

The Goal: The Terrorist Heads

Danny Yatom

A running debate in the defense and intelligence community is over the value of eliminating most-wanted terrorists and the heads of terror organizations.

In recent years the issue has also entered the public debate and is rekindled each time a senior terrorist is cut down. Some claim that eliminating senior terrorists is a vital part of the War on Terror; others argue that such killings cause more damage than good.

Those opposed to the assassination of a senior terrorist make the compelling charge that removing the head of the organizations does not remove the organization's activities; on the contrary, it even motivates them to go to greater lengths to exact revenge and perpetrate painful mega-strikes. And the correlation: eliminating their senior members encourages the organizations to target our leaders.

On the other hand, those who favor targeted killings, including senior terrorists, contend that this is a necessary step in the all-out war against terror. Eliminating a top terrorist or the head of a group unhinges the whole organization, undermines its self-confidence and morale, forces it to channel manpower and means to protect its leaders, and detracts from its image. At the same time, it enhances the image of the side that carried out

the assassination, and signals that no terrorist is safe from the long arm of the Western world.

The goal of terror organizations is to spread panic and dread in the targeted population, therefore the psychological element is of key importance in both terrorist and counterterrorist activity. The elimination of a major terrorist naturally boosts morale in the victimized population and strengthens its resist and will to persevere.

When a terrorist organization is relatively small, the removal of its leader can bring a halt to its activity for an extended period of time. This is what happened to the Palestinian terror organization Islamic Jihad, when Fathi Shaqaqi was eliminated in Malta in 1995.

Hezbollah, too, was crippled after the targeted killing of Imad Mughniyah in 2008: its self-confidence was undermined, its morale sank, and its leaders were shocked.

This was due to Mughniyah's senior position and especially because it proved that the enemy could reach him despite the painstaking steps he took to cover his movements and conceal his whereabouts.

I believe that the terror organizations will persist in trying to hurt us. If possible, they will not hesitate to strike at senior Israeli figures, regardless if their leaders are targeted or not.

Eliminating upper level terrorists is not without danger. We well remember Hezbollah's deadly blow to the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in revenge for the murder of Abbas Musawi in 1992.

In each case we have to take calculated risks and examine the implications of removing major terrorists. A situation assessment must be made that weighs the degree of damage their elimination will cause their organization and its activities, against the suffering that we are liable to incur as a result.

The decision to neutralize a senior figure, as in every targeted assassination, is not automatic. It depends on the situation assessment and requires approval.

Israel must not go after the heads of states even if they're the leaders of terror states. We have to differentiate between a terrorist (no matter what his position in the hierarchy) and a politician who was elected (even if the elections were rigged).

The bottom line: the heads of terrorism have to know that they will never be safe as long as they order acts of terror