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The Mechanism of “Targeted Killing” as a Part of Israeli Counter-Terrorism Policy

Abstract

Key words: Counterterrorism, Deterrence, Targeted Killings, Terrorist Organizations.

The uniqueness of this research study is the attempt to offer other perspectives regarding the mechanism of “targeted killing” and its influence on factors of terrorism. One of the reasons for carrying out the research study lies in the essential difference of the world of the culture and values of the free and democratic countries, which is contradictory to the values of terrorism. The tendency in the research literature, including the legal literature, is to accept “targeted killing”, but with limitations. This research study discussed at-length the topic of the effective fight against terrorism and the use as a last option of the mechanism of targeted killing by democratic countries, with emphasis on Israel, during the Al-Aqsa Intifada in the years 2000-2009.

This research study addressed the rules of international law that balance between the humanitarian considerations and human rights and the military considerations. There is a conflict between human rights and state security. Counterterrorism activity is examined in two ways, harm to the terrorists carrying out the attack and/or to the commanders as self-defense, in aspects of morality and in aspects of law. It becomes clear that this possibility is legitimate, since it will cause the terrorist commanders to consider their steps, in light of the direct influence on them. In the research study it became clear that during the Al-Aksa Intifada and the researched period about 127 targeted assassination operations were carried out, in which 212 terrorists were killed, including field operatives and commanders at different levels, when the most senior was the leader of the Hamas movement, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin.

The events of September 11 increased the interest in the research of the phenomenon of terrorism, with emphasis on conceptual and theoretical articles.

Research groups and academic conferences that engage in the phenomenon will promote the research processes. Effective counterterrorism is based on deterrence, but this fundamental assumption is cast in doubt when referring to terrorist organizations. Despite the research engagement in terrorism, there is still no definition that will be accepted in the academic community and will constitute an agreed-upon starting point for researches in the field. This research study indicated according to the researchers Fleming, Stohl, and Shmid a variety of typologies in the field of terrorism, for these to constitute a basis for generalization and even theorization of a violent social phenomenon like terrorism. For example, a fundamental typology of the ideological characteristics of the terrorist organization can constitute a basis for the examination of the relationship between ideology, goals, and methods of action of such organization.

The research hypotheses and questions addressed the policy of the deployment and use of the mechanism of targeted killing and the success or lack of success in reducing the number of terrorist attacks against the State of Israel. The success or lack of success was examined through preventative arrests. Furthermore, the lack of influence of this mechanism was examined on the number of terrorist attacks. The research also examined the policy of targeted killing against low-level operatives and senior operatives of the terrorist organization and the degree of reduction of the terrorist attacks.

The findings indicate that targeted killing contributed to the decline of the number of terrorist victims. It became clear that the performance of arrests is sometimes more effective than targeted killings, since in arrest and interrogation intelligence is collected and the entire terrorist network is exposed. Arrests increase the risk to the security forces but also reduce the risk to the population. In addition, the findings disconfirm the influence of the harm to the senior terrorist operatives on the reduction of number of terrorist attacks. While it is possible to notice a significant decrease in the number of terrorist attacks, it is not possible to create a causal correlation on the issue of the seniority of the operatives. The findings show that the carrying out of targeted killing is effective but the status of the terrorist operative does not have considerable meaning although the number of terrorist victims decreased.¹

¹ See Table Number 2 in the Appendices.

The contribution of this research study enables the understanding that the mechanism of targeted killing contributes to the reduction of the number of terrorist attacks. In addition, the contribution of the research study is its broadening of the discussion, both theoretical and practical, development of knowledge and tools for understanding components of terrorism, and examination of effective ways of coping with this threat by a democratic state, through the Israeli case.