

Israel and the Palestinian Authority: Edging toward the Abyss?

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Brief Analysis

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit this week to the Middle East may be the last chance for the United States to avert a potential drift toward armed confrontation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), due to the latter's failure to mount a sustained effort to halt terrorism by groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).

The recent Hamas suicide bombings in Jerusalem have highlighted the failure of the security regime created by the Oslo Accords, which is predicated on security cooperation between Israel and the PA. These bombings have spurred calls by Israeli security officials for a reassessment of Israel's counter-terrorist strategy, and warnings by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's media adviser David Bar-Ilan that Israel would act unilaterally to uproot Hamas and the PIJ from areas controlled by the PA, if the latter failed to do so itself.

Israel has a number of options in this regard. While all have significant drawbacks, domestic political pressures and a growing sense of exasperation with the PA could lead the Netanyahu government to act against Hamas and PIJ, if current efforts to revive security cooperation with the PA fail.

Israeli Options In dealing with Hamas and PIJ terrorism that emanates from PA-controlled areas, Israel has several options:

- the imposition of a total closure on the West Bank and Gaza;
- covert operations;
- overt short-duration military operations;
- retaking parts of the West Bank and Gaza now under PA control;
- retaking the entire West Bank and Gaza.

Total closure: Israel might not only close off the West Bank and Gaza from Israel, but it could seal off the various

Palestinian enclaves from each other, ringing major Palestinian towns and villages with a cordon of troops and tanks. Such measures would cause grave damage to the Palestinian economy, but would also inflame popular opinion in the Palestinian areas, thereby enhancing (at least on a short-term basis) popular support for Hamas and PIJ. Experience has shown, moreover, that closures cannot keep sophisticated and determined terrorists out of Israel, and do nothing to disrupt the terrorist infrastructure itself. Nor have they been successful in compelling the PA to act against the Hamas and PIJ terrorist infrastructure.

Covert operations: Israel has already conducted a number of covert operations in PA controlled areas. These include the assassination of bombmaker Yahya Ayyash in Gaza in January 1996, and the abduction of a fugitive security suspect by undercover men in Tulkarm just last month. Though such operations might have a psychological impact, they can at best temporarily disrupt-but not halt-the terrorist activities of Hamas and PIJ. Covert operations require extensive intelligence preparation and planning, are very risky, and require the right objective conditions (i.e., the target must be in the right place at the right time); consequently, only a small number of such operations can be conducted. On their own, covert operations are not likely to have a major impact on the ability of Hamas or PIJ to engage in terrorism: these groups may altogether consist of several hundred activists organized into scores of cells, and a small number of covert operations are unlikely to disrupt an infrastructure of this size.

Overt, short-duration military operations: Israel could openly send forces into PA controlled areas to capture wanted men or to destroy bomb factories. To accomplish such tasks, Israeli forces will need precise intelligence so that they can go in and out quickly, in order to avoid a major clash with responding PA forces.

Retake parts of the West Bank and Gaza: Israel might seize and hold areas previously turned over to the PA under the Oslo accords to better enable it to defend exposed Jewish enclaves, or to demonstrate to the PA that their territorial gains under the Oslo accords are reversible, if security cooperation is not forthcoming.

Retaking the entire West Bank and Gaza: Israel could launch a major operation to retake all the areas now under PA control, uproot Hamas and PIJ, and perhaps even expel Yasser Arafat and the senior PA leadership. This would require large forces (tens of thousands of men), a long-term mobilization of the Israeli military (months), and would likely result in a bloody guerilla war. A recent Israeli general staff exercise that simulated an Israeli invasion of PA controlled areas of the West Bank and Gaza estimated that hundreds of Israeli soldiers and thousands of Palestinians would be killed, and thousands more Israelis and Palestinians wounded in such a scenario. Though highly unlikely for now or the near future, if Palestinian terrorism were to continue, if a new, broader intifada were to be unleashed, if Arafat were to unilaterally declare a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, or if the PA were to try to dramatically upgrade its armaments, what is now unthinkable might eventually become possible. Having been expelled from Jordan in 1970-71, and Lebanon in 1982-83, Arafat should not dismiss the possibility that this could happen again.

Constraints In surveying its military options, Israel will be operating under a number of constraints. First, the PA's 30,000 plus armed police and security men could inflict painful losses on Israeli forces. As a result, all military options involve the prospect of casualties and escalation. Second, the PA might counter Israeli military action by exerting countervailing military pressure (in the form of intifada- like violence) against vulnerable Jewish enclaves, such as Joseph's tomb, Hebron, or the several isolated Jewish settlements located adjacent to PA-controlled areas. Third, Arafat's status as a de facto head-of-state and the PA's status as a state-in-the-making in the eyes of much of the world limit Israel's freedom of action vis-a-vis Arafat and the PA. Fourth, unilateral military actions in PA-controlled areas are likely to exacerbate Israel's relationship with the Arab world and Europe, and further isolate it diplomatically. Fifth, for moral and practical reasons Israel will be unable to exploit its military potential fully and it will have to act with restraint, in order to minimize civilian losses among the Palestinian population, and thereby not lose the battle for world opinion. Thus, in a recent interview, Major General Shlomo Yanai, the officer in charge of the

Southern Command, stated that in the event of another confrontation with the PA (along the lines of events of September 1996) the Israeli military would rely on "focused, accurate fire," since "massive fire looks bad on camera and this is a main consideration." Finally, military operations in PA-controlled areas could prompt the PLO to escalate on other fronts; for instance, coordinating with Syria and Iran to heat up Israel's northern border, and perhaps even inciting Israel's Arab community to violence.

Conclusion Despite numerous threats to resort to military action against Hamas and PIJ—including last Friday's clear statement by the ministerial security committee promising action "against the terrorist organizations and their infrastructure"—Jerusalem has so far restrained itself. Perhaps that is because of the downsides associated with each option. However, at some point, the PA's use of, or indulgence toward, Hamas and PIJ terror as a means of pressuring Israel may compel Israel to act, regardless of the costs. For Israel, the best option is still Arafat's own efforts to crack down on Hamas and PIJ. Therefore, short of an all-out assault on the terrorist infrastructure that might inter alia abort peace efforts, Israel may opt for a lesser military action to try to alter Arafat's calculus and force him to do the job, saving what is left of the diplomatic process.

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