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Research Proposal

**The Threat of Assassination of Senior Political and Military Officials by Terrorist Organizations:**

**Lessons to NATO from the Israeli Experience**

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in 1999, NATO has identified terrorism as a main threat to its members' security. Since 11 September attack on 2001, NATO's involvement and attention to counterterrorism aspect has gradually increased and in the 2010 Lisbon Summit it was decided to commit NATO Allies to enhance their efforts and capabilities to detect, analyze and thwart terrorism. Since then, this issue was discussed in summits, meetings, and policy papers. Nowadays, NATO focuses its counterterrorism efforts in three main aspects: Awareness of the terrorist threat, development of capabilities to prevent, protect against and respond to terrorist threats, and engagement in order to strengthen the cooperation of NATO Allies with partner countries and other international actors.

The history of terrorist organizations shows that they have made extensive use of the tactic of targeted killings of political and military officials and of key civilian figures in their conflicts with enemy states. A review of Nato's open sources literature on terrorism indicates that this threat has not received much attention so far. For example, there is no article dealing with this topic on the 11 Volumes of the DATR Journal, as well as other publications of Nato.[[1]](#footnote-1) Even books dealing widely on NATO's role in counterterrorism, such as James W. peterson's "NATO and terrorism organizational expansion and mission transformation"[[2]](#footnote-2), did not devote to this aspect in-depth analysis.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The purpose of this proposed research is to explore the phenomenon of assassination operations conducted by terrorist organizations in the Middle East as a base for raising NATO's Allies awareness to this phenomenon as well as create an infrastructure for drafting a policy dealing with this threat. It applies several case studies from the Israeli environment – the activities of Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist organizations –in order to identify and analyze the underpinnings of this phenomenon and the way it relates to NATO. It will examine the motivation and goals for these operations, the methods for gathering information and conducting the assassinations, and the influence of the assassinations on the dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflict, as means to translate the Israeli codes of conduct into clear-cut simple policy implications.

Throughout the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, terrorist organizations have made attempts to assassinate Israeli officials, with information available about a few dozen such attempts in recent decades alone. The successful assassination attempts have involved information gathering, operational planning, and actual execution. However, many other planned assassinations never reached the action stage, often because of Israeli counterintelligence and countermeasures. Some of the more notorious successful cases of terrorist assassinations include the attack on the Israeli diplomat Shlomo Argov in London by Palestinian Abu Nidal's organization (1982), which left Argov paralyzed, and the assassinations of Brigadier General Erez Gerstein by Hizballah in South Lebanon (1999), and of Israel’s Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze'evi by the Palestinian PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) in Jerusalem (2001). More recent examples are Hizballah's gathering information as a part of assassination planning against Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenzi (2009) and Hamas' planning and gathering information for assassinating Israeli Minister of Defense Avigdor Liberman (2014). The latter constitutes an interesting modus operandi for possible targeting of NATO Defense Ministers.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is an appropriate case study for exploring this phenomenon for two main reasons. First, the conflict has spanned many decades and has been marked by numerous events, including both attempted and successful assassinations. Second, a great number of terrorist organizations, using different kinds of assassination operations have been involved in the conflict. For these reasons, it is a suitable platform for NATO for learning on this phenomenon with a variety of perspective.

This research is based on a variety of sources, in Hebrew, Arabic and English, including official publications of Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist organizations and official Israeli sources, such as judicial proceedings, some of which have not yet received serious attention in the research literature. Some secondary literature and journalistic sources will be used to supply the necessary background and to provide a more comprehensive overview of the subject.

In conclusion, on the policy level, by expanding the base of knowledge of the threat posed by terrorist organizations and by bringing it to NATO public policy-making awareness, this research can serve as an important resource for NATO Members in formulating a strategy to cope with this threat. On the academic level, this research represents a unique opportunity to explore an interesting aspect of the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict that has not been adequately studied to date. It also offers new insights in the field of terrorism research.

1. Although there are a few mentions of assassination operations conducted by terror organization, as in the paper of Michael Smith, The Nature of Contemporary Terrorism and Dimensions that Terrorism Reached", in 'Proceedings of the First International Symposium in Global Terrorism and International Cooperation (Ankara, 23-24 March 2006), pp. 35-58 , it is done as part of a discussion of other topics. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. New York: Continuum, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In fact. The words "assassination/assassinating" do not appear in the book even once. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)