

How Effective is Terrorism in Exerting Political Influence: The Case of Hamas?

Written by Aidan Lecky

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AIDAN LECKY, JAN 16 2022

In his book 'Terrorism: All That Matters' Andrew Silke comments, "The purest essence of terrorism is violence. This violence is carried out in order to compel an enemy to do the will of the terrorists," and that, "Terrorism is unquestionably politically motivated." [1] Whilst undeniably adopted in the pursuit of political concessions, the efficacy of terrorism as an instrument for attaining these concessions is often disputed. In this essay, I explore terrorism in Hamas's insurgent campaign against Israel. Through this lens, I argue that terrorism is a moderately effective instrument of political influence that can assist an organisation in achieving smaller and process goals, however, is an ineffective instrument for achieving larger and outcome goals. I explore how terrorism has been an effective instrument for Hamas for achieving smaller and process goals by enabling the organisation to exert political influence through stifling the Oslo Accords, inciting Israeli concessions in the Second Intifada, and underpinning its rise to prominence in domestic Palestinian politics. I then explore terrorism as an ineffective means for pursuing larger and outcome goals through how Hamas has shifted away from terrorism because of how Israeli counterterrorism has effectively mitigated its impact, how it has become disincentivised as Hamas's size and political capacity have increased, and finally, how Hamas has redefined its outcome goals. As a dynamic organisation that exists in a constantly evolving environment, Hamas must be prepared to adjust its strategies to reflect shifting political realities. Ultimately, I assert that terrorism can be an effective political tool, however, the extent of this effectiveness is limited.

In order to understand the political motivations that underpin Hamas's use of terrorism, it is essential to understand the historical context in which Hamas exists. Israel was created in 1948, covering 78% of the British Mandate for Palestine. [2] Its legitimacy as a state has since been highly contentious, but with its strong United States (US) backing, Palestinian struggles against Israel have been unable to compete militarily, economically, or politically. [3] The terrorism that has come to define the Palestinian insurgency against Israel first rose to prominence in the Palestinian Liberation Organisation's (PLO) campaigns during the 1970s and 1980s, contributing to political inroads such as United Nations and Arab League memberships. [4]

However, the First Intifada (1987-1993) saw a shift in PLO policy toward non-violent approaches, compromise, and a possible two-state solution. [5] Founded in 1987 by members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas endorses the ideals that Palestinian liberation can only be achieved through state-wide Islamisation and Israel's destruction. [6] Since this inception, gaining power has been Hamas's greatest challenge – an idea apparent in Fatah [7] leader Yasser Arafat's 1990 description of Hamas as 'ants' during a time when Hamas possessed only 3% domestic support and an arsenal of an estimated 20 machine guns. [8] Hamas's goals have since been to increase its domestic support and military capacity to pursue Israel's destruction – an outcome goal outlined in Hamas' Charter which states in its preamble that, "Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it." [9] Hamas has readily adopted terrorism through suicide bombings and rocket campaigns targeting Israeli citizens in its efforts to assert Palestinian sovereignty into the international agenda. [10] Evidently, Hamas undoubtedly adopted terrorism to support its political pursuits and to combat the asymmetry inherent to its insurgency against Israel. I will now explore both the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of terrorism for achieving these ends.

Hamas's use of terrorism to stifle the Oslo Accords demonstrates how terrorism can be an effective instrument of political influence, especially when an organisation lacks traditional means for exerting this influence. The Oslo

How Effective is Terrorism in Exerting Political Influence: The Case of Hamas?

Written by Aidan Lecky

Peace Process (1993-1995) was a concerted effort to bring peace and diplomatic relations to the Israel-Palestine conflict.[11] Communication between PLO leader Yasser Arafat and Israel's Yitzhak Rabin saw Arafat recognise Israel's sovereignty and renounce terrorism, while Rabin recognised the PLO as Palestine's representative authority.[12] The Oslo I Accord sought to introduce a legitimate democratic process in Palestine creating the Palestinian Authority (PA) to govern Gaza and much of the West Bank.[13] This shift in discourse toward compromise, concessions, and a two-state solution ran in inherent contradiction to Hamas's political identity and threatened to reshape the conflict's political and security circumstances.

As a relative newcomer and small organisation, Hamas lacked the political clout to influence the negotiations themselves and sought alternative means for meeting these ends. As the Accords' main opposition, Hamas found that suicide terror was able to grant it an effective power of veto over the process.[14] The political significance of Hamas terrorism was not to prevent the Oslo Accords, but rather to demonstrate a commitment to the Palestinian plight as the Accords failed to deliver on promises for safety and security. The Hebron Massacre of 1994 where an Israeli act of terror took 30 Palestinian lives caused many Palestinians to become disenfranchised with the Accords for not meeting these security promises.[15] In response, Hamas ramped up its terror campaign, and a particularly successful spell in 1996 that claimed 58 Israeli lives and forced Israel to significantly ramp up its counter-insurgency efforts in Palestine, further contributing to Palestinian insecurity and disenfranchisement with the Oslo Accords.[16] This aligns with Pape's argument that the strategic logic of terror is to force a government into a no-win situation where it can either grant concessions or retaliate, which often stokes the public's support for the terrorist cause.[17] Hamas's sustained terrorist campaign during the Oslo Accords shifted domestic Palestinian discourse away from a two-state solution by demonstrating both how the Accords could not create the promised peace and security and Hamas's unwavering commitment to the Palestinian cause. Therefore, Hamas terrorism during the Oslo Accords portrays terrorism as an effective instrument of political influence by enabling the organisation to pursue smaller and process goals at a time when it lacked traditional means of political influence.

Hamas terrorism during the Second Intifada and Israel's consequent withdrawal from Gaza again reveals terrorism as an effective instrument of political influence for achieving smaller and process goals in conditions of significant asymmetry. The Second Intifada (2000-2005) came with the resounding message from the Palestinian people that they would no longer be bound by the Oslo Accords.[18] The conflict saw a drastic rise in Hamas suicide terror, with the organisation conducting 112 attacks, which caused 474 fatalities across 2000-2004, up from 27 attacks with 120 fatalities from 1993-2000.[19] As the most destructive tool in Hamas' arsenal, suicide terror accounted for 73% of all deaths caused by Palestinian resistance groups during the Second Intifada.[20] Hamas championed the use of suicide terror because it was an effective means to bridge the asymmetry between Palestine and Israel. Hamas's Secretary-General of Jihad Ramadan Shalah supported this rationale by commenting, "[o]ur enemy possesses the most sophisticated weapons in the world and its army is trained to a very high standard ... We have nothing to repel the killing and thuggery against us except the weapon of Martyrdom." [21] Suicide terror provided a cheap, effective means for confronting the more powerful Israel. While each attack cost Hamas an estimated US\$150, in 2002 the Bank of Israel estimated the Second Intifada cost Israel 3.8% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP).[22] In previous conflicts Israel had managed to contain violence to enemy territory and the periphery; however, suicide terror within Israel's borders effectively slowed down production and damaged the economy, where between 2000-2002 GDP Per Capita dropped 6% from US\$18,358 to US\$17,359.[23] The economic costs of the Second Intifada to Israel were clearly significant, with suicide terror allowing Hamas to threaten Israeli production and sense of security.

However, whilst the individual attacks were cheap, this terror campaign came with significant costs from Israeli retaliation. Indeed, whilst Israel ultimately withdrew from Gaza in 2005, previous retaliation had seen military incursions into Palestinian population centres, assassinations of top-level Hamas leaders, and restrictions of Hamas's access to international and financial support.[24] It is clear that terrorism can be a counterproductive tool, where retaliation can bring about significant consequences, but when paired with unceasing resolve terrorism can incite political concessions. Hamas's sustained terrorist campaign during the Second Intifada pressured Israel's withdrawal from Gaza through imposing significant economic and security costs, but also for winning the battle of resolve. Therefore, Hamas terrorism during the Second Intifada portrays terrorism as an effective means for achieving smaller and process goals, where asymmetry is significant.

How Effective is Terrorism in Exerting Political Influence: The Case of Hamas?

Written by Aidan Lecky

Terrorism's influence on Hamas's election into the Palestinian Authority further reveals how it can be an effective instrument of political influence for achieving smaller and process goals, such as building domestic support. Hamas was elected to govern the PA in 2007, having won 76 seats to Fatah's 43 – a stark contrast to Hamas's initial 3% domestic support.[25] The evolution from a fringe group to the governing body was derived from the Muqawama Doctrine, which emphasises self-sacrifice through a strategy of prolonged war designed to erode an enemy's resources and resolve for an ultimate victory by attrition.[26] This policy, designed to solidify Hamas's position on the Gaza Strip, involved state-building policies to establish governance and activist policies to support its foreign affairs agenda through terrorism and the cycle of conflict with Israel.[27] The integral role of Hamas's sustained terrorist efforts was to demonstrate unwavering resolve and to seek an ultimate victory through attrition.

Having seen a far greater proportion of its population killed by terrorism than any other democracy paired with a deeply insecure sense of public safety, Israel has increasingly grown to accept Hamas as a reality that must be accepted.[28] It is clear that Hamas has proven its unrelenting resolve through its terrorist efforts and their impacts on Israel. This shift in the rhetoric surrounding Israel-Palestine relations can be understood clearly with a 2012 poll revealing that most Palestinians believed a two-state solution was no longer viable, and over two-thirds – that the chances of negotiations succeeding over the next five years were 'low' or 'non-existent'. [29] Evidently, by demonstrating unwavering commitment to the Palestinian cause through a sustained terrorist campaign, Hamas has shifted the domestic sentiment away from Fatah's willingness for compromise toward its own unwavering political objectives, while also acquiring legitimacy in the eyes of Israel and the international community. Therefore, terrorism can be understood as an effective instrument for achieving smaller and process goals for how it assisted Hamas's rise to power within domestic Palestinian politics.

Thus far, I have explored how Hamas's use of terrorism shows how it can be an effective instrument for pursuing smaller and process goals. However, an insurgency must be dynamic to reflect changing political realities and terrorism is only a limited means for pursuing political goals. With Hamas's outcome goal for Israel's destruction remaining elusive, I will now explore terrorism as an ineffective means for achieving larger and outcome goals through the organisation's shift away from terrorism since its election into the PA.

Terrorism can be understood as an ineffective means of political influence for pursuing larger and outcome goals because of how effective counterterrorism measures can render terrorist strategies ineffective, consequently limiting the organisation's political influence and forcing it to adopt alternative strategies. In 2000-2007, Hamas's terrorism became less effective, where a decline in casualties per attack was followed by a decline in the number of attacks themselves[30]. This decrease in effectiveness stemmed from Israel's capacity for developing effective counterterrorism strategies, where the Israel Defense Force demonstrated itself to be well-prepared for the scope and magnitude of weaponry used in Hamas attacks.[31] In light of the diminishing effectiveness of suicide terror, Hamas assumed an intensive ballistic and mortar campaign at the expense of effectiveness. Whilst still instilling insecurity and disruptions to Israeli daily life, rocket and mortar attacks came with reduced efficacy causing only 42 deaths across 2001-2009, compared to over 600 deaths from suicide attacks between just 2000-2005[32], [33]. In 2011, Hamas's chief political advisor Ahmed Yousef provided the rationale for why Hamas had previously shifted away from suicide terror stating, "[r]ockets against Sderot will cause mass migration, greatly disrupt daily lives and government administration and can make a much huger impact on the government... We are succeeding with the rockets. We have no losses and the impact on the Israeli side is so much." [34] This is consistent with Walter and Enders' theory that perpetrators of organised violence will substitute new techniques to replace or complement those that are no longer efficient.[35] Essentially, as Hamas suicide terror became less efficient, the organisation sought alternative means for pursuing its political goals.

However, Israel's counterterrorism has even been able to limit the effectiveness of Hamas rocket attacks[36]. Effective Israeli counterterrorism efforts have significantly mitigated the effects of Hamas terror strategies, forcing the organisation to pursue alternative means of political influence, and displaying the dynamic nature of terrorist campaigns. Therefore, terrorism can be understood as an ineffective instrument of political influence for how effective counterterrorism can mitigate the impacts of terrorist strategies and, consequently, their political influence. This forces the organisation to be dynamic and to pursue alternative methods to elicit its desired concessions.

How Effective is Terrorism in Exerting Political Influence: The Case of Hamas?

Written by Aidan Lecky

The Israel-Palestine conflict further reveals terrorism as an ineffective instrument of political influence for achieving larger and outcome goals because it can become counterproductive as an insurgent organisation increases its political authority. Where the asymmetry is more severe in a conflict, the use of terror is more rational because insurgents lack the popular backing or capacity to achieve their goals through non-violent means.[37] This logic explains Hamas's shift away from terror following its election into the PA. Having acquired more political authority and clout, Hamas possessed greater means for exerting political influence, especially as its military wing the Qassam Brigades, which was once dominated by suicide bombings and cheap mortar attacks, morphed into a more conventional military force.[38] Compared to its initial arsenal of only 20 machine guns, the Qassam Brigades now boast 17,000-27,000 soldiers, various rockets with a range of 48-160 km, hundreds of mortars, laser-guided anti-tank missiles, and the early stage of a drone program.[39] This transformation from a fringe organisation into a more conventional insurgent force is critical for Hamas's pursuit of its political goals. Abrahms argues that terrorist campaigns see limited coercive effectiveness because governments resist complying when their civilians are the focus of attacks and that of the terrorist campaigns that have achieved concessions, almost all of them have involved guerrilla campaigns against a state's military.[40] Furthermore, whilst the asymmetry in this conflict is still distinct, as a legitimate government, terrorism is a counterproductive tool for achieving international legitimacy and support. This is clear in how since the Second Intifada, parts of the international community have condemned Hamas's persistent use of terrorism.[41] Evidently, the pursuit of Hamas's political goals requires it to be a dynamic organisation that can adapt to its changing political circumstances, where since Hamas has increased its power and evolved into the legitimate governing body of the PA, terrorism is no longer its dominant means for pursuing its political goals and can often be counterproductive. Therefore, terrorism is an ineffective instrument for achieving larger and outcome political goals because as an organisation increases its political clout, other means become more effective.

A final illustration of terrorism as an ineffective instrument for achieving political goals, particularly larger and outcome goals, can be understood through how Hamas has recently redefined and softened its outcome goals. Hamas released a new policy document in 2017 that, whilst still outlining a commitment to Israel's destruction, denoted a shift in policy toward a willingness to accept an interim Palestinian state.[42] This softens its initial stance laid out in Article 13 of its Covenant that followed, "... [Peace initiatives] are no more than a means to appoint infidels as arbitrators in the lands of Islam... There is no solution for the Palestinian problem except by Jihad." [43] The shift in rhetoric illuminates the dynamic nature of Hamas and terrorist organisations – that as the political context evolves, so too must the organisation's objectives and methods. Hamas's 2007 election campaign ran on a platform that resistance was a multi-faceted strategy that included military operations, but also extended to governance capabilities.[44] The evolving context for Hamas has been the different expectations and responsibilities set for governments compared to smaller terrorist cells. This was especially relevant following Hamas's struggles during the three Gazan Wars (2009-2014), wherein the context of effective Israeli counterterrorism that neutered Hamas's traditional terrorist strategies, public support for Hamas dropped to 35% in 2014, down from 62% in 2007.[45] Since taking power in 2007, Hamas's biggest challenge has been governing Gaza, a challenge aggravated by factional infighting, international isolation, and the Israeli conflict.[46] While an armed group can accept the costs of the Gazan Wars without major consequences, once elected to power, Hamas took upon a mantle of responsibility that requires it to look out for its constituents' needs.[47] Evidently, in the context of Hamas's newfound governmental responsibilities, still elusive Palestinian sovereignty, and an inability to exert political influence over Israel, Hamas is struggling to retain its identity as an effective nationalist organisation. Therefore, terrorism can be understood as an ineffective instrument for exerting political influence through Hamas's recent softening of its outcome goals and shift away from conflict and terrorism toward diplomatic efforts.

To conclude, I have argued that Hamas's terrorist campaigns against Israel demonstrate that terrorism is a moderately effective instrument of political influence. I have explored that while terrorism can be an effective tool for pursuing smaller and process goals when an organisation has limited capacity for political influence, it is not an effective tool for achieving larger and outcome goals as an organisation increases its political authority. I have argued that terrorism is an effective tool for achieving smaller and process goals through how Hamas used it to stifle the Oslo Accords when the organisation lacked alternative means for political leverage; how sustained terror activity during the Second Intifada incited Israel's withdrawal from Gaza; and how terrorism underpinned Hamas's election into the PA by demonstrating Hamas's commitment to the Palestinian cause. However, with Hamas's outcome goal of destroying Israel remaining elusive, the Israel-Palestine conflict demonstrates terrorism as an ineffective means for

How Effective is Terrorism in Exerting Political Influence: The Case of Hamas?

Written by Aidan Lecky

pursuing larger and outcome goals through how Hamas has shifted away from terrorism due to effective Israeli counterterrorism; how as a legitimate governing body, terrorism is no longer Hamas's dominant means for pursuing its political objectives; and through how Hamas has softened its outcome goals, shifting away from conflict and terrorism toward diplomatic efforts. Ultimately, terrorism underpinned Hamas's rise in political influence; however, Hamas's shift away from terrorism suggests that it is a limited instrument of this influence. That is not to say terrorism is redundant or useless, but rather imperfect – an insurgent organisation must be dynamic and prepared to adjust its strategies to reflect the evolving context in which it exists.

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How Effective is Terrorism in Exerting Political Influence: The Case of Hamas?

Written by Aidan Lecky

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How Effective is Terrorism in Exerting Political Influence: The Case of Hamas?

Written by Aidan Lecky

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How Effective is Terrorism in Exerting Political Influence: The Case of Hamas?

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How Effective is Terrorism in Exerting Political Influence: The Case of Hamas?

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