

PeaceWatch #533 : Special Forum Report

Lessons from the Fight against Terrorism

Featuring [Moshe Yaalon](#), Avi Dichter, and [Dennis Ross](#)
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[Read](#) Institute military fellow Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog's (IDF) discussion of the historical and ethical aspects of director Steven Spielberg's film *Munich*.

On December 15, 2005, Lt. Gen. (ret.) Moshe Yaalon, Avi Dichter, and Ambassador Dennis Ross addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. General Yaalon, a distinguished military fellow at the Institute, is the former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff. Mr. Dichter, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy, is the former head of the Israeli Security Agency (Shin Bet). Ambassador Ross, the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow, is a former U.S. Middle East peace envoy and author of The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace (2004). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Moshe Yaalon

Successful counterterrorism efforts must satisfy moral imperatives and strategic objectives. Prior to analyzing responses to terrorism, however, legal considerations are at the forefront.

Israel considers the morality of counterterrorist measures within the framework of three tests: the “mirror” test, in which the counterterrorist executor asks whether the policy meets his own ethical standards; the “our own society” test, in which a policymaker must consider whether the policy meets the moral standards of his broader society; and the “international” test, which considers whether the policy satisfies internationally recognized moral standards, as well as what would be the response of the international community.

Strategic considerations in counterterrorist operations must account for the absence of an exclusively military “knockout” option against terrorism. Policymakers must therefore operate on two fronts against terrorism: the short-term battle against the terrorists, and the long-term battle to win the hearts and minds of their constituents.

The short-term battle against the terrorists is ultimately a cost-benefit analysis of lives lost versus lives saved by a given operation. Preventing collateral damage while targeting terrorists is therefore essential; during the past five years of conflict, Israel often declined to attack terrorist leaders when they were in densely populated areas for fear of inflicting collateral damage. Terrorism can be fought surgically—focusing exclusively on the terrorists—by achieving three advantages: intelligence dominance, which includes the capability to intercept terrorists, foil their financial support systems, and prevent the smuggling of weapons; information dominance, which includes the ability to deliver the intelligence to decision makers, so intelligence can be used effectively and quickly; and operational flexibility and creativity, which include the ability of all arms of the military to arrest or kill terrorists on short notice.

In the fight against Palestinian terrorism, the consequence for not acting against terrorists due to concern for civilian casualties was often more terrorist attacks and Israeli deaths. This complicated the cost-benefit analysis of lives lost versus lives saved. The attention given to minimizing civilian casualties and civilian

hardships during a war against terrorism, however, is the driving force behind the long-term battle for the hearts and minds. Decision makers must always be cognizant of implications of counterterrorism for the terrorists' constituents; measures that do not adequately consider the hardships imposed on civilians will neither create greater security nor advance the long-term vision of peaceful coexistence in the region.

Effective counterterrorism should be based on two guiding principles. The first of these is that the best defense is a good offense. Israeli counterstrikes on Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) bases in Syria and Lebanon following the Munich Olympics attacks, which disrupted PLO capabilities, were effective uses of force and deterred future terrorist incidents. Israel has further exemplified this principle since the April 2002 Operation Defensive Shield, when the IDF moved from the defensive to the offensive, including the use of targeted killings as an offensive tool. It should be emphasized that the targeted killings in the aftermath of Munich and those since April 2002 serve different purposes: while both deterred future attacks, the former were additionally intended to punish, while the latter were intended to preempt, terrorist attacks.

The second key principle of counterterrorism is the imperative never to surrender to terrorism. Following the Munich attacks, the Israeli government refused to surrender to the terrorists' demands; this was in contrast to the actions of the German government, which released three of the terrorists it had arrested after the Black September organization hijacked a Lufthansa airliner.

Avi Dichter

The major goal of counterterrorism must be to thwart terrorist attacks before they happen. The preferable method of thwarting terrorism is to arrest terrorist leaders and operatives, both of whom can be excellent sources of intelligence regarding future attacks. However, when terrorists are threatening to attack and cannot be apprehended, Israel has undertaken a policy of targeted killings. In contrast to the portrayal of counterterrorism in Steven Spielberg's *Munich*, targeted killings are not executed to punish terrorists who are no longer considered to be threats.

Targeted killings have served two purposes in Israel's fight against terrorism. First, targeted killings have been effective in creating disarray within terrorist organizations, thereby significantly undermining their ability to organize and attack. The current *tahdiya*—period of calm—unilaterally declared by Hamas in January 2005 is an example of the success of targeting terrorist leaders: Hamas's leadership in the West Bank was demolished, much of its leadership in Gaza had fled as fugitives, and, as a result, Hamas was no longer an effective terrorist organization.

Targeted killings have served a second purpose by effectively creating a deterrent for future attacks. Israeli counterstrikes against the Black September terrorists in the wake of the Munich attacks, for example, succeeded in sharply curbing Palestinian terrorism during the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, with terrorist threats against Israel emanating from regional terrorist hosts—mainly Iran, Syria, and Lebanon—targeting terrorists serves to undermine their sense of security.

Despite their success, targeted killings are not the most effective means of cracking down on terrorism. More effective counterterrorism requires cooperation with the terrorist organization's host government. In pursuit of this policy, during the early stages of the intifada, the Israeli Security Agency opted to keep its communication channels with Palestinian security services open. On occasions when the ISA informed Palestinian security services regarding the locations of known terrorists poised to strike, however, Palestinian security officials declined to arrest the terrorists, fearing retribution from the terrorist organizations against their own families. Before the security situation in Israel improves, the Palestinians must put the priorities of the state above their families. Currently, the Palestinian Authority is stronger than Hamas in Gaza, but lacks the will to fight.

The movie *Munich* makes terrorism and counterterrorism look like a child's game. The distinction of principle between terrorism and counterterrorism must therefore be emphasized: where terrorists take a panoramic view of their targets—seeking to kill as many Israelis as possible, even if it means killing Palestinian civilians in the

process—counterterrorism policymakers focus precisely on their targets and work to minimize all other casualties.

Dennis Ross

Targeted killings serve two primary purposes. First, targeted killings may deter terror by demonstrating that those who are responsible for organizing terror attacks cannot do so with impunity. Second, by forcing terrorists to hide and take extra security precautions, targeted killings may disrupt terrorist organizations and acts of terror because they make it far harder for terrorists to communicate, organize, and plan attacks.

In the cost-benefit analysis of counterterrorism, however, targeted killings come with a price. One has to weigh whether killing a particular terrorist leader creates a martyr and serves as a rallying cry for local publics, thereby making it easier for terrorist groups to recruit many new followers. In this sense, as General Yaalon has said, since terror cannot be defeated only by military means, one has to consider the effect that a targeted killing will have on the larger struggle to win hearts and minds.

An additional consideration to bear in mind when conducting the cost-benefit analysis of whether to carry out a targeted killing is the effect the act is likely to have on the ability and willingness of a putative partner to take its own counterterrorism steps. For example, Palestinian security officials often complained to me that Israeli targeted killings hurt their ability to command the public support necessary to go after known militants. (Of course, the Israelis often countered that they would not have to conduct targeted killings if Palestinian leaders or security forces showed the slightest readiness to take steps on their own.)

In short, the essential point is that policymakers need to evaluate targeted killings on a case-by-case basis. Targeted killings are a necessary tool for fighting terrorism. But before conducting them, policymakers must engage in a serious cost-benefit analysis. Policymakers would also be wise to conduct a serious lessons-learned analysis to evaluate whether targeted killings in the past produced the expected ends, which ones were the most successful, and why those targeted killings produced positive results.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Eric Trager.

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