

After the Washington Summit: Implications for Security and the Peace Process

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Brief Analysis

Last week's serious crisis provides a number of important lessons. Although the Washington summit produced assurances from both sides to avoid violence, similar pledges have been made in the past and have been violated. Unless serious steps are taken by both sides, it is likely that last week's understanding will be violated, too.

The Washington summit. From the beginning, the summit was treated as a zero-sum game. The two parties came to Washington in order to win, not to compromise, almost as if the summit was a continuation of the fighting in the West Bank. The summit's only achievement was a clear promise to terminate the three-month freeze on negotiations and to accelerate talks until an outcome is reached. Unfortunately, the peace process cannot depend on a Washington summit every few months. Moreover, relations between Egypt and the United States are now aggravated as a result of the peace process, further exacerbating regional tensions.

Background to the crisis. We now know more about the outbreak of rioting than we did a week ago. Ami Ayalon, the director of the Shin Bet, and Moshe Ya'alon, the chief of military intelligence, briefed a key Knesset committee on their assessment of the situation after the crisis erupted last week. Admiral Ayalon observed that, "There is a feeling there among the Palestinians, that the political process with Israel has failed." He also commented that the Palestinians are frustrated with Arafat. General Ya'alon noted that since Netanyahu came to power, there was a widespread perception among Palestinians that the peace process had reached an impasse and that Arafat had sought to inflame his people in order to energize the process. Ya'alon cited eleven points which have caused frustration and friction among the Palestinians: 1) the freeze in the peace process, 2) Israel's refusal to start final status talks, 3) a humiliating attitude by Israel toward the Palestinian leadership, 4) the closures of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, 5) new Israeli initiatives to enlarge the settlements, 6) Israeli expropriation of land in the West Bank, 7) Israeli refusal to settle the Gaza airport issue, 8) Israeli refusal to release more Palestinian prisoners, 9) corruption in the Palestinian administration, 10) economic problems of the Palestinian Authority, and 11) the struggle within

the Palestinian community which has led to Arafat's diminishing status.

This list indicates that Israel's security establishment was aware that the situation was reaching a boiling point even before the outbreak of violence. Under these circumstances, opening the tunnel was clearly not a smart move. This is not the first time Israel had discussed opening the entrance to the tunnel. Shamir, Rabin, and Peres all brought up the idea and after speaking with their security advisors, all three chose not to open the entrance. (Rabin said, "We waited 2,000 years, we can wait 2,000 years and two months.") Interestingly, neither Ya'alon nor Oren Shachor, coordinator of Israel's activities in the territories, were consulted this time, and the IDF chief of staff was only informed of the decision hours before the tunnel opened, reflecting the poor decisionmaking process of the Netanyahu government. However, it also appears clear that Netanyahu did not open the tunnel deliberately to cause a crisis, as evidenced by his leaving for Europe and sending David Levy to the United Nations, both of which were unexpectedly interrupted by the riots.

The crisis. What followed was a massive violation of the Oslo agreements by the Palestinian police. Even if the Israeli government committed a serious mistake in opening the tunnel, the Palestinian police response was a gross violation of Oslo. The IDF responded to this with great restraint; if the IDF had been told to open fire, not just to defend itself, hundreds, if not thousands, of Palestinians would have been killed. Although Arafat encouraged his people to revolt and protest, at a certain point he lost control. The Palestinians should not have opened fire. There are many other ways to express frustration, any of which would have been better than opening fire. This action undermined the trust Israelis placed in the Palestinians. The next time, the IDF response will be massive.

The ramifications of this situation will be evident in the upcoming talks. When the Hebron issue is decided, Palestinian police should not be allowed to carry assault rifles among this mixed population. And in the final status talks, Israel must insist that the Palestinian entity is demilitarized. Finally, during the interim stage, the security of ports, airports, and border check-points must remain in Israeli hands.

The Israelis can learn a number of lessons from this event. The outbreaks of violence occurred in isolated spots, places that are difficult to control. From a military perspective, remaining in points such as Joseph's Tomb was a mistake. Second, Arafat demonstrated that by using violence he could "reshuffle the cards" to revive negotiations. His success could encourage Assad to follow suit with similar hopes. The final lesson learned here is that there is no alternative to the Oslo process. Without movement on Oslo there would be total chaos which would have an impact on stability throughout the entire region.

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The Washington summit. The outcome of the summit was not a disaster, as some have suggested, but rather it achieved the minimal acceptable outcomes. The four ingredients necessary for this were: 1) a face-to-face meeting, 2) a handshake, 3) a photo-op, and 4) a clear next step for the process. Furthermore, since the summit, Israel has taken unilateral moves to ease some of the economic sanctions against the PA and to lift the closures in certain areas. Both Arafat and Netanyahu have altered their tone and style so as not to undermine the summit itself.

In retrospect, the summit provides two clear assessments: First, there was no viable alternative to holding this meeting on a presidential level; one week ago, it was impossible to convene talks at Erez or even to meet in Cairo. Second, the political risk factor for President Clinton was minimal as neither Arafat or Netanyahu wanted to risk the wrath of the President by marring the campaign with a failed summit. Although many had higher hopes for the summit, such as setting dates for Hebron redeployment, final status negotiations, and lifting closures, Netanyahu was only willing to concede procedurally, accepting non-stop talks with U.S. participation, for fear of legitimizing violence as a means of achieving Israeli concessions. This resulted in tough talk from King Hussein. Jordan is strategically sympathetic toward Israel, yet sees Netanyahu's tactics as self-defeating for the Israelis and more

importantly, as having a negative impact on Jordanian security. The king made this quite clear to Netanyahu.

Netanyahu, a changed man? American officials are quick to point out that Netanyahu called Arafat his "partner and friend" during the summit. And in an interview with Nightline, he recognized the Palestinians as a people and the PA as a government, as well as the fact that Arafat is Israel's only partner in this process. Although Netanyahu does not see the Oslo process as Peres or Rabin did, he has publicly accepted Oslo as a "win-win" option for Israelis and Palestinians and implored Palestinians to "give peace a chance." The most likely explanation for Netanyahu's apparent mellowing on Oslo is the change in the Israeli electorate mood toward "security" given the prospects of Oslo's collapse: Netanyahu was elected on the issue of personal security, yet today 79 percent of Israelis are "worried" about their security. Therefore, Netanyahu must remedy this situation and fixing Oslo, not discarding it, is apparently at the heart of his strategy.

Continuing talks. There are five working groups now underway: 1) Hebron, 2) civilian issues, 3) security issues, 4) economic issues, and 5) the Rafah airfield. Unfortunately, with last week's crisis there is a new status quo in the territories of broken trust and lost confidence; repairing it will require innovation and change. The Israelis will not ask to amend the Oslo agreements. The Palestinians, however, will have to accept technical changes in procedural aspects of the implementation of the agreements.

Hebron. Hebron is an important issue that remains to be resolved but regrettably, there is probably too much emphasis placed on it relative to other issues. To let Hebron be the yardstick of progress will almost ensure a further catastrophe. At the best of times, Hebron is a "mess" and at the worst of times it is a "damn mess." Examining the Oslo guidelines for Hebron illustrates its special intricacies: the portion of the town from where Israel is to redeploy will not become Zone A, as would be the case in other towns; instead it will become Zone H-1 where police will have "similar" responsibilities to those in the other West Bank towns, but not identical responsibility. Moreover, in Zone H-2 the Israelis will retain a police presence although the PA will have "civil powers" in the area, except for those areas which affect Israeli persons and property. Similarly, Palestinian municipal inspectors, plain-clothes police without weapons, will also remain in this zone. Hebron rules, therefore, are full of ambiguity, a recipe for clashes and anxiety in even the best of times. Thus it is important to complement movement on the Hebron track with movement on other areas, especially economics.

Peace process. The peace process is by no means out of the woods. A chance occurrence—such as a traffic accident—could reignite violence. And although it has been over six months since a terrorist attack occurred, now would be an ideal time for Hamas or Islamic Jihad to deal it a death blow. Vigilance and extreme caution are necessary to prevent such an attack.

Furthermore, the Oslo process does not exist in a vacuum. What happens in the Israel-Palestinian track reverberates throughout the region, and vice versa. The danger lies in the fact that while the positive steps toward cooperation move slowly and incrementally, negative steps toward regression and hostility gather steam quite rapidly. With the war scare in Syria and negative statements coming out of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, it will take very little for the process to fall apart, and require heroic efforts to put it back together.

APPENDIX Excerpts from Article VII of Oslo II

Guidelines for Hebron 1. a. There will be redeployment of Israeli military forces in the city of Hebron except for places and roads where arrangements are necessary for the security and protection of Israelis and their movements.

b. This redeployment will be completed not later than six months after the signing of this Agreement.

2. a. The Palestinian Police will assume responsibilities in Area H-1 similar to those in other cities in the West Bank.

b. All civil powers and responsibilities, set out in Annex III of this Agreement, will be transferred to the Council in the City of Hebron as in the other cities in the West Bank. c. Palestinian police stations or posts will be established in

Area H-1, manned by a total of up to 400 policemen, equipped with 20 vehicles and armed with 200 pistols, and 100 rifles for the protection of those stations. d. The Palestinian Police shall operate freely in Area H-1. Any activity or movement by it outside this area will be carried out after coordination and confirmation through the DCO established in paragraph 6 of this Article. e. The Imara will be turned over to the Palestinian side upon the completion of the redeployment, and will become the headquarters of the Palestinian Police in the city of Hebron.

3. According to the DOP, Israel will continue to carry the responsibility for overall security of Israelis for the purpose of safeguarding their internal security and public order.

4. a. In the area of the city of Hebron from which Israel military forces will not redeploy, Israel will retain all powers and responsibilities for internal security and public order. b. In Area H-2, the civil powers and responsibilities will be transferred to the Council, except for those relating to Israelis and their property which shall continue to be exercised by Israeli Military Government. c. In Area H-2, plainclothes unarmed municipal inspectors will monitor and enforce vis-a-vis Palestinians, compliance with the laws and regulations, within the civil powers and responsibilities transferred to the Council in Hebron.

12. Hebron will continue to be one city, and the division of security responsibility will not divide the city.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Lauren Rossman.

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