

Palestinian militants' advantage in Gaza?

The key there is a system of trap doors and tunnels.

By Don Duncan | MARCH 20, 2009

Nahr alBared, Lebanon

The humanitarian focus in Gaza will soon begin to shift, thanks to the more than \$4 billion in pledges that were made by international donors at the Sharm el-Sheik conference this month.

Among the emergency relief workers, the humanitarian workers, and medics flooding the strip, there will be some unexpected people trawling through the rubble before reconstruction starts.

A small army of architects and urban planners working with the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, are poised to make a bee-line to the half-standing buildings that remain in the strip. In the broken remnants of Gaza, they say, lie the clues as to what shape Israeli military practice is likely to take in the future.

One of the few tactical advantages Palestinian militants have in the face of Israel's military might is an intimate knowledge and command of their own architecture and urban space. The maze-like streets, alleys, and thickly packed, high-rise buildings of the Palestinian refugee camps have played to the favor of militants in the camps in times of conflict.

This was made clear most recently in in 2007, when a small group of Islamic militants infiltrated the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon and used it as a base. Holed up there, the militants manipulated the architecture to their military advantage, much as Palestinian militants traditionally have. The Lebanese military was unable to negotiate the camp and it took more than three months of heavy shelling to topple the militant group that was estimated to number under 1,000.

"The [Palestinian] camp is an urban neighborhood but it is also a single building – it is contiguous," says Eyal Weizman, an Israeli architect, academic, and author of "Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation." He goes on to say, "This contiguity of the structure allows a certain movement across it that is not possible in other urban environments."

When under attack, many Palestinian camps across the Middle East can deploy a system of trap doors, hallways, rooftops, and holes through walls, connecting apartments and buildings. The camp's militants use this system to command full control of the camp from the inside, and advantage over the aggressor outside.

When the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) infiltrated the Palestinian refugee camp at Jenin in the West Bank in 2002 by breaking through walls and proceeding to dominate the camp internally, it was clear it had been taking notes.

So to keep ahead, the Palestinians have to innovate further. This has made warfare between Israel and enemies such as Hamas and Hezbollah a kind of tactical conversation.

"There is an asymmetry in power – fire power, political power, military power – and that asymmetry is always compensated by the ingenuity of the weak," says Laleh Khalili, a professor of Middle East politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

During the summer war in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, this ingenuity took the form of underground caches and bunkers where Hezbollah managed to withstand intense Israeli bombardment for 33 days. By the time Israel launched its attack on Gaza last December, the subterranean holdout had become the new front in the conflict.

"Hamas has disappeared underground and Israel controls the sky," says Mr. Weizman. "The more dominance they have of

The permeability of the Palestinian camp, once a strong defense strategy for the Palestinians, has been effectively neutralized by the IDF's appropriation of the tactic in their own ground offensives on camps.

So Palestinians have had to push the envelope to stay ahead and they have done this by extending what was once an above-ground network of passages beneath the surface of the camp.

The camps in Gaza have extended underground, not just in the form of the tunnel lifelines to Egypt at Rafah, but in a sophisticated network of bunkers, control rooms, and hideouts at inland camps like Al Shati and Jabilia. This is the latest puzzle the IDF has to solve in its ongoing cat-and-mouse game of war tactics with the Palestinian militants.

How close they are to solving it may become clearer once the architects and urban planners working with B'Tselem are allowed to reenter Gaza. The teams will undertake a "forensic" survey of the rubble, taking photos, discerning patterns of destruction, and creating 3-D reconstructions of areas and buildings.

The survey will result in a public report in the coming months, and its findings may offer some indication as to how Israel will adapt its game to the new subterranean Palestinian resistance. Since Israel has not yet developed technology to discern this logic, the Palestinian militants remain one step ahead – for now.

Don Duncan is a freelance reporter. His field work in Lebanon was supported by The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, in Washington D.C.

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