

HOME GROWN ORGANIZED CRIME A PROBLEM FOR ISRAEL

Conclusions:

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to put a halt to organized crime in Israel, following a mid-day hit the previous day near the crowded Tel Aviv boardwalk.

“We have recently witnessed several severe actions by organized crime. We are determined to uproot this severe phenomenon and we give full backing to the Israel Police to use existing and new means against organized crime,” Netanyahu said Sunday morning at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting.

“It is not the citizens of Israel who need to worry about going around the streets freely but the members of organized crime families who need to be worried. They must be put in jail quickly,” he said.

On Saturday, 27-year-old Taher Lalah, an alleged Jaffa underworld figure, was shot by two masked assailants in his car at a bustling tourism spot, a refurbished old railroad complex called HaTahana, adjacent to the Tel Aviv boardwalk.

The murder comes a week after a man was killed in a car bomb in a southern Tel Aviv neighborhood.

A car bomb in Petah Tikvah two weeks ago killed two in what is believed to be an accidental detonation prior to a mob hit, referred to as a work accident. Earlier in the year, two car bombs exploded in Ashkelon in what were described as mob hits.

In October 2013, two car explosions shook residential neighborhoods in the southern city of Ashkelon. The explosions were so powerful that buildings shook.

The first blast on Oct. 24 thrust a vehicle into the air from a demolition charge that had been affixed to it. The two passengers flew dozens of meters upward. One was killed on the spot, the other was mortally wounded. The police identified them as two soldiers in the crime organization of Shalom Domrani. On Nov. 2, another car blew up the same way and with the same force. The driver was seriously wounded with both legs torn from his body. He, too, was identified as a soldier in a crime organization.

In November 2012, Ashkelon residents were at the receiving end of a shower of Grad missiles from Gaza, now they get shocked by car explosions in an organized crime war.

On Nov. 7, a shrapnel-packed bomb detonated inside a car belonging to a top Tel Aviv District prosecutor who handled a number of organized crime cases, near the courthouse in north Tel Aviv.

The prosecutor, whose name is covered under a gag order police secured Thursday night, was known for working a number of high-profile cases involving Israeli underworld

figures, including one that involved southern crime boss Shalom Domrani, and another against several associates of top organized crime figure Amir Mulner.

Senior prosecution officials said the targeted lawyer had been conducting a militant battle against crime organizations. According to them, the attack in the center of Tel Aviv was designed to signal to other prosecutors that their lives were not safe either. The Ministry of Justice was quick to back its prosecutors and announced, two hours later, that the incident would not deter the state from acting against crime organizations. Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein and State Prosecutor Moshe Lador said the incident crossed all lines.

Police commanders say that the struggle between the crime families become so dangerous that the criminals have no compunctions about harming innocent bystanders.

The killings in the light of day, and especially the brutal way these were carried out, put the police on the defensive. The police were asked to explain their weakness in light of the rising crime wave. Polls continue to show the decline of faith of the public in the ability of the police to protect them.

"It is a Sisyphean struggle," explained Yaakov, a high-level police investigator who spent many years in pursuit of organized crime in the north. He insisted on not revealing his last name, because he has been involved in tracking and catching dozens of criminals connected to the crime families in the north in recent years.

I asked what prevented the police from eradicating the phenomenon. "We are fighting organizations that are busy day and night in power struggles among themselves, for control over who will be the boss and close to the boss," he answered. "This [infighting] intensifies when the head of the organization is incarcerated. In this situation, many people enter the fray to jockey for improving their position in the organization. When I talk about power struggles, I talk about tremendous sums of money stemming from drug deals, protection money, casinos and intermediation transactions. The assassination campaigns are an integral part of the power struggles. I know from experience that in these organizations, you can't climb to the top without eliminating those who stand in your way."

Even the killings are adapted to the spirit of the times. In the past, assassinations were conducted by pistols and point-blank shootings. Today — due to technological improvements — most killings are done by remote control, via demolition charges that are activated far from the victim.

Organized crime does not differentiate between Jews and Arabs, Yaakov said. They work together with full cooperation. "I would say there is comradeship between them and a peaceful atmosphere. If only the diplomatic relations between Israel and the Arabs shared such intimacy," he said.

Israel's military has recently reported that organized crime networks were selling weapons to Palestinian. The sources said organized crime was engaged in gun-running as well as using everything from light weapons to rocket-propelled grenades to settle conflicts and intimidate Palestinian businesses. The Army has been working with the Israel Security Agency to seize weapons flowing to the West Bank.

The Israel Police force is concerned that the long arm of organized crime will reach governmental institutions as well. Cmdr. Meni Yitzhaki, head of the Israeli police investigations and intelligence unit, told the Knesset's Internal Affairs Committee on Oct. 30 that recently harbingers have been noted of contacts between organized crime and government institutions in Israel. He directed his words mainly toward the local government.

Many mayors have personal security guards against criminal threats from elements that are operating to expand their economic hold of their local hometowns. Police investigator Yaakov says that almost every city in Israel contains elements of organized crime families. "They make a fortune from taking control of the sand of the beach strip, from collecting bottles and raking in the deposit money."

To destroy organized crime, the police demand that the state give them tools similar to those used by the Shin Bet in its fight against terror. "This is the only way we can win this war against criminals operating within us," says Yaakov with determination