**Abstract**

During the 1980s, conventional warfare between state armies was superseded by a new prototype – armies fighting terrorist organizations. In this kind of armed conflict, some of the operations are carried out in the open, while others are conducted in secret. Since its establishment, the State of Israel has been forced to contend with terrorist activity that has claimed many victims. Terrorist organizations have changed their tactics and methods, mainly for the sake of terrorizing and harming civilians and soldiers within the country, at its borders and even overseas. The government of Israel and its various security apparatus have therefore faced new challenges over the years and have been forced to frequently re-examine realities in their effort to develop policies and tools to combat terrorism. In 2000, with the outbreak of the Second Intifada, the Israeli government and the security establishment faced an extremely complex challenge. Political demonstrations on the Palestinian street and violent riots swiftly gave way to organized activity by terrorist organizations, culminating in indiscriminate suicide bombings. As part of its struggle against terrorism, the security establishment developed the use of targeted killings.

This study pursues the question of how Israel's targeted killings policy developed over the years 2000-2012 as part of the struggle against Palestinian terrorism in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, further examining how the Israeli security establishment, its political echelon, and the Palestinian terrorist organizations acted within this context. The study examines the officials who were involved in developing this policy, the decision-making process, the importance of targeted killings for overall counter-terrorism activities, the legal and political criticism of the policy, and even the use of targeted killings in the United States since 9/11, during the presidencies of George W. Bush and President Barack Obama. The main research hypothesis was that the targeted killings carried out by Israel constituted tactical and strategic weapons in a campaign to stop Palestinian terrorism.

The research question was pursued by analyzing dozens of case studies – targeted killings carried out by Israel against Palestinian terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank during the years 2000-2012. The research methodology is based on primary and secondary sources, books and publications from Israel and abroad, academic articles, and a large number of personal interviews I held with senior political and security officials, some of whom even participated directly in the development of the targeted killings policy. In addition, I held interviews with senior Palestinian officials and even with a diplomat from a hostile Muslim country.

For the purpose of the analysis, I developed a model with eight variables that served as the basis for the development of the targeted killings policy: intelligence gathering; intelligence- and operational cooperation between IDF units, the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet), the Israel Police, and the Mossad; the process of selecting targets; unique attack cells and creative joint operations; the chosen methods of operation; and the reactions of terrorist organizations to targeted killings in different time periods.

The first part of the study includes a theoretical review – the background to Israel's targeted killings policy during the examined period (from the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, to 2012). The second part provides an overview of how Palestinian terrorism was dealt with in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; of the targeted killings of dozens of leaders, activists from the political and military echelons; and of the integration of diverse types of operations and an array of security apparatus. The third part of the study reviews the following topics: the targeted killings policy vis-à-vis the legal system; the construction of the separation barrier as part of Israel’s counter-terrorism campaign; and the targeted killings policy of the United States, for the purpose of reinforcing and validating the research findings and resulting insights. The fourth and final part includes a discussion of the findings, presentation of the research outcomes, and conclusion.

This study is innovative in that it offers a comprehensive analysis of dozens of case studies, examining diverse aspects – decision making processes, policy changes, as well as military, security, political, and legal developments. Previous studies on the subject dealt with periods of only up to a few years and examined a small number of targeted killings.

The study’s main finding is that the targeted killings policy was an extremely influential strategic and tactical weapon in Israel's campaign against Palestinian terrorism in 2000-2012. Targeted killings led to the death of junior and senior activists, among them leaders and instigators of terrorist organizations, and helped weaken these organizations and disrupt their activities. On the strategic level, targeted killings created conditions that enabled cross-conflict dialogue, agreements, and ceasefires. However, as early as the beginning of 2000, the heads of the security establishment emphasized that this was a limited tool and therefore sought to employ additional mechanisms, such as restoring freedom of action to the IDF in the West Bank, arrests and interrogations, and the construction of the security barrier.

This study also examines the targeted killings policy of the United States. The analysis reinforces the hypothesis that there are obvious similarities between the Israeli and American policies of targeted killing, as well as their effectiveness as counter-terrorism measures. Former US President George W. Bush, who initially opposed the Israeli targeted killings policy, eventually approved it as an American counter-terrorism measure and promoted it. This was followed by instructive frameworks for the purpose of learning from the Israeli security establishment, as this study demonstrates. President Barack Obama adopted his predecessor's policy, making it a key tool in the war on terrorism.

This study could serve as a basis for future research on this topic, such as on the development of the targeted killings policy in light of new challenges faced by Israel, or the utilization of advanced intelligence- and operational technologies.