

Opinion – Why Is Hamas Not Conducting More Suicide Attacks?

Written by Joseph Mroszczyk

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JOSEPH MROSZCZYK, FEB 22 2024

Historically, Hamas has been known for its use of suicide attacks in their campaigns of terror targeting Israel since the early 1990s. The group conducted approximately 40% of the 135 suicide attacks during the Second Intifada between 2000 and 2005 and has killed 857 people in their suicide bombings between 1987 and 2020. Given this record of employing suicide tactics to deadly effect, it is puzzling to observe that Hamas did not use suicide tactics during its October 7 attacks on Israel and is not using them more frequently in subsequent fighting against Israeli forces in Gaza. What can explain this apparent shift in tactical approach?

Terrorism scholars have long cited the operational advantages of suicide attacks to explain why terrorist groups—particularly jihadist groups—have adopted this tactic around the world. Despite the costs associated with this tactic, namely the loss of a trained operative from a group's ranks, terrorist groups might derive significant tactical benefits that outweigh those costs. These benefits include uniquely high lethality rates, the ability to instill more fear into a targeted population, and the attention-grabbing quality of suicide attacks that nearly guarantees media attention. Assuming terrorist group leaders are rational actors seeking to maximize the effects of their violence, it is not surprising why this tactic has proliferated worldwide.

Yet, despite this presumed record of effectiveness, Hamas has apparently made the strategic decision to limit the use of suicide tactics against either Israeli civilians or security forces. It is challenging to gather data on how many suicide attacks the group has carried out since fighting began in Gaza as reporting is largely unconfirmed or anecdotal, but this tactic has not been a prominent component of their campaign and was not part of their siege on Israel on October 7. For now, it is impossible to know for sure why Hamas has not been using suicide attacks widely in their recent operations. The study of suicide terrorism is plagued by a number of methodological problems, particularly the lack of access to group leaders to discuss their decision-making criteria. However, based on existing research on terrorism, at least three factors may have contributed to this decision to not rely on suicide tactics.

First, Hamas leaders have learned that siege-style terrorist attacks have their own unique benefits that outweigh those of suicide attacks. Terrorist groups have used sieges to great effect over the years. Perhaps most notably, in November 2008 gunmen with the group Lashkar-e-Taiba conducted a multi-day siege attack in Mumbai, India, killing 164 people at hotels, a hospital, a community center, a train station, and other locations. The attack had international effects, even increasing fear of terrorism in geographically distant areas. Speaking about the impacts of the Mumbai attacks, Donald N. Van Duyn, the former Chief Intelligence Officer for the FBI noted that that terrorist groups look for what works, and the Mumbai attack was “clearly successful, so I think we can expect that [other] groups will look to that as a model for themselves.”

Perhaps as expected, other terrorist groups around the world adopted siege-style attacks to deadly effect in the following years. In November 2015, the Islamic State conducted an hours-long siege-style attack on Paris, using gunmen and suicide bombers to kill 130 people and injure hundreds of others across the city. The attack prompted the French government to expand its fight against the terror group in Syria and to strengthen counter-terrorism measures across the country.

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Other terror groups like al-Shabaab, Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jamma'ah in Mozambique, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM), and others have used siege-style attacks to maximize carnage, command prolonged media attention, and intensify the psychological impact on their targeted populations. In al-Shabaab's hours-long siege on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi in September 2013, the group even live-Tweeted the events, issuing threats and reporting on their carnage in real-time to maximize the psychological impact of their violence.

Hamas' cross-border siege on Israel on October 7 was the latest example of how deadly this style of attack can be (it was by far the deadliest attack in Israeli history) and how challenging they are to both prevent and stop. Sieges allow a group to conduct multiple attacks against various targets using diverse tactics over the course of hours or days, enabling them to maximize lethality and ensure sustained media coverage. Hamas also leveraged the attacks for propaganda purposes, filming portions of the siege to release to the public in the following days and weeks. This media coverage has been described as the "oxygen" of terrorism.

Second, Hamas has sought to preserve its force rather than sacrifice its fighters in suicide operations. My research finds that while suicide attacks may kill more victims on average than non-suicide attacks, they also come at high organizational costs, killing more terrorists in the process than non-suicide attacks. If Hamas intended to provoke Israel into a follow-on fight in Gaza, it makes sense why they chose not to sacrifice their operatives using suicide attacks on October 7. Preserving their limited fighting force for future operations by refraining from suicide attacks makes strategic sense for Hamas leaders.

Similarly, with the ongoing fighting in Gaza, Hamas must preserve its ranks in order to maintain a viable fighting force even after Israeli forces withdraw. The opportunity costs of sacrificing operatives in suicide attacks has risen tremendously as those fighters are needed for future operations, given that it may take years to replenish its ranks with fresh recruits. Hamas leaders must strategically employ its limited force and this may have reduced the appeal of suicide missions.

Third, Hamas has thus far not used suicide attacks to any effect in their fighting against Israeli forces in Gaza because of the limited propaganda advantages they would have. Suicide tactics are acts of both terror and theater. On the media-restricted frontlines of the fighting in Gaza, there is a limited audience in front of which suicide bombers can perform. This reduces the tactic to pure military utility, and it is challenging to think how suicide bombs would have any material effect on the fighting. Suicide tactics have historically been useful in assassinations, mass casualty bombings, and in breaching hardened perimeters. They are less militarily useful in fighting a quantitatively and qualitatively superior force in sustained urban combat. Without the propaganda value, suicide tactics may have little appeal to Hamas leadership.

Should we expect Hamas to increase their use of suicide tactics as fighting continues? Possibly. As this initial stage of fighting culminates and transitions to the next phase of operations, which likely will involve some sort of Israeli occupation force, Hamas leaders may rediscover the value of suicide bombing as a propaganda tool. Suicide attacks can strengthen intra-group cohesion, increase popular support for the group, and even help with recruitment. Hamas may need all three as it attempts to rebuild in the coming months and years. As Hamas fighters transition from fighting Israeli forces on the battlefields of Gaza to conducting a counter-occupation campaign, suicide tactics may have more appeal as their propaganda efforts increase.

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