hamas 'Working to Curb Gaza Rocket Attacks,'" BBC, April 2, 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8601171.stm>.
- 17 Shaul Mishal and Doron Mazza, "Preempting a 'White Intifada,'" *Haaretz*, February 22, 2010.