

Light at the End of the Tunnels

On July 8, 2014 the Israeli air force began to deal with rocket fire coming from Hamas operatives in the Gaza Strip. In the preceding three weeks, Hamas had fired 250 rockets capable of reaching Israeli population centers. Many of those rockets were intercepted by the Israeli Iron Dome system, but Israel soon found that confronting it was a new and challenging menace, a labyrinth of highly sophisticated tunnels built by Hamas.

For years Hamas had been using building materials and an estimated 600,000 of concrete to build tunnels similar to, though much more skillfully constructed than, the Viet Cong tunnels dug in South Vietnam. The U.S. forces, the so called "tunnel rats" had to dispose of them using simply a pistol and a flashlight. Israel, between July 17 and August 5, 2014 using more advanced methods, disposed of 33 tunnels, 14 of which crossed into Israel, and one of which was 66 feet deep and 1.5 miles long.

The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has long been laughable. Its absurdity reached a zenith with the 284-page report on June 22, 2015 of its Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Gaza war chaired by the American jurist, Mary McGowan Davis who had replaced the discredited William Schabas. The Commission found there was no indication the Hamas tunnels were constructed to attack Israeli civilians. It did not say the tunnels were used as playgrounds for recreational purposes or for sightseeing trips, but it did say that it could not "conclusively determine the intent of Palestinian armed groups with regard to the construction and use of the tunnels."

Yet the evidence to the contrary is abundant. Everyone was aware that Hamas had built tunnels in Sinai for smuggling

people and communities between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. More important they had been built for both defensive and offensive purposes in connection with the State of Israel. Defensively, Hamas used the tunnels to store rockets, launchers, and explosives, and as military command centers. Offensively, they were built to attack Israeli civilians, or to kidnap Israeli soldiers and civilians. Hamas had done this in June 2006 when it kidnapped Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier, and held him in prison until October 2011.

The UNHRC disregarded the Hamas violations of human rights and indeed war crimes by its construction of tunnels under civilian homes among other violations. The Institute for Palestinian Studies recorded that Hamas between 2007 and 2012 had caused 160 Palestinian deaths in building the tunnels: by August 2014, 400 had died. The UNHRC also seemed unaware of the Hamas plot to use Rosh Hashanah, September 24, 2014, as an opportunity to initiate a mass attack on Israel. It had begun rebuilding some of its tunnels that been destroyed and planned to use a dozen of them to carry 200 heavily armed fighters into Israeli territory.

Hamas never stops its war against Israel. Since the beginning of 2016 there have been five incidents when tunnels being built by Hamas in the Gaza Strip have collapsed and Palestinian operatives killed in them. On February 9, 2016 one operative, a member of the military wing of Hamas, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassan Brigades died in the tunnel near Khan Younis. He was repairing a tunnel that had been damaged by Egyptian authorities because it was being used to smuggle arms and fighters for affiliates of ISIS in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula.

Egypt has long been aware of the activity of Hamas and other terrorists. In late 2014 it began destroying hundreds of tunnels being built in Sinai for smuggling weapons.

Sometimes the truth seeps out, even from terrorist leaders. At

the funeral service in the Great Omari Mosque in Gaza City on January 29, 2016 for seven Hamas operatives who were killed when the tunnel on which they were working collapsed because of rain and flooding, Ismael Haniyeh, the Hamas leader, spoke truth. Hamas is getting stronger and will use any measures to prepare for the next confrontation with Israel. The Hamas military brigades, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade and the al-Qussan Brigades are continuing with their preparation and training. East of Gaza City, the "heroes" are digging through rock and building tunnels: to the west of the City they are experimenting with rockets every day.

The Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot speaking at the Herzliya interdisciplinary Center on February 9, 2016 asserted that the Hamas tunnels were the main threat against his country. A major concern is their central tunnel, one of high quality, on which 1,000 terrorists are working that will lead deep into Israeli territory from which an attack can be launched. A considerable part of the resources coming into Gaza is being used for building an underground infrastructure. Israel is focusing intelligence operations and using nearly 100 engineering machines to counter the threat.

Hamas leader Haniyeh has given fair warning. He told us that his organization is digging twice as many tunnels as was dug in Vietnam. The United States and France, both involved in the morass of the Indo-China war that cost the lives of 58,000 Americans and 300,000 wounded, and more than 2,000 French lives, can understand the parallel of the two conflicts. They must pay special attention to Haniyeh's announcement, now that the two countries are pressing for peace negotiations between Israel and Palestinians to start as soon as possible.

The international community, if not the UNHRC or Amnesty International, is aware that representatives of Hamas, whose objective is the elimination of Israel, cannot come to the table with clean hands. Light will only come after the tunnels

are ended.