

The Palestinian Intifada: Lessons and Prospects (Part II)

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Brief Analysis

In late October 2004, the Israeli parliament will debate Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan for "disengagement" from Gaza and the northern West Bank. This plan was born of Israel's experience over the course of the four-year-old Palestinian intifada. Understanding the rationale for disengagement requires a review of the lessons that Israel has learned from this conflict.

A Turning Point

The outbreak of Palestinian violence in late September 2000 was not a surprise. Israel's defense establishment had anticipated that Palestinians would employ violence following the breakdown of the Camp David summit in July of that year, as had been the case during previous crisis points in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Yet, hardly anyone in Israel had anticipated a prolonged armed conflict of this sort, characterized by such frequent suicide bombings. It took the Israelis a relatively long time, with a heavy toll, to adjust to the new reality.

In retrospect, the watershed in this adjustment process was March 2002, the peak of the terror campaign, a month during which 135 Israelis were killed and over 700 wounded. Lethal attacks occurred almost daily, and Israelis lost their sense of personal and national security. The worst incident was the bombing at the Park Hotel in Netanya, where thirty people celebrating a Passover seder were killed.

Israeli Decisions and Security Lessons

That bloody month had a profound psychological impact on Israelis. In response, the Israeli government adopted two strategic decisions designed to put a halt to the deteriorating situation: first, to implement large-scale and continuous offensive measures to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure in its breeding centers inside Palestinian cities and refugee camps, an effort that evolved into "Operation Defensive Shield"; and second, to take the defensive step of constructing a physical barrier—the West Bank fence—to block the free passage of terrorists into Israel. These decisions were coupled with the following operational lessons, learned and implemented over time:

- **Comprehensiveness.** Israeli strategists came to realize that countering a terror campaign requires more than just focusing on the military operational level, with simultaneous offensive and defensive efforts. A more comprehensive

effort is needed, one that addresses all of the supporting elements that exist to facilitate the terror campaign against Israel, from financing to the civilian institutions of the Islamist groups (a.k.a. the Dawa).

- **Precise, actionable intelligence.** Israel came to realize that the essential infrastructure for gathering intelligence, both human and technological, must be complemented by a mechanism designed to digest all incoming intelligence, fuse it into usable form, and disseminate it to operational units that can act on it within a relevant timeframe (often measured in minutes).
- **Targeting terrorist leadership.** After long internal deliberation, Israel concluded that its campaign against terrorism would be best served if the "political" leadership of such groups as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad no longer enjoyed immunity from retaliation. This immunity had effectively distinguished them from the groups' operational leaders and field agents. From Israel's perspective, however, the so-called political leaders were at least as responsible for terrorist attacks as the operational figures, since they gave strategic direction on matters of terrorism (e.g., Shaykh Ahmed Yassin's ruling in early 2004 that women were eligible to carry out Hamas suicide operations). Accordingly, the Israeli mindset evolved from dealing solely with suicide bombers to dealing with the producers and launchers of these "ticking bombs." It took Israel more than three years to reach the decision to eliminate Yassin (mistakenly regarded by many as a religious authority) and his successor, Abdul Aziz Rantisi. The result of these actions was a considerable weakening of Hamas, which now lacks authoritative leadership and a unified voice.
- **Dealing with the phenomenon of suicide bombing.** Israel came to realize that its operational answers to suicide bombings—responsible for most Israeli fatalities—were insufficient. The problem requires a holistic approach that addresses the unique aspects of a Palestinian society that produces suicide bombers in such large numbers. Accordingly, the Israeli government charged various interagency task groups with assessing this phenomenon—its roots, characteristics, and methods—and suggesting ways of dealing with it, in all relevant realms (i.e., operationally, technologically, socially, psychologically, religiously, etc.). The core question was (and remains) how to affect the motivation of a potential bomber, not just his or her ability to carry out an attack.
- **Improving force and civilian protection.** This step included providing protective gear to soldiers and vehicles moving and operating throughout the territories, alongside the introduction of new operational procedures. Obviously, the volume and severity of casualties had a significant effect on Israeli responses. Lowering the number of casualties created an environment that was less pressing in terms of decisionmaking.

The Effectiveness of Israeli Measures

Over time, the Israeli measures described above proved quite effective. Since March 2002, Israel has managed to reduce the number of terrorist attacks as well as the number of its fatalities; both have decreased by about 70 percent. Specifically, terrorist attacks killed 452 Israelis in 2002, 214 in 2003, and 100 in 2004 (through October 1). Of the 138 successful suicide bombings conducted over the past four years (i.e., not including those that were thwarted or that failed), 60 were carried out in 2002, 26 in 2003, and 13 in 2004. At the same time, the percentage of total attacks that Israel was able to prevent increased significantly, from about 30 percent in early 2002 to the current rate of about 90 percent. Although the situation is still fragile, life in Israel has begun to return to pre-intifada normalcy.

Notwithstanding disputes and mistakes in determining the precise route of the West Bank barrier, there is no doubt that it has played a major role in preventing terrorists from infiltrating Israel. When the portion of the fence in the northern part of the West Bank was completed and became operational, the number of attacks from that area—long the primary hotbed of terrorism against Israel—declined sharply. The fence forces terrorists to relocate southward, into areas without such a barrier, prolonging their preparations and movements and thus giving the Israeli security

forces a better chance to stop them.

Shortcomings

Despite the above successes, the number of Palestinian terrorist attacks moving to the implementation stage has not decreased significantly. Israel's main achievement has been in preventing these attacks from materializing or succeeding. Essentially, then, Israeli strategy has considerably eroded Palestinian capabilities but not Palestinian motivation. There is still no shortage of young people willing to volunteer for suicide bombings. Their motivation emanates primarily from the deteriorating political and socioeconomic situation and from extremist indoctrination, which continues unabated and has yet to be delegitimized by any political or spiritual authority.

Although suicide bombers do not care for their own lives, they do care for their families. A suicide bomber can be a significant boon to his or her family's economic and social status in Palestinian society. The \$25,000 that Saddam Hussein paid to such families—a huge sum in local terms—was only one manifestation of this problem. Israel has been trying to change this reality by taking measures to stop the flow of "compensation" funds and to punish those families that know in advance about intended suicide attacks. So far, these measures have produced only modest success. Operational initiatives have decreased the potency of Palestinian terrorism, but a long-term solution will require the development of additional tools (e.g., political, economic) in order to transform the environment into a peaceful one.

One of the most serious shortcomings of Israel's counterterrorism strategy has been the negative effect of certain measures on the sizable segment of the Palestinian population not involved in terrorism. The Israeli military has been drawn into large-scale action against terrorist infrastructure intentionally nested within heavily populated civilian areas. As a result, Israel has been caught in the dilemma of balancing its own security needs with the needs of the Palestinian population. Despite its best efforts, Israel has periodically failed to strike the best possible balance. In fact, some of its measures have had the unintended consequence of fueling the conflict instead of limiting it. One important conclusion is that fighting terrorism in heavily populated areas inevitably produces friction with the local population, and that such friction can be reduced but not eliminated. Israel's growing appreciation of this dilemma—and of the price it pays in terms of its future relationship with the Palestinians and its standing in the international community—has been a major factor in popularizing the concept of "separation" among Israelis, convincing many that they are better off with a policy that includes disengagement, the fence, and a gradual reduction in the number of Palestinian laborers in Israel through economic solutions within the territories.

Unilateralism

The most important Israeli conclusion, currently shared by most Israelis, is that there can be no partner on the Palestinian side as long as Yasser Arafat continues to hold power. This is true not only for diplomatic negotiations but also for the more modest goal of stabilizing the situation. Although Israel accepted the notion of a two-state solution and the Quartet's Roadmap for Middle East Peace, both of which grew out of the intifada, the popular impression of the Oslo experience together with four years of ongoing confrontation have caused Israelis to despair of the prospects for a bilateral deal. The alternative opted for by Israel is unilateralism: to fight terrorism without relying on Palestinian cooperation, to build a separation fence, and, ultimately, to disengage from Gaza. The result is that the intifada, a Palestinian initiative, has led Israel to take the initiative itself.

A Critical Juncture

The outlook for this concrete strategy of unilateralism is unclear—it offers major opportunities but also poses significant dangers. Will unilateralism strengthen Palestinian reformers, or will it embolden the radicals and terrorists? Although much depends on how the Israelis and Palestinians play their hands, a great deal also depends on the involvement of external actors.

In recent years, the international community has played a backseat role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Seeing little prospect for a solution, recognizing that the confrontation produces little spillover in terms of regional stability and oil prices, and preoccupied with other regional crises such as Iraq, key international players have not responded to the Palestinian call for direct and heavy involvement in this issue. With disengagement now at center stage, a different sort of international activism may be warranted—actions that can help make disengagement a success story. With U.S. leadership, international actors have a role to play on the economic, diplomatic, and security fronts to help launch Israeli-Palestinian coordination on the ground and to ensure that disengagement proceeds in as peaceful a fashion as possible. Such assistance can help foster a Palestinian administration in Gaza that functions as well as possible and that assumes responsibility for the security situation. Although the intifada produced a consensus about a negotiated, two-state solution, that solution looks as far away as ever, with the focus now resting on conflict management. The success or failure of disengagement will, to a great extent, determine whether a return to the peace process is a possibility or a fantasy.

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