

BICOM Briefing: The threat from Gaza tunnels

February 2016

Key Points

- Concerns for renewed violence over the Israel-Gaza border have risen in recent weeks as evidence emerges of the extent of Hamas's efforts to rebuild its attack tunnels.
- Israeli efforts to detect tunnels are also moving forward, adding an additional potential source of friction.
- The heightened concern comes in the context of major ongoing economic and humanitarian challenges placing considerable pressure on Hamas in Gaza, and Hamas's efforts to fan the flames of violence in the West Bank.

Why is there heightened concern around Gaza now?

- In late January 2016, seven operatives from Hamas's military wing were killed when a tunnel they were constructing collapsed in the Tuffah neighbourhood east of Gaza City. Since then, reports have emerged of at least four additional collapses. The reason is unclear, though may be linked to stormy weather conditions. Whether IDF covert action is involved is unknown.

- The collapses have highlighted Hamas's efforts to reconstruct the tunnels network it used during Operation Protective Edge in 2014 to launch cross border raids near Israeli communities. Hamas leaders have confirmed publicly that this work is underway.

- Gadi Yarkoni, head of the Eshkol Regional Council which sits on the Israeli side of the border, told Israel Radio that residents have been complaining of hearing and feeling underground digging, and a [senior IDF official](#) recently told Israeli residents living near Gaza that the organisation had restored its tunnels, rocket firing systems, intelligence gathering operations and observation posts. This has increased public concern and political pressure on Israel's leaders to deal with the tunnel threat.

- Whilst public concern is growing, the actual extent of Hamas's reconstruction is not clear. Israeli defence analyst [Amos Harel](#) writes that "The reasonable assessment is that the number of tunnels that extend beneath the border into Israel is now close to the number prior to Operation Protective Edge." However, senior defence official Amos Gilad said in an Israeli radio interview in February that no Hamas tunnels had yet entered Israeli territory.

- The US is said to be ready to [invest \\$120m](#) in a new Israeli system which Israel has reportedly begun to deploy around the Gaza Strip to detect tunnels – a task that has presented major technical challenges until now. Israeli engineering equipment can be seen on the border.

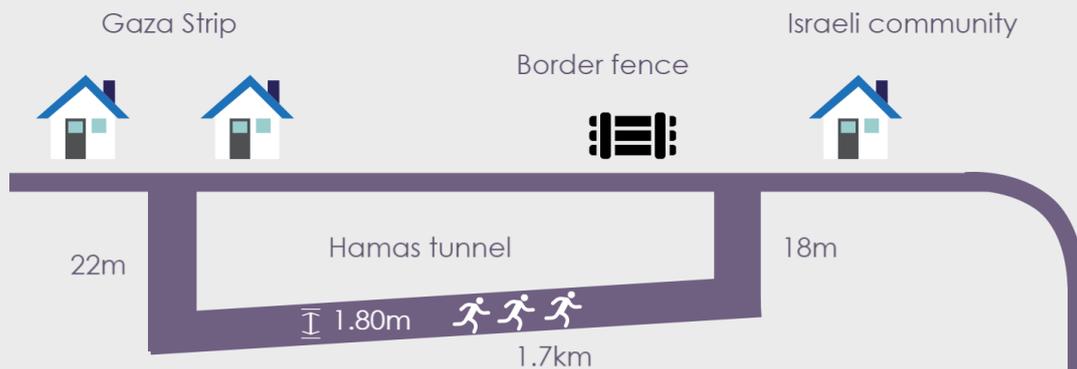
- Responding to the tunnel threat is presenting technical challenges and policy dilemmas for Israel: how to find the tunnels; how to neutralise them; whether to act pre-emptively and risk an escalation; and how to balance Israeli security requirements with the humanitarian needs in the Gaza Strip, for example in allowing building materials into the Gaza Strip which Hamas are diverting to build tunnels.

- Whilst Hamas has reportedly [sent messages](#) through intermediaries that it is uninterested in war, the situation has the inherent potential for escalation and miscalculation. Israeli action to destroy Hamas tunnels could trigger a new round of fighting, whilst the possibility that Israel could detect and neutralise the tunnels could potentially spur Hamas to use them before they are taken out. There is also concern of disunity in Hamas around how to respond to the ongoing economic crisis in the Gaza Strip, and the possibility of other armed groups triggering an escalation.

- This delicate situation is developing within a wider strategic context in which Hamas is both under severe pressure within the Gaza Strip, and trying to fan the flames of violence that has been taking place in the West Bank and Israel. Hamas is trying to exploit the series of lone wolf terror attacks emerging from the

The growing threat of Gaza tunnel terror

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WHY TUNNELS ARE A THREAT

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West Bank and escalate the violence to advance its goal of undermining the Palestinian Authority. Israeli security officials have recently exposed several Hamas cells planning terror attacks in the West Bank, including the kidnapping and killing of Israelis.

The Hamas strategy: Tunnels as a strategic game changer

- Hamas has for several years been developing offensive tunnels as a [strategic weapon](#) capable of causing significant military and psychological damage to Israel. In its asymmetric battle with Israel, Hamas has long used tactics that involve directly targeting Israel's civilian population, whilst using the Palestinian civilian population as cover. Israel's success in defending its civilian population from Hamas missiles with Iron Dome has incentivised Hamas to develop other forms of attack, including a massive investment in tunnels. As well as digging tunnels into Israeli territory to carry out attacks, Hamas used tunnels in their battle with IDF forces in 2014 as well as to store weapons and move gunmen within Gaza neighbourhoods.

- According to [reports](#), Hamas has created a secret commando unit, called Nukhba (the "selected ones"), and trained its men to fight and manoeuvre through the tunnels on foot and on small motorcycles. During Operation Protective Edge, the IDF uncovered 32 Hamas attack tunnels, a third of which had breached Israeli territory. Before Operation Protective Edge, Israeli intelligence sources believe Hamas had planned to carry out a simultaneous, coordinated, surprise attack within Israel by sending 200 heavily armed operatives through 14 tunnels into Israel in order to infiltrate civilian communities and inflict mass casualties. They were due to carry R.P.G.s, Kalashnikovs, M-16s, hand grenades, and night-vision equipment and to wear IDF uniforms. Other Hamas operatives who entered Israel via a tunnel were found carrying tranquilizers and handcuffs.

- The tunnel threat is not new. Hamas gunmen used a tunnel in a 2006 raid in which IDF Corporal Gilad Shalit was kidnapped and two other soldiers killed. Israel eventually released more than 1000 Palestinian convicts to secure Shalit's release after five years in captivity.

Israel's challenge in detecting the tunnels

- Locating Hamas's tunnels presents significant challenges. To hide the tunnel work from Israeli intelligence, Hamas generally locates tunnel entrances in houses, mosques, schools or other public buildings. To find these entrances requires Israel to either have excellent intelligence or search house by house during

ground operations such as Operation Protective Edge. One such tunnel search led to the death of 13 Israeli soldiers.

- Detecting a small underground tunnel with technology is very difficult. There are methods to detect tunnels while they are being built, usually using sensitive underground microphone systems or geophones which detect underground noise of movement. However once a tunnel is completed the empty spaces underground are much harder to detect, and no reliable technology has yet been deployed to cover a wide area and see a man-sized tunnel to a depth of more than a few meters.

- The details of the methods being developed by Israel are not known, but in the past, various methods have been tried. These include: land penetrating radar; initiating sound waves through controlled explosions and mechanical hammers which are then detected by geophones and analysed; sensors based on optical fibres; mapping changes in ground-generated infrared radiation; and microgravity measurements (i.e., sensors that attempt to detect minute changes in the earth's gravity).

- A preventative measure Israel is considering is the building of underground protective barriers against tunnels although the cost of such a subterranean fence is estimated at NIS 2.8 billion (\$700 million). According to [Haaretz](#) there is no allocation in the current defence budget for this.

- Egypt has also grappled with the issue of tunnels used to smuggle weapons and goods between Sinai and Gaza. They have built an underground fence and [flooded many tunnels with seawater](#). The destruction of these tunnels has played a major role in Hamas's economic crisis.

- Reports that the US will invest \$120m in the development of a new Israeli system to detect tunnels may indicate that Israel is making progress in meeting this major technological challenge. The US has its own interest in the system for use against smugglers on the US-Mexico border.

The Israeli Pre-emption debate: towards another round of Israel-Hamas fighting?

- The knowledge that Hamas is strengthening its offensive capacity poses a dilemma for Israel. If Israel acts preventatively against the tunnels it faces the considerable risk of triggering a new round of fighting. But by not acting it may be increasing the threat to Israeli civilian communities if Hamas decided to strike, or when the next round of fighting takes place. At the same time, there is the concern that the possibility

of Hamas's tunnel network being exposed might spur Hamas to use the tunnels before it's too late.

- MK Omer Bar-Lev and Isaac Herzog from the centre left Zionist Union have [called on the government](#) "to stop hesitating and instruct the IDF to bomb the tunnels and destroy this threat." According to recent reports, Jewish Home leader and cabinet member Naftali Bennett also challenged Netanyahu in the Security Cabinet to act pre-emptively against the tunnels.

- So far Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon have taken a more cautious approach and appear unlikely to take this advice, preferring to prolong the current period of calm as long as possible. However, Netanyahu has warned Hamas against any attack saying "If we are attacked from the tunnels in the Gaza Strip we will respond ... with much greater force than we used during Operation Protective Edge."

- President of the INSS policy centre Amos Yadlin has advised the government to define a red line, such as tunnels clearly crossing the border, which would trigger preventative action.

The Gaza Reconstruction challenge

- A further Israeli dilemma surrounds how to facilitate reconstruction in the Gaza Strip. It is widely acknowledged among the Israeli security establishment that easing conditions inside the Gaza Strip will help reduce the chances of another round of intense violence.

- However, Israel does not want to legitimise Hamas with a long term ceasefire agreement, which would also undermine Hamas's rivals, the PA in the West Bank. However, the PA has been unwilling to assume any direct responsibility for Gaza's borders, not wanting to do anything to assist Hamas – which it sees as an enemy – and believing Hamas will not allow it real control inside the Gaza Strip. Nor has the PA been willing to transfer salaries to Hamas officials. Meanwhile Egypt is in direct conflict with Hamas, seeing Hamas as a partner to the ISIL inspired insurgency taking place in the Sinai, and has put ever tighter controls on its border with Gaza, including destroying underground smuggling tunnels.

- Much of the donor money pledged to Gaza following Operation Protective Edge has failed to materialise. An August 2015 World Bank reports suggests that only 35% of the promised \$3.5 billion funds have been delivered. In addition, Israel believes that money and building materials earmarked for Gaza reconstruction are being commandeered by Hamas to build offensive tunnels.

- In this context, Israel has nonetheless taken various measures to try and ease the economic situation in the Gaza Strip, which is suffering severe hardships. Quantities of goods entering the Gaza Strip have increased to 700-800 truckloads on a typical day. More than one million tonnes of construction materials have entered the Gaza Strip through Israel since September 2014 under the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, with around 100,000 residents receiving materials to rebuild homes. Exports from the Gaza Strip via Israel have also increased, as have the numbers allowed to enter Israel for medical treatment, trade or other purposes (typically in the region of 6000 and 8000 each week in recent months). Israel has also worked with international authorities, including the Qatari authorities, to facilitate construction in Gaza. Other major projects, however, such as upgrading Gaza's electricity or building a large desalination plant have not moved forward. It remains to be seen whether a reconciliation deal between Israel and Turkey will change the picture, since Turkey demands maritime access to Gaza as part of a deal to restore diplomatic ties.

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