

Divide and Rule: A Machiavellian Account of Israel's Targeted Killings

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ALEXANDER VINCENT BECK, APR 18 2015

Divide and Rule: A Machiavellian Account of Israel's Targeted Killings against Hamas

"A targeted killing is a state-level, intentionally focused operation using every resource that intelligence agencies and armed forces have at their disposal with the objective of forcefully and permanently eliminating specific individuals from armed conflict, or at the very least deterring them from partaking in armed hostilities." [1] Israel claims it has the right to conduct Targeted Killings (TKs) as a mean to prevent imminent attacks by Palestinian militants. It argues that TKs are within the rules of war and, accordingly, they prevent and deter terrorist attacks by keeping militants on the run [2]. In fact, several scholars have suggested that in the process of withdrawing its troops from Palestinian territories, targeted warfare became a primary element of Israel's strategy in dealing with terrorist threats beyond its sphere of jurisprudence [3] [4] [5]. With more than 200 assaults on Palestinian terror suspects, most of Israel's TKs were carried out during the second intifada [6] – a period of intensified insurgency that began in 2000, following the IDF's crackdown on Palestinian demonstrators in Jerusalem, and which subsided somewhat in 2005, after Sharon's declaration of Israel's disengagement from the Gaza strip.

Among academics there is an intense debate over whether the use of TKs has served Israel's interests. While some scholars conclude that Israel's constant utilisation of TKs during the second intifada successfully impaired the Islamist Hamas' operational capabilities [7], others such as Or Honig argue that the killing of the group's spiritual and political leadership had a profoundly negative impact on Palestinian public opinion, and was therefore a strategic miscalculation [8]. Honig refers to studies which allege Israel's TKs have encouraged more Palestinians to join Hamas, thus perpetuating the mutually reinforcing cycle of terrorism and state repression [9]. By instigating the martyrdom of its highly respected core leadership, Honig argues that Israel bolstered the popularity of Hamas to an extent that undermined the position of precisely those moderate Palestinian forces that should have been strengthened for the sake of peace [10]. Partially because "these assassinations increased the support for Hamas and portrayed Abbas as Israel's accomplice" [11], Hamas won a landslide victory during the Palestinian municipal election. Since 2005 Hamas has held office in Gaza, making it difficult for Israel to defeat the group in the long-term.

This study gives a 'Machiavellian' account of the role of TKs in Israel's strategy against Hamas. Explained herein are the questions of when, why and to what extent TKs have been used against Hamas throughout its history, and how this has benefited Israel. Employing Realism as a theoretical framework [12], the text alleges that Israel used TKs tactically in order to deter and avenge Hamas attacks, appeal to the hardliners among its electorate, and divide the Palestinian resistance. However, it was not until Israel had experienced a wave of deadly suicide bombings during the second intifada that it adopted TKs as a strategy to subdue the Islamists [13]. Ultimately, this study claims the decapitation strategy was without alternative as it impaired Hamas to such an extent that obviated the need for a continuous military occupation of the Gaza-strip. These findings reinforce existing studies that show how the constant application of TKs during the second intifada had, firstly, deterred Hamas and thus reduced the frequency of attacks in the mid-term [14]; and secondly, demoralized its remaining leadership to an extent that made it more inclined to negotiate a truce [15]. In conclusion, it matters little that these killings significantly increased support for the Islamist resistance [16]. The strategy as a whole had undermined Hamas' capacity to conduct asymmetric warfare, divided the Palestinian independence movement, and advanced the domestic interests of Israel's right-wing government [17].

Divide and Rule: A Machiavellian Account of Israel's Targeted Killings

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To begin, it is important to stress that Israel's settlements and repressive tendencies in occupied territories have exposed it as a colonial power[18]. As a democracy, Israel's government faces the challenge of reconciling international pressure to solve the Palestinian issue with considerations of domestic leverage[19]. In recent decades Israel has been dominated by center-right governments that have drawn a large part of their support base from Jewish settlers[20]. Long-term peace is wishful thinking as long as Israel's priority remains the continuation of its colonial settlement projects in the West Bank, with the aim of undermining plans for an independent Palestinian state[21] [22]. Through a Realist lens the issues in question should therefore not be whether the launch of TKs is morally legitimate, compliant with international law and/or beneficial for the peace process; but rather, when and how the use of this method advances the interests of the Israeli government[23].

For the purpose of this study strategy is defined as a comprehensive long-ranging plan to promote interests in the context of conflict[24]. In theory, strategy "(...) requires both a policy to define its purpose and tactics to make it happen"[25] and thus provides "(...) the bridge between political goals and military means"[26]. Tactics, on the other hand, are understood as "(...) the sciences and art organizing a military force, and the techniques for combining and using weapons and military units to engage and defeat an enemy." [27] TKs could therefore either be considered a tactic or strategy, depending on whether they are utilized occasionally or consistently over a fixed period.

Good strategy should always be aimed at rational and attainable political objectives, meaning that TKs neither work on all occasions nor for all political purposes[28]. "If the policy were to wholly destroy Hamas as a physical and ideological entity, a strategy of TK would likely be ineffective, as the policy would be simply unattainable and possibly irrational, in purely tactical and even technical terms." [29] Actually there are plausible reasons to believe that Israeli policy makers are quite accustomed to co-existing with Hamas. After all, Israel's right-wing coalition needs the terrorist threat associated with Palestinian Islamists to justify its reluctance to advance a two-state solution. The Islamist group is without doubt a lesser evil than, for instance, globally operating Jihadist groups that could easily exploit the vacuum that would emerge if the leverage of Hamas diminished[30]. Under these circumstances, TKs have proved an incredibly useful tactic to promote certain political priorities. They have certainly increased the popular support for Hamas[31], working against the interests of the Israeli government, insofar as it has put a strain on its security apparatus. This however, is a loss that can be taken given that TK's can be used to provoke the Hamas in times when an escalation of the conflict is considered to be politically advantageous. Polls have shown that a majority of Israelis support the assassination of terror suspects, which explains why Israel's government authorized TKs during elections, even though they inflicted significant damage on Israel's reputation and the peace process[32]. By bringing justice to alleged terrorists, TKs help Israeli elites demonstrate their hard-liner qualities, and distract from social and economic issues[33]. A constantly applied strategy of decapitation serves Israel as a crucial tool to subdue Hamas in times of intensified conflict. "Those next in line for succession take a long time to step into their predecessors' shoes. They know that by choosing to take the lead, they add their names to Israel's target list, where life is Hobbesian: nasty, brutish, and short." [34]

But most importantly TKs can be launched as part of a 'divide and rule' strategy in dealing with the Palestinian resistance. For instance, Israel has frequently assassinated members of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)[35], and yet initially refrained from targeting Hamas members. Ironically, Israeli occupation policy in the 1980s and '90s instead encouraged the rise of the Hamas as it was thought that the spread of Islamic ideals could balance power against the socialist and secular-oriented PLO[36]. However, as the leverage of the group grew, Israeli began to adopt a more repressive attitude towards the Islamists and in the process encouraged Hamas to declare Jihad against the occupying power. It was not until 1996 that Israel launched its first TK against a Hamas member[37]. The killing of Yihya Ayash led to the collapse of a successful ceasefire and unleashed numerous deadly suicide bombings[38]. Given that Israel was holding an election in the same year it is likely the killing was partially ordered for domestic reasons: helping Shimon Peres to sharpen his low profile among hard-liners[39]. And even though Ayash's death neither led to Peres' re-election nor benefited the security of Israelis, the provocation of Hamas aided Israeli efforts to incite divisions between different Palestinian factions, thus undermining the PLO's bargaining position[40]. That is because the cease-fire that collapsed had been the product of an agreement between Hamas and the PLO[41]. It was arranged in order to avoid threatening the Oslo agreement that had obliged Israel to redeploy some of its settlements in Palestinian territories[42]. The assassination of Ayash Israel "(...) shattered the Hamas-PLO reconciliation and (re)fractured the Palestinian polity" [43]. While Hamas resumed its attacks on Israel to avenge the

Divide and Rule: A Machiavellian Account of Israel's Targeted Killings

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death of its member, the PLO appeared to be incapable of fulfilling its Oslo mandate of protecting Israeli citizens. Henceforth, Israel gained a justification to delay the redeployment of its settlements in the West Bank[44].

Nonetheless, not all of Israel's covert operations have been a success story. A famous case was the attempted killing of – current Hamas leader – Khaled Masha'al, who during that time was chief of the group's bureau in Jordan. The operation was authorized in 1997 in the wake of public pressure to avenge a wave of deadly suicide bombings[45]. Ultimately, it became the greatest Mossad failure in history, as the agents who injected a slow-acting poison into Masha'al's ear were later captured by Jordanian authorities[46]. Outraged by Israel's behaviour, King Hussein then threatened to nullify the Israel-Jordan peace treaty of 1994, eventually forcing Israel to forward the anti-poison and release numerous high-ranking Hamas prisoners[47]. In the end, the Netanyahu government was embarrassed both internationally and on the domestic front. The worst part of the whole affair was that the same high-profile Hamas members released from prison went on to help instigate the destabilizing insurgency in 2000.

With the beginning of the second intifada, the nature, frequency and magnitude of Israel's TKs changed dramatically. Whereas before the insurgency Israel's TKs against Islamists were covert operations conducted by the secret service, now that Israel was facing a wave of deadly suicide bombings the army itself adopted TKs as a strategy to subdue the Hamas[48]. Consequently, the armed forces were sent on a mission to 'terrorize the terrorists' with the weapons they had at their disposal[49]. "The main downside of helicopter attacks was that such operations did not allow Israel any deniability. For this reason, Israel claimed responsibility for all helicopter assassinations while remaining mute in most cases on which activists were gunned down in the middle of the street or by long-range sniper bullets." [50]

The first major operation against a high-profile Hamas target was launched in 2002. In that particular case the Israeli Air Force dropped a one-ton bomb on a building in Gaza city which had been serving as a shelter for the leader of Hamas' armed wing. The attack resulted in the collapse of the entire building and killed 14 Palestinians, including Salah Shehade, his wife and 9 children[51]. The response was retributive suicide bombings, as well as wide-spread international condemnation which not only damaged Israel's reputation, but boosted the popularity of the Hamas[52].

During the latter period of the intifada Israel put Hamas' spiritual and political leaders on its death list. One factor that certainly fostered the decision to target these leaders was that after Sharon's declaration of disengagement from Palestinian territories, Israel was confronted with the loss of crucial intelligence sources[53]. Hence it is likely that the Sharon government, encouraged by popular support, hurried in order to make the most of this closing window of opportunity. Between the summer of 2004 and spring 2005, the core leadership of Hamas, including Ismail Abu Shanab, Abd Aziz Rantisi, and Shaykh Ahmad Yasin, were assassinated. All three operations were conducted with the use of air-force, missiles or bombs that tore the Hamas leaders and bystanders into pieces[54].

Nevertheless, from a Realist perspective the adoption of the strategy benefited Israel's national interest: firstly, a majority of Israelis supported these killings no matter what effect they had on Palestinian public opinion[55]; secondly, scholars have convincingly demonstrated that the constant application of TKs impaired Hamas to an extent that decreased the frequency of attacks in the mid-term and prompted its remaining leaders to negotiate with Israelis[56] [57]. This highlights that the deterrence associated with the use of TKs has at least partially fulfilled its promise. It reaffirms the Realist hypothesis that "constant elimination of their leaders leave terrorist organizations in a state of confusion and disarray." [58] The third and main benefit of the strategy was that it obviated the need for other more costly means of subduing Hamas. TKs have in fact proved to be a more surgical and efficient application of warfare than, for instance, full-scale military operations that potentially cause more casualties among soldiers and non-combatants – which obviously has an even more negative effect on both domestic and international public opinion[59]. To make possible a gradual withdrawal of its troops from the Gaza strip without jeopardizing its own security, Israel had to inflict maximum damage on Hamas' operational capabilities. Thus, the effectiveness of the TKs facilitated a gradual withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza strip. In other words, Israel failed to slay enough Hamas leaders[60].

Conclusion:

Divide and Rule: A Machiavellian Account of Israel's Targeted Killings

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From a Realist perspective negative implications of the assassination campaign on Israel's national interests are negligible when considering that the subsequent rise of the Hamas in Gaza had the effect of undermining the bargaining position of the Palestinian authority[61]. Moreover it is worth noting that with the rise of a new generation of Hamas leaders and its takeover of government the nature of the group's attacks changed, with the number of suicide bombings against Israelis decreasing[62]. Part of the reason for this lower level of violence is that due to its seizure of power it has become possible for Israel to isolate Hamas within the Gaza strip[63]. Since then security checkpoints have helped to prevent suicide bombers from entering Israeli areas[64]. These findings suggest that — contrary to the reading of Or Honig[65] — the TK campaign and subsequent rise of Hamas in Gaza did not contradict the long-term interests of Israel's right-wing government. Hence, the assassination of Ayash and Hamas' core leadership were not as Honig suggests: the product of a flawed decision-making culture[66] but brutally calculated moves. Realistically, Israel cannot have any interest in contributing to a two-state solution, as this would in effect require it to abandon its settlements in the West Bank, which would in turn antagonize the electorate[67]. However, the rise of Hamas had the effect of balancing power and inciting further divisions among Palestinian factions which would eventually culminate in the outbreak of a civil war and the division of the Palestinian Authority in 2007. For this reason Israel's application of TKs was consistent with its grand strategy of 'dividing and ruling' the Palestinian independence movement, including all its grisly aspects, such as the systematic disintegration of Palestinian territory through settlement projects and security barriers[68]. The logic being simply to prevent the growing number of Palestinians from speaking in a unified voice. Accordingly: the rise of a terrorist group in Gaza serves as the ultimate justification to deny the Palestinians their right to independence for the sake of Israel's security.

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Divide and Rule: A Machiavellian Account of Israel's Targeted Killings

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Divide and Rule: A Machiavellian Account of Israel's Targeted Killings

Written by Alexander Vincent Beck

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Divide and Rule: A Machiavellian Account of Israel's Targeted Killings

Written by Alexander Vincent Beck

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