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Updating Israel's National Security Doctrine

Policy Paper

Syria and the sub terrain warfare – the Hamas connection

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Sub terrain warfare is not new in the Middle East. During the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the Shi'ite terrorists used a well-concealed, planned and equipped tunnel system to launch rockets and to attack IDF soldiers. In Gaza strip since the "Second Intifada" (2000) Hamas and other Palestinian terror organizations are using tunnels to smuggle arms from Sinai to Gaza and to bomb Israeli positions and to infiltrate and kidnap Israeli soldiers (Gilad Shalit, June 2006). During the course of Operation Protective Edge (July –August 2014), Israel discovered and destroyed 32 terror tunnels dug by Hamas in Gaza beneath Israeli territory.

"There are two cities. There's the virtual one above, and the real one below". The buildings are connected through a network of tunnels. The first tunnel is for food supplies, the second to communicate between our positions and the third to evacuate the wounded," explains Maher, a bearded officer in fatigues. "The last, which can go to depths of 12 meters, surrounds the building and, if the enemy tries to get in, we detonate bombs placed inside it."

This description of the sub terrain infrastructure is not taken from Gaza (July- August 2014) but from the battle zone between the Assad regime forces and the rebels in Syria.

Syria's three-year-old conflict has become a war of attrition and Sunni rebels, outnumbered and outgunned, have waged a sub terrain warfare in Syria. The rebels were exploiting their knowledge of urban areas as well as techniques in tunnel construction, tunneling underneath enemy positions for surprise attacks to try to break the stalemate in fighting against government forces in Aleppo, Damascus and Dera.¹

These days, tunnels snake their way all over Syria, a creative military strategy that enables rebels to transport humans, prepare bombs, take cover, store weapons and attack heavily guarded military headquarters. The network is a symptom of the stagnating, three-year war, which the rebels know is

far from over. Their underground infrastructure has them well-prepared for the long haul. Since 2013 the Assad regime forces discovered intensive tunnel networks in different battle zones in Syria.²

Tunnel bombs are also being used as a powerful propaganda tool and the increasingly dominant role of social media. YouTube and Facebook have become the primary forums for rebel groups' self-promotion and claiming responsibility for attacks. The Islamic Front has posted spectacular online videos of its entire recent tunnel bombing attacks.³

Syrian Jihadist groups and the sub terrain warfare

The Islamic front was formed in 2013 with the reported backing of Saudi Arabia.⁴ The Liwa al-Tawhid is a part of the Islamic front and it has around 100-strong unit of tunnellers which is credited with doing at least nine tunnel bombings in the past six months. The tunnel bombings of the group were:

On November 20, 2013, Syrian regime forces discovered a tunnel that connected a southeastern suburb of Damascus to al-Mazza airport. Dubbed a "terror tunnel" by the army. The tunnel was well-ventilated and broad enough for the rebels to smuggle supplies and weapons to and from Damascus.⁵

On May 6, 2014, About 30 Syrian government fighters were killed when Islamic Front and the Shields of the Revolution Council fighters set off some 60 tons of explosives, in a tunnel beneath a checkpoint outside the town of Ma'arat al-Nu'man in the northwestern Idlib province. Videos and images posted by opposition supporters online showed a massive plume of smoke and earth shooting into the air near a small town as men shouted "Allahu akbar" (God is greatest).⁶

On May 8, 2014, fighters from Liwa al-Tawhid, detonated explosives underneath the Carlton hotel in Aleppo that was being used as a barracks by Syrian police officers and by paramilitaries known as Shabiha.

In an interview with the commander of the "Aleppo's tunnellers " he said that they called the operation " Aleppo Earthquake". He was given the idea to start digging by a Palestinian who visited him in northern Syria last year. "They said they had some success in Palestine, so I decided to try it. It wasn't hard to find the explosives. I have personally supervised nine tunnels."⁷

He said that it was not difficult to find volunteers prepared to dig through rock and stone under the ancient heart of Aleppo, the arches and millennia-old homes and mosques which separate regime and opposition forces. The hotel tunnel was 107 meters long and took 33 days to build and the tunnellers has packed 25 tons of explosives into the tunnel dug under the a hotel filled with Syrian troops.⁸

The explosion that destroyed the Carlton Citadel hotel in central Aleppo sent shock waves and giant plumes of dirt and rubble that ballooned several hundred meters skyward as the hotel crumbled, killing 30-50 Syrian troops.

The Carlton Citadel hotel bombing have fast become one of the most jaw-dropping images of Syria's civil war. "Our holy warriors this morning blew up the Carlton Hotel barracks in old Aleppo and a number of adjoining buildings," the Islamic Front said announcing the operation on Twitter.⁹

Syrian officials angrily denounced the attack and the tunnel bombs used by the rebels, claiming they were killing and maiming indiscriminately and destroying the city's soul and identity.

On May 31, 2014, The Islamic Front, claim to have killed up to 40 government soldiers in Aleppo by tunneling under their positions and setting off an underground bomb. The rebel group posted a video to Twitter of the explosion. The video shows the moment of blast, followed by a huge cloud of debris in the air.¹⁰

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights group said the blast took place near the Zahrawi market, not far from the citadel in Old Aleppo. It said at least 20 people were killed.

The city of Homs was known as the capital of the revolution. In order to mark the rebels abandoning a stronghold in May 2014, Syrian Army invited a CNN reporter to Homs and revealed to him the elaborate tunnel system that permitted the rebels to stay in touch with the outside world. The exposed tunnels were developed in residential areas and they shocked the military personnel that exposed the extensive network.¹¹

The rebels have also used tunnels in fighting around Damascus. On June 2, 2014, the Syrian Army reported finding a rebel tunnel that spanned 300 meters and included an operations room. "The army found a 300 meters long and 12 meters deep tunnel dug by terrorists between the Qaboun area and deep into the Joubar neighborhood in Damascus," the official Syrian news agency, Sana, said. "The tunnel included an operations room."¹²

The Hamas and the sub terrain warfare in Syria

Syrian rebels were trained in tunnel building by Hamas military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, which have extensive experience in building underground tunnels corridors to smuggle arms and goods from Sinai to the Gaza strip.¹³

A report claims that the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades were training Free Syrian Army (FSA) units in the rebel-held neighborhoods of Yalda, Jaramana and Babbila. Other sources suggested that Hamas trainers were helping the FSA to dig tunnels beneath at least one contested area of Damascus in preparation for a widely expected assault on the city center.¹⁴

A Palestinian source from Lebanon's Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp said that it was common knowledge that Hamas operatives were fighting alongside the FSA in the Yarmouk and Neirab Palestinian camps in Damascus and Aleppo.¹⁵

A pro Assad source claimed that the Assad forces has discovered that Hamas' revolutionary tactics were behind the growing terrorism. The Syrian authorities revealed that some cities are fraught with tunnels full of rebels. Some of these tunnels in cities such as Qusayr, Baba Amr, Harasta, Douma and Daria . Some tunnels were dug by abducted civilians. He carries on saying: "To our consternation, these civilians were killed the minute they end digging the tunnels". Today, the Syrian army is coming to grips with Hamas-born tactic in order to overcome it, by daily discovering a large number of tunnels, and alleviating its destructive impact.¹⁶

Other sources close to Hezbollah and the Syrian regime claim that Hamas had a role to play in the battles of Qusayr. The sources said that the tunnels discovered in the strategic Syrian town had been dug using small Iranian devices that Hezbollah had transferred to Hamas. The sources said, "What delayed the military operation was the explosives planted by the militants everywhere, from windows to television sets and even teapots, in addition to using motion-sensitive explosives – all methods that

the resistance fighters used against the enemy.” Some of the explosives, they added, were found to contain electronic chips that Hamas had acquired from Iran and Hezbollah.¹⁷

Hamas has denied the claims, Osama Hamdan, a leading Hamas official based in Lebanon, said: “It’s a false thing. There are no members of Izz ad-Din al-Qassam or any members of Hamas in Syria. “We don’t interfere in the internal problems of Syria. Our members there are normal civilians, Syrian Palestinians, who live with their families there. From the beginning of what has happened in Syria we rejected as a movement any involvement of any Palestinian in the current events in Syria.”¹⁸

Summary

Since the IDF’s discovery and detonation of 32 terror tunnels dug by Hamas in Gaza beneath Israeli territory during the course of Operation Protective Edge, the Israeli security agencies are concerned by the potential threat of Hezbollah tunnels across the border with Lebanon.

The issue first came to the public’s attention during the 2006 war against Hezbollah, when the Shi’ite terrorists popped out of well-concealed, planned and equipped tunnels to attack IDF soldiers – often with lethal results.¹⁹

While the sandy and clay-like soil near Gaza is relatively easy to dig through, the boulder-strewn and rocky hills on Israel’s northern frontier are far harder to tunnel into. But Israel cannot underestimate the possibility that Hezbollah dug a network of tunnels from the Lebanese border into Israel. The deployment of Hezbollah forces along the border in the Golan Heights extends the threat of offensive tunnels from Lebanon to the Golan Heights.

The Syrian opposition including the Salafi jihadi groups like Jubhat al Nusra the Islamic Front and the Islamic State, gained significant experience in sub terrain warfare which they can implement against Israeli targets in the Golan Heights.

Israel has to be ready to deal with sub terrain threats along all its northern borders and to find technological and operational solutions to the sub terrain strategic threats.

Notes

- ¹ Syrian troops hit in Aleppo tunnel bombing, Al Jazeera, May 31, 2014.
- ² Alessandra Masi, Inside the secret rebel tunnels of Syria, Voactive, November 20, 2013.
- ³ Umberto Bacchi, Syria Civil War: Massive Tunnel Bombs Become New Rebel Weapon to Break Stalemate, International Business Times, June 3, 2014.
- ⁴ Umberto Bacchi, Syria Civil War: Massive Tunnel Bombs Become New Rebel Weapon to Break Stalemate, International Business Times, June 3, 2014.
- ⁵ Alessandra Masi, Inside the secret rebel tunnels of Syria, Voactive, November 20, 2013.
- ⁶ Bomb in Syria's Idlib kills 30 government fighters: monitoring group, Reuters, May 6, 2014.
- ⁷ Martin Chulov, Aleppo's most wanted man - the rebel leader behind tunnel bombs in Aleppo, The Guardian, 20 May 2014.
- ⁸ Martin Chulov, Aleppo's most wanted man - the rebel leader behind tunnel bombs in Aleppo, The Guardian, 20 May 2014.
- ⁹ Umberto Bacchi, Syria Civil War: Massive Tunnel Bombs Become New Rebel Weapon to Break Stalemate, International Business Times, June 3, 2014.
- ¹⁰ Syrian troops hit in Aleppo tunnel bombing, Al Jazeera, May 31, 2014.
- ¹¹ Syrian conflict update: A Rare Glimpse into Rebel Tunnels, CNN, May 15, 2014.
- ¹² Tunnels war: Rebels resort to blowing up Syrian Army from below, WorldTribune.com, June 3, 2014.
- ¹³ Syrian troops hit in Aleppo tunnel bombing, Al Jazeera, May 31, 2014.
- ¹⁴ Hamas training rebels in Damascus, ynet, April 5, 2013.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Nedal Naisseh, Hamas' Revolutionary Tactics, Levant, October 26, 2013.
- ¹⁷ Alexandra Valiente, Orient tendencies: Syria's resistance confounds the, deliberation, June 24, 2013.
- ¹⁸ Hamas training rebels in Damascus, ynet, April 5, 2013.
- ¹⁹ Dave Bender, The Israeli government now probing Lebanon terror tunnels threat, The Algemeiner, August 4, 2014.