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USDOS – US Department of State

Country Report on Terrorism 2019 - Chapter 1 - Israel, West Bank, and Gaza

Israel

Overview: Israel was a committed counterterrorism partner in 2019, closely coordinating with the United States on a range of counterterrorism initiatives. Israel and the United States held numerous interagency counterterrorism dialogues to discuss the broad range of threats in the Middle East and to determine areas of collaboration to address these challenges. This included the annual meeting of the U.S.-Israel Joint Counterterrorism Group, which was launched in the early 1990s and is our longest-standing strategic counterterrorism dialogue.

Israel faced threats from the north from Hizballah and along the northeastern frontier from Hizballah and other Iran-backed groups, including about 150,000 rockets aimed at Israel. Israeli officials expressed concern that Iran was supplying Hizballah with advanced weapons systems and technologies, as well as assisting the group in creating infrastructure that would permit it to indigenously produce rockets, missiles, and drones to threaten Israel from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, or Yemen.

To the south, Israel faced threats from terrorist organizations including Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and ISIS-Sinai. Rocket attacks originating from Gaza resulted in four deaths and dozens of injuries in 2019.

2019 Terrorist Incidents: Israel experienced numerous terrorist attacks in 2019 involving weapons ranging from rockets and mortars to small arms and knives. The following is a partial list of terrorist incidents that occurred in 2019:

- On February 7, an assailant violently assaulted and stabbed to death 19-year-old Ori Ansbacher in the EinYael forest near Jerusalem. Police arrested Arafat Irfiya, a 29-year-old Palestinian man from Hebron and reported he admitted the attack was “nationalistically motivated.”
- Hamas and other terrorist groups including PIJ launched more than 1,000 rockets and mortar shells from Gaza toward Israel during the year, some of which landed in civilian areas. **For details, see “West Bank and Gaza” section below.**

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: Israel has a robust legal framework to combat terrorism and promote international legal assistance in the investigation and prosecution of terrorists. In December, the defense minister signed the first executive order placing economic restrictions on assets of an individual connected to terrorism: Mohammad Jamil, a Hamas activist living in the United Kingdom.

Israeli security forces took numerous significant law enforcement actions against suspected terrorists and terrorist groups. The following examples represent some of the law enforcement actions taken in 2019:

- On October 28, Border Police officers arrested two ISIS members who planned a terrorist attack either in Jerusalem or against an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) army base in the Jordan Valley with the intention to kill as many civilians and military personnel as possible.
- In June, Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) arrested an Israeli Bedouin supporter of Hamas, who planned to bomb a hotel in southern Ashdod.
- On August 6, Israeli security forces arrested three members of a Hamas bomb team, thwarting a major plot targeting Jerusalem.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Israel remains a full member of the FATF. Israel’s FIU, the Israeli Money Laundering and Terror Finance Prohibition Authority, is a member of the Egmont Group.

In accordance with the Israeli Deduction Law, the Ministry of Defense announced in February 2019 that it would withhold \$138 million (\$12 million a month) from monthly tax revenue Israel collects and transfers to the Palestinian Authority (PA), which is the amount Israel determined the PA paid in 2018 to Palestinians connected to terrorism, including Palestinian terrorists in Israeli prison and released Palestinian terrorists. The PA responded to

Israel’s withholding by refusing to accept any of its remaining tax revenues from Israel, representing about 65 percent of the PA’s budget. As the PA’s fiscal situation worsened, the PA eventually agreed in October 2019 to accept its remaining tax revenues.

In December 2019, Israel announced that it would withhold an additional \$43 million from PA revenues for payments the PA provided during 2018 to families of Palestinians who were wounded or died while committing terrorist acts or in connection with terrorism. Israel also seized funds the PA paid to eight Israeli Arabs convicted of terrorism and their families. The PA argues these payments are social payments for families who have lost their primary breadwinner. The United States and Israel argue the payments incentivize and reward terrorism, with higher monthly payments for lengthier prison sentences tied to more severe crimes.

Countering Violent Extremism: The Ministry of Public Security supported and funded Israel’s flagship City Without Violence initiative. One hundred fifty-one municipalities implemented education and social welfare projects to counter violence, crime, and terrorism. The program emphasized partnerships with the Israel National Police, with the goal of reducing violence and increasing citizen-police communication.

The president of Israel’s initiative, Israeli Hope, in cooperation with government ministries, established a sustainable partnership across different segments of Israeli society, focusing on projects ranging from education to employment to sports. The sports initiative, with the cooperation of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, implemented programs aimed at countering racism and reducing violence in collaboration with professional soccer clubs and players.

International and Regional Cooperation: According to media reports, Israeli intelligence helped Denmark foil a series of terror attacks, resulting in 22 arrests in December. Other media reports stated that Israeli intelligence officials helped foil more than 50 terrorist attacks planned worldwide by Iran and its proxies, as well as by ISIS, during the 2017-2019 period.

The West Bank and Gaza

Overview: The Palestinian Authority continued its counterterrorism and law enforcement efforts in the West Bank, where Hamas, PIJ, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) remained active. PA officials continued to make inconsistent statements about a commitment to non-violence. The PA security forces constrained the ability of terrorist organizations and individuals to conduct attacks, in part by arrests targeting those planning attacks against Israelis. Per Oslo-era agreements, the PA exercised varying degrees of authority over the West Bank owing to the presence of IDF in certain areas, as well as frequent Israeli entry into PA-controlled areas for counterterrorism operations. The IDF and Shin Bet also arrested individuals and members of terrorist organizations operating in the West Bank.

The United States continued to coordinate with PA security forces in counterterrorism efforts. U.S. advisory support assisted the PA as it continued to develop professional security forces capable of some, but not all, counterterrorism functions.

The number of Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israelis in the West Bank in 2019 was in line with rates in recent years and lower than rates during the heightened period of violence from October 2015 to April 2016. Methods employed included stabbings, shootings, bombings, and vehicular attacks.

Some Israelis committed retaliatory “price tag” attacks involving property crimes and other violent acts against Palestinians in the West Bank in 2019. For example, in November 2019, “price tag” attacks were reported in multiple Palestinian villages in which vehicles were vandalized and olive tree groves were destroyed.

Hamas maintained control of Gaza in 2019. Several militant groups, including Hamas and PIJ, launched rocket attacks against Israel from Gaza, including significant attacks against Israel in May. PIJ led other large attacks against Israel in November and members of PIJ committed suicide attacks against Hamas civil police. During weekly protests at the Israel-Gaza security fence with Israel, Palestinians threw Molotov cocktails and IEDs, and they launched incendiary balloons and devices towards Israel, damaging farms and nature preserves. According to the head of Israel’s Eshkol regional council, the total damage in 2019 was estimated at \$3.46 million. Hamas and PIJ terror tunneling activities continued.

2019 Terrorist Incidents: The following are representative examples of some of the terrorist incidents:

- Hamas and other terrorist groups including PIJ launched more than 1,000 rockets and mortar shells from Gaza toward Israel during the year, some of which landed in civilian areas. The IDF confirmed that the Iron Dome, Israel’s air defense system, intercepted most of these projectiles.
- In March, a rocket from Gaza hit a house in Kfar Saba, injuring seven people including grandparents and three children.
- Also in March, at the Ariel junction in the West Bank, a Palestinian stabbed an IDF soldier, grabbed his weapon, and shot him. As he escaped, the assailant shot and killed a civilian and wounded another soldier before briefly escaping and ultimately being killed in a shootout with the IDF.
- In May, during a barrage of 690 rockets and mortars from Gaza, six Israelis were killed. In July, a Palestinian man crashed his car into a group of five IDF soldiers and wounded them near the Hizma check point.

- In August, Palestinians detonated a homemade bomb in a public area near Ramallah, killing an Israeli teenager and wounding her father and brother. According to Shin Bet, the suspects were members of the PFLP.
- Also in August, two suicide bombers detonated themselves near police checkpoints in Gaza City, killing three police officers and wounding three other Palestinians.
- Also in August, two Palestinian men were arrested for stabbing to death an 18-year-old Yeshiva student near Gush Etzion Junction.
- During November 12-13, 562 rockets and mortars were fired from Gaza into Israel, forcing schools to close and civilians to take shelter in affected areas.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: The PA lacked comprehensive legislation specifically tailored to counterterrorism, although existing Palestinian laws criminalize actions that constitute terrorist acts. Presidential decrees prohibit incitement to violence, illegal associations, providing financial support to terrorist groups, and acts that run counter to Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) agreements with other states (an indirect reference to the Oslo Accords with Israel). The Palestinian legislature, the Palestinian Legislative Council, was dissolved in December 2018 and is therefore unable to pass new laws. Governance is managed by presidential decree. NGOs claimed that at times the PA made arbitrary arrests based on political acts and affiliation, including criticism of the PA online.

The Preventive Security Organization is the key PA institution that works to prevent West Bank terrorist attacks and investigates security-related criminal conduct. In practice, the General Intelligence Organization also plays a critical role in this effort, as does, to a lesser extent, the Military Intelligence Organization.

Per previous agreements, Israel retained control of border security across the West Bank and general security throughout Area C, which encompasses a majority of the West Bank.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: The PA is a member of MENAFATF, a Financial Action Task Force-style regional body, and will next be reviewed in 2020. The Palestinian Financial Follow-Up Unit (FFU) is the PA’s FIU. Banks file suspicious transaction reports (STRs) and currency transaction reports electronically through the FFU computer system. In 2019, banks, law enforcement agencies, and other entities filed approximately 160 STRs (year to date, December 11, 2019) compared with 124 in 2018.

In 2019, the Palestinian Monetary Authority launched a new banking system, titled Know Your Customer, designed to help keep track of the sources and recipients of financial transactions to facilitate transparency, ensure customs duty collection, and comply with anti-money laundering laws.

Countering Violent Extremism: Official PA media, TV, and social media accounts affiliated with the ruling political movement Fatah have featured content praising or condoning acts of terrorism, and Palestinian leaders did not consistently publicly condemn individual terrorist attacks. President Mahmoud Abbas has stated in the past a commitment to non-violence, a two-state solution, and previous PLO commitments, but he has also made inconsistent statements that appear to contradict and undermine his prior commitments. Abbas said on Palestinian media on March 24, “We want to achieve our right and our state peacefully... We will not choose a path other than negotiations to achieve our right.” But according to translation by MEMRI, Abbas said on August 10, “So we say to them: ‘Every stone you [used] to build on our land and every house you have built on our land is bound to be destroyed, Allah willing... Jerusalem is ours whether they like it or not... We shall enter Jerusalem – millions of fighters! We shall enter it! All of us, the entire Palestinian people, the entire Arab nation, the Islamic nation, and the Christian nation... They shall all enter Jerusalem...’”

International and Regional Cooperation: PA justice, security leaders, and PA security force personnel continued to participate in regional conferences and meetings to combat terrorism.

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Austrian Red Cross Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)	Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien T (Telephone) +43 1 589 00 583 F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589 info@ecoi.net	Contact Imprint & Disclaimer F.A.Q. Data Protection Notice
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