The Wave of Lone Wolf Attacks in Israel (Oct. 2015 – Sep. 2016) and Palestinian Social Media

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On October 3, 2015, a young Palestinian, Mohanad Halabi, stabbed to death two Israelis Aharon Banita and Nechemia Lavi in Jerusalem. The murder signaled the beginning of a wave of violence that was significantly different from previous confrontations between Israel and the Palestinians. During this wave, which lasted until October 2016, there were approximately 340 separate "lone wolf" Palestinian attacks on Israelis, mostly using knives, as well as instances of vehicles being used to run over victims. In contrast to the past, most of the attackers, whose average age was 21, operated without operational guidance from a Palestinian organization, leaving 160 of the attackers dead, along with 39 of their victims. Many viewed this trend as a result of the incitement prevalent among Palestinian social media, while others opined that, just as with other media forms, these social networks merely reflect the situation on the ground and should not be overemphasized. Therefore, they claimed, these attacks must be explained by looking at the root causes of social and political unrest – namely the 50-year Israeli occupation of Palestinian inhabited territories.[2] In contrast to these claims, which lie on opposite poles of the analytical spectrum, my argument is that social media was not in and of itself the motivational source for the Palestinian "lone wolf" attackers; nevertheless, it did play a critical role in shaping the identity, attitudes, and behavioral patterns of many of the attackers as well as the dynamics that have spread the idea of "lone-wolf" attack as a viable tactic and encouraged its implementation.[3]

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[1] I would like to thank the social media research staff at the Dayan Center – Smadar Shaul, Gilad Shiloach and Adam Hoffman, who greatly assisted me in preparing the study on which this article is based.

[2] For both approaches, see, for example: Anat Ben David, "Like with an Olive leaf," *Haaretz*, July 5, 2016; *al-Hayat al-Jadida*, November 23, 24 2015.

[3] The article is based on, Harel Chorev, "Palestinian Social Media and Lone-Wolf Attacks: Subculture, Legitimization and Epidemic," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, published online July 17, 2017 (forthcoming in print).

The "lone wolf" attacks were an expression of various social media influences on Palestinian politics and society that go beyond incitement. It should be emphasized, however, that those who regard social networks as a mere means of communication reflecting reality are also mistaken. As opposed to traditional means of communication, social media offers interaction and multilateral dialogue that enables mutual influence and cooperation at an unprecedented speed and scale without leadership or an organizational support structure. As a result, it has played a simultaneous role in the "lone wolf" attacks – on the one hand reflecting the reality on the ground, but also feeding and amplifying it. Social media offered alternative sources of legitimacy to the traditional sources of authority of the assailant, and has generated a contagious dynamic of attacks carried out without a guiding hand and characterized by expansion, decay, and conservation.

Previous attackers, such as the second Intifada's suicide bombers, depended on the material and moral support of the traditional sources of authority, including the Palestinian organizations, family members, and the immediate social circles. In the last wave of violence, however, many of the attackers sought the support of online communities. These communities are based in diversified social networks, ranging from Facebook to Whatsapp groups like "The Way to Paradise," in which some members utilized an Islamic discourse in support of lone wolf attacks. In the spring of 2017, Israel arrested 18 members of this online community after capturing a phone from one of its members, Ibrahim Matar, who stabbed two policemen at the Lions' Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Prospective attackers derive legitimacy for their intentions from the feedback they receive through social media in the form of "Likes," talkbacks, and shares, often with the use of an inner-language of verbal and graphic codes. This includes symbols such as knives, guns, hearts, bleeding hands, illustrations depicting known attacks from the past, and references to previous attackers, along with patterned sentences such as "we will live as proud hawks and die as erect trees."[4] This inner-language outlines the boundaries of the virtual community supporting the attackers and unifies it. It also makes the incrimination of its users more difficult, as it is implied and coded. It should be noted that other social media communities, such as those of the Islamic State's supporters, also use inner-languages for similar reasons.

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[4] These observations were taken, among other sources, from the findings of the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, which were published in: "Social networks as a source of inspiration and imitation," March 22, 2016.

Some of the components of the inner-language are by no means original, but they are adjusted to the age of social media. For example, the commemoration of past attackers expresses the longstanding Islamic concept of the "convoy of martyrs" (*qafilat al-shuhada'*), which sanctifies the value of striving for the martyrs' goal despite the difficulties. The prospective attacker's intention is not simply to honor the memory of prior attackers, but also to request the legitimacy conferred on them for him or herself. Likewise, the discourse conducted between the attackers and their social media community indicates that they do not see themselves as "lone wolves," but as representatives of communities that support their intentions. Since, in many cases, there has been a months-long discourse between the attacker in-the-making and "his" community, it appears that the attacks themselves were not the result of a precipitous decision.

The search for legitimacy from online communities, hundreds of which exist in the Palestinian cyberspace, reflects a process of change in the relations between the individual and the traditional collectives, which in the past were deeply influential. There are a number of reasons for this change, including the rise of individualism, particularly in the West Bank, which according to Palestinian sociologist Jamil Hilal has increased since 2005 following the Palestinian Authority's adoption of neoliberalism, along with the erosion of solidarity among the underground movements following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority and, no less significantly, young people's disappointment and alienation from both Fatah and Hamas due to allegations of corruption and their failure to advance a solution to the Palestinian problem. It would be mistaken to view the process of individualization through an exclusively Palestinian prism, as it is also an expression of global developments affecting youth born between the mid-1990s and the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century (Generation Z), who are often "accused" of radical individualism.

Although Palestinian youth are perceived as individualists, they – like their peers throughout the world who have taken part in protest movements such as "Occupy Wall Street" and the Spanish "Youth without a Future" – have not eschewed commitment to the collective. In contrast to the past, however, they reserve their right to independently choose the collective and the agenda to which they bind themselves. This need is addressed by online communities, whose emergence is an expression of global changes, rather than uniquely Palestinian developments.
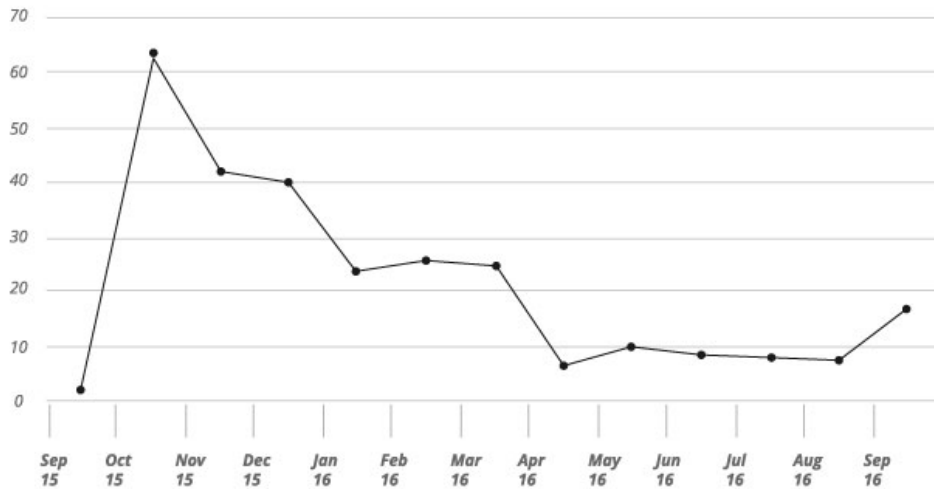
In a Facebook post titled "ten commandments for every martyr," ten months before he murdered passengers on a bus in Jerusalem in November 2015, the 23-

year-old Baha' 'Alyan provided an expression of the complex identity of Palestinian youth that combines strong individualism with commitment to a collective of his choice. Four of 'Alyan's "commandments" demanded that Palestinian organizations not claim ownership of his martyrdom, because "my death was for the homeland, not for you." In another section he demanded "not to sow hate in my son's heart – if he discovers his nation and desires to die, he will do it for her, and not to avenge my death."[5] That is, 'Alyan sanctified his son's individualism and released him from the familial tradition and collective embodied in his own image. Aside from individualism and anti-establishment attitudes, the "commandments" reflected the absence of a clear vision and appealed to the lowest common denominator of national loyalty. An indication that 'Alyan's approach is representative of many of his contemporaries is evidenced in the fact that the post went viral with 39,000 "Likes" and some attackers even shared it before carrying out their attacks. This incident also revealed the increased blurring of the boundaries between the virtual and physical realms, when, in the aftermath of his death, 'Alyan became known as the "educated martyr" and commemorative projects were held in his memory, such as youth "reading chains."

Another social media-inspired characteristic of the wave of lone wolf attacks has been the epidemic-like spread. Epidemics are characterized by a typical pattern, beginning with its outbreak and a sharp rise followed by a gradual decline, ending in a "long tail" reflecting the persistence of the cause of the epidemic, or "virus," at a low level. This structure has also characterized the "lone wolf" attacks. In October 2015, when the wave of violence erupted, the number of lone wolf attacks soared from the previously monthly average of 3.3 to 64 attacks and attempts to attack in that month. In the following months the number of attacks declined until settling in a "long tail" (starting in April 2016), with a lower frequency of 7-8 attacks and attempted attacks per month. The "long tail" is an expression of the fact that the "virus," meaning the idea of the lone wolf attack, was preserved on social media without the need for institutional or organizational support to cultivate it. Therefore, even if the phenomenon appears to have ended, it has the potential to return, as was demonstrated in September 2016 and in other instances.

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[5] 'Abd ar-Rahman al-Ghayt, "Baha' al-'Alyan... masar muqadasi min al-nidal lil-shahada," *Al Jazeera*, October 14, 2015.

Attacks per Month

A line chart titled "Attacks per Month" with a y-axis ranging from 0 to 70 in increments of 10, and an x-axis showing months from Sep 15 to Sep 16. The plotted values approximately are: Sep 15 ≈ 2, Oct 15 ≈ 63, Nov 15 ≈ 42, Dec 15 ≈ 40, Jan 16 ≈ 24, Feb 16 ≈ 26, Mar 16 ≈ 25, Apr 16 ≈ 7, May 16 ≈ 10, Jun 16 ≈ 9, Jul 16 ≈ 8, Aug 16 ≈ 8, Sep 16 ≈ 17.

Epidemics, whether in the form of disease, fashion, mass drug addiction, or viral content (such as the global #MeToo campaign), require several conditions to take off, including a suitable platform or context for their promulgation – this could be political, personal and social issues, hate and so on, as in the case of the lone wolf attacks. Furthermore, unforeseen changes or mutations serve as a catalyst for the spread of the "virus" – and in the discussed case, Halabi's "successful" attack and the permeation of the logic behind lone wolf terrorism to the Palestinian popular culture and social media discourse. Finally, the large online propagation centers known as "hubs," which influence their numerous followers can determine whether the idea will go viral (epidemic) or not.

The epidemical characteristics of lone wolf attacks were also evident in what is often referred to as "copycat" attacks, which were carried out shortly after other assaults, a pattern that generated clusters of attacks. However, emulation as an end in and of itself does not explain these clusters, for which I offer two explanations. The first – a direct result of the emergence of social media – is an unconscious synchronization of prospective attackers, arising from their sense of being part of an imagined group with a shared objective and from their desire to ride the media wave that promises them their "15 minutes of fame." The second explanation derives from the so-called "Werther effect," named after the suicide epidemic that apparently took place in Europe following the publication of Goethe's book, "The Sorrows of Young Werther," in 1774. The Werther effect is based on the social approval to an objectionable act like suicide, which was ostensibly received by the fact that others were also committing such an act.

Thus, those contemplating an attack drew legitimacy from the precedent set forth by other attackers. Other common characteristics of the lone wolf attacks and suicide epidemics range from the existence of sub-cultures that utilize inner languages to support the idea of suicide to the use of ceremonial means of death. Lone wolf attackers have tended to use knives or vehicles as their weapon of choice. The cumulative data on the major contribution of personal problems in motivating assailants, and the sharp decline in the number of officially registered suicides among Palestinians during the wave of violence, raises the question of whether the lone wolf epidemic was also, to a large extent, a suicide epidemic.

In conclusion, social networks are not responsible for the fundamental motives of independent terrorist attackers, yet it is doubtful that the wave of "lone wolf" attacks would have taken the same form without the involvement of social media. Social media is not just another mode of communication, but one that creates social arenas that generate deep changes in Palestinian society, including the strengthening of individualism, the erosion of traditional sources of authority, and the rise of new ones online. The contribution of social media is critical to the formation of the Palestinian cyberspace, which is controlled by just a few major hubs capable of dominating this environment with militant discourse that helped transform individual acts of terror into an epidemic with no need for organizational involvement. It is also critical to maintaining the potential for outburst even after the trend has apparently subsided. These changes redefine the characteristics of confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians in such a way that traditional terms like "Intifada" are not only historically inappropriate to describe the wave of attacks, but also impede understanding the nature of the differences between this wave of violence and previous confrontations. These differences are not simply a matter of the influence of new technologies, but are also related to global changes including, among other things, the rise of a young generation with new conceptions of the individual and the collective, an anti-establishment mentality, and alienation from the traditional and professional sources of authority. This is also the case for the global phenomenon of cultural enclaves in the form of online communities, which despite their unclear boundaries, are tangible enough to encourage individuals and groups to act.

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