Weapons, weapons everywhere – why?

written by David M. Weinberg | 08.09.2023

As Israel moves this month to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Oslo Accords, note the following great failure, the failure to prevent the militarization of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and Gaza, and by extension Arab communities in Israel.

It is painfully obvious that Israel is suffering from a gargantuan wave of terrorist and criminal violence facilitated and fueled in part by the unbearable ease of obtaining weapons; by the insanely widespread availability of weapons. The weapons available to every terrorist and criminal gang are increasingly advanced, sophisticated, and professional grade.

The results are horrific: Close to 40 Israeli Jews killed in Palestinian terror attacks in 2023, and over 170 Israeli Arabs and Bedouin Arabs killed by other Arabs in crime related and gang violence. Despite all IDF counter-terror operations and police interdiction efforts, the proliferation of weaponry is on the sharp rise and so is the murder rate. This is both a critical security issue and a cardinal societal matter; a crisis of monstrous proportions.

Ask any government or military official just how much unlicensed and illegal weaponry is on the loose in Israel (primarily in Israeli and Bedouin Arab communities) and in Palestinian areas, and you will not get an answer. Nobody knows for sure, and estimates vary from "massive" to "berserk" and "unlimited" amounts. More than a decade ago, police estimates stood at half a million weapons, and since then, well, only G-d knows how many more weapons are out there.

Where has all the weaponry come from? According to a State Comptroller's report from 2019, there are multiple sources: Cross-border smuggling, local manufacture, theft from IDF bases, theft from Israeli homes, and more. Iran is publicly claiming "credit" for a percentage of the weapons inflow, and it is certainly funding much of it.

(In August 2022, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Hossein Salami

bragged how he was driving weapons to Palestinians engaged in "jihad" against Israel, adding that just as Iran managed to send weapons to Gaza in the past, "the West Bank can be armed in the same way, and this process is happening.")

The smuggling of weapons from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt appears to be the current greatest challenge. A July study entitled "Guns, Drugs, and Smugglers: A Recent Heightened Challenge at Israel's Borders with Jordan and Egypt" by Dr. Matthew Levitt and Lauren Von Thaden of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point of the US Army) indicates that for every smuggling attempt identified, thwarted, or disrupted by Israeli authorities, a vast number of other smuggling forays get through successfully without authorities ever learning about them.

Sure, Israeli guards along the Jordan border have over the past two years intercepted 1,600 weapons destined for Palestinian terrorists and Arab criminal gangs in 26 separate smuggling attempts.

In April this included a Jordanian parliament member who was caught trying to smuggle 200 weapons into the West Bank. In June, this included professional grade Iranian-made explosives.

But IDF officials admitted to the American researchers that the Jordanian border is long and porous, and that most of the time the IDF's Bedouin trackers discover cross-border incursions only after the fact. Despite the enormity of the problem, only one division of IDF troops holds down the entire Jordanian border from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, and only one division more patrols the Arava from the Dead Sea down to Eilat.

Occasionally, the army and/or the police will trumpet a particularly large arms shipment interdiction or sizable cache of arms that was discovered and seized in the Negev, Galilee, or West Bank. In 2022, this amounted to over 500 guns and rifles plus mines and IEDs, hand and stun grenades, and bricks of explosives; up by more than a third for 2021. Ninety-two percent of the arms smugglers and dealers that were arrested were Arab or Palestinian.

But all this is what in Yiddish is termed "*kleinigkeit*," or small potatoes. It is a drop in the bucket. Weapons continue to be easily smuggled-in to Israel in substantial numbers. They also are being stolen from Israeli depots with alacrity. Last October, 30,000 bullets were stolen from ammunition warehouses in the

IDF's Sde Teiman base in the south. In November, 70,000 bullets and 70 grenades were stolen from an IDF base in the Golan Heights in the north.

(Israeli interdiction efforts have had an impact, if at all, only on the price of weaponry available to crime syndicates and terrorist groups. A single 9mm bullet for a handgun might today cost as much as $10. Handguns reportedly cost $13,000 to $23,000 on the black market, depending on age, type, and condition. The same weapon, legally obtained in Israel, costs around $1,350. The price of an M4 rifle has shot-up to about $30,000 compared to only $5,000 in Lebanon; the Kalashnikov assault rifle costs about $20,000; and an old M16 rifle sells for about $16,000. As a result, according to the IDF, Bedouin and Arab smugglers can make a profit of around $60,000 from one smuggling operation, and Egyptian smugglers can earn $30,000.)

THE DIRTY SECRET behind the untamed epidemic of weapons now plaguing Israel is that it all started with the Oslo Accords when Israel agreed to give the Palestinian Authority (PA) arms. There is a direct line that runs from Oslo to the current Israeli Wild West situation.

Israel provided Yasser Arafat's police force with tens of thousands of rifles and hundreds of tons of ammunition. These weapons soon ended-up in the shooting arms of Arafat's 16 different declared security organizations and many other declared and undeclared terrorist factions.

At first, Israel sought to monitor and therefore control the use of its weapons in the Palestinian Authority by registering the ballistic signature of every gun and rifle before transferring them to Arafat. But the Oslo-era enthusiasm for "strengthening" the Palestinian Authority led to more and more helter-skelter arms handovers, with Israel soon losing track of the weapons.

The US and other Western countries involved in providing security assistance and training to the PA also were supposed to have a handle on this, but they too soon lost track of the swelling armories of Yasser Arafat and his multiple organizations of gunmen.

Much of this Israeli-provided weaponry was directed at Israeli civilians and IDF troops during the so-called Second Intifada, leading to the need for Operation Defensive Shield in 2002.

For a while, this operation indeed led a renewed tight Israeli grip on the flow of weaponry into and within Palestinian areas. But in 2004 then-Minister of Defense Shaul Mofaz re-approved gun licenses for all PA police officers. Over the years since, and under American pressure to ease-up on the PA and "strengthen" Arafat's successor Mahmoud Abbas, the IDF has further relented, leading to the current weapons-loose state of affairs.

Today, the Israeli Arab/Bedouin and Palestinian Arab weapons economy is thoroughly integrated, with smugglers, thieves, manufacturers, and suppliers such as the Iranians, servicing both the terrorist and criminal markets interchangeably and interdependently.

For this, I blame Israeli military leaders going back three decades who not only soft-pedalled the dangers of Oslo, but also promised Israelis a demilitarized West Bank and Gaza under all political circumstances.

I blame three decades of military experts in charge of securing Israel's borders, which as detailed above, alas, are perfectly porous.

I blame police officials in charge of law and order in Israel's minority communities, which everybody knows have become mafia fiefdoms with nightly shootouts.

All these security officials have utterly failed in their core tasks over the past 30 years. One more aspect of the sad Oslo legacy.

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