

# The Palestinian Intifada (Part I):

## Palestinian Lessons and Prospects

by [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

Sep 29, 2004

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.

---



### Brief Analysis

**T**he Palestinian intifada against Israel, this week entering its fifth year, has wreaked havoc on both Israelis and Palestinians. In Palestinian quarters, it has provoked considerable soul-searching about the wisdom of resorting to terrorism as a tool in the confrontation with Israel. Yasser Arafat remains the Palestinians' paramount political leader, though his standing is diminished at home and abroad. Israel managed to considerably reduce the level and volume of terror against it, but also decided to disengage from Gaza.

### Background

In contrast to the first intifada, which began in December 1987 when the Palestinian issue had been relegated to the sidelines of Arab and international politics, the current intifada erupted in late September 2000 under very different circumstances. Not only did it break out with a Palestinian Authority (PA) well entrenched in Gaza and parts of the West Bank, but it followed by just two months the Palestinian rejection of a viable political option for a peaceful settlement of the conflict with Israel, proposed at the Camp David summit. On the ground, the second intifada is essentially an armed conflict. What has especially characterized the second intifada is the use of terror against Israeli targets, both in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and in pre-1967 Israel, which has often prompted large-scale Israeli retaliation. The major innovation in Palestinian tactics has been the extensive use of suicide bombers, who have served as a kind of precision-guided "smart" munition. Hundreds of such bombers, among them women and children, have been launched and have proved to be quite effective. In fact, while suicide bombings have constituted less than 1 percent of all Palestinian armed attacks, they have been responsible for more than 50 percent of all Israeli fatalities. This "success" has not been lost on other Middle Eastern terrorist groups, which have adopted suicide bombing as the poor man's answer to the military might of their enemies.

### Origin

There is controversy about the origin of the intifada. Was it, as the Palestinian narrative suggests, the outcome of growing Palestinian resentment at continual Israeli provocations, from settlement building to Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount, compounded by the frustration of the failed Camp David summit and the apparent closing of a political horizon to settle the conflict with Israel? Or, as the Israeli narrative argues, was the intifada an instrument of

a deliberate Palestinian policy to discard the pre-Oslo commitment of Arafat to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to settle "all outstanding issues " through peaceful means, and instead to use terror to extricate from Israel what could not have been achieved through negotiations, including the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees into the state of Israel? What is beyond doubt is that Arafat's approach toward Israel was to pursue two tracks simultaneously—the diplomatic/political track and the terror/violence track—and that he took pains to ensure that the latter option would be available whenever necessary. At the very least, once the uprising broke out, Arafat took no steps to halt or delegitimize it. Indeed, according to Israeli intelligence, he encouraged and funded it. From the outset, Arafat made no secret of his view that the uprising could be used to advance Palestinian political goals. In this sense, the intifada was in large measure a top-down phenomenon.

### From Terror to Anarchy

The intifada has extracted a heavy toll on both sides. Among Israelis, the number of deaths recently passed 1,000, an exceedingly high number given Israel's small population. Not only were most of those deaths civilians, but more civilians have been killed due to hostile action during the current intifada than the combined number of civilians killed by terrorism, war, and other hostile action in all the previous years of Israel's existence. On the Palestinian side, the death toll is two to three times higher, though credible figures are difficult to ascertain, given that many Palestinian reports and international nongovernmental organization fatality assessments include people who did not die as a direct result of the armed conflict. Some even include suicide bombers among the Palestinian casualties.

Beyond the death and violence, the intifada has severely damaged both the Palestinian and Israeli economies and heightened the level of insecurity within both societies. Many have lost their faith in the possibility of peaceful coexistence and in the very idea that cooperation and enlightened self-interest could lead to peace. Both sides have lost much more than they have achieved.

One repercussion of the Palestinian use of terror was the spread of anarchy within the PA itself. As anarchy broadened, it was increasingly difficult to find a Palestinian voice willing and able to exert authority and stabilize the situation. Paradoxically, this chaos was tacitly encouraged by Arafat himself, who seems to have concluded that it would trigger greater international involvement and position him as the only leader capable of exerting control over the deteriorating situation. The result was quite different from what he had hoped.

Against this background, considerable time and energy have been spent on both sides trying to learn the lessons of what has happened since September 2000. The balance of this article addresses Palestinian lessons learned. **Part II (templateC05.php?CID=2172)** will address Israeli and international lessons learned.

### Questioning the Utility of Terror

For Palestinians, the most important question has concerned the wisdom and utility of employing terrorism in the conflict with Israel. Among most Palestinians the use of violence as a political tool remains both popular and legitimate; a sizable percentage believe that anti-Israel violence was the main cause of Israel's decision to withdraw from Gaza. At the same time, however, there is growing internal criticism within important political, media, and intellectual circles against what is termed "the militarization of the intifada." This refers to the use of terror—especially suicide bombers—against Israeli targets, particularly against civilians and inside pre-1967 Israel. This line of thinking was voiced as early as late 2002 by the future prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas (a.k.a. Abu Mazen), in a closed meeting of the heads of the popular committees of the Gaza refugee camps; his views were later published and provoked considerable public controversy. At the time Abbas was a rather solitary voice, but his critique has gained adherents over the past year and now seems to reflect the current thinking of mainstream political circles. In April 2004, for example, the PA daily al-Ayyam published a supplement titled "The Road to Independence and Peace," which included a series of articles calling for a halt to violence.

## A Lesser Arafat

To be sure, the internal Palestinian debate is not about the ethical dimension of using terror but about its usefulness in promoting the Palestinian cause. Implicit in this debate is substantial criticism of Arafat. One conclusion shared to varying degrees by an increasing number of Palestinians is that he is no longer part of the Palestinian solution but rather a major part of the problem. In this view, Palestinians are joining most other concerned parties. A large majority of Israelis believe nothing positive can emerge as long as Arafat remains in power; Arab leaders have grown increasingly fed up with Arafat and are making fewer excuses for him; the U.S. administration has advocated, since June 2002, the emergence of "new leadership" for Palestinians; and even once-sympathetic international figures, like UN special coordinator for the peace process Terje Larsen, have soured on the chairman. Indeed, one unmistakable outcome of the intifada has been the shrinking of Arafat's standing in both Palestinian politics and on the world stage. He is now an isolated and discredited figure. Many are willing to grant him his historic rights as the "founding father" of the Palestinian national movement, but they yearn for reform within the Palestinian political leadership and governing system. Long the subject of private, salon conversation, this view has burst open in public. Indeed, one of the effects of the intifada seems to be the awakening among Palestinians of a need for profound political reform. Yet, although there is considerable overlap between the proponents of reform and the opponents of a militarized intifada, they are not necessarily identical; some "democrats" are true militants and vice versa.

Despite this critique of Arafat and of the use of terror, little has actually changed on the ground, although there is a dynamic of incremental change. The considerable reduction in the number and impact of Palestinian terrorist attacks, especially over the past year, is principally due to effective Israeli preemption and prevention, not to any substantial change in Palestinian behavior. Even if the circle of those actively engaged in terror has decreased to some extent, there are still many who undoubtedly retain the motivation and zeal to continue the violent war against Israel. These people are constantly pushed forward by the "hard nucleus" of the terror groups.

The anarchy that has emerged as a result of the uprising has created a vacuum that is being filled by competing forces. These include, on the one hand, Palestinians seeking reform and/or the suspension of the use of violence and terror, and, on the other hand, extremist, mostly Islamist, forces actively advocating the continuation of the armed struggle. These forces are not only internal. Coupled with the fact that Hamas and other Islamist forces have found themselves on the defensive in the face of heavy Israeli attacks, the chaotic internal situation has made possible substantial external involvement in Palestinian terrorism. For players like Iran and Hizballah, the situation inside the West Bank and Gaza offers a golden opportunity to exercise their "jihadist" identity and beliefs, especially at a time when circumstances compel Hizballah to restrain itself on the Israeli-Lebanese front.

The involvement of outside parties has grown steadily and now accounts for a major part of terrorist activities against Israel. According to official Israeli data, Hizballah is currently operating about forty-five terrorist cells in the West Bank and Gaza, providing them with funding, know-how, instructions, and operational guidelines. These cells are responsible for about 25 percent of all Israeli casualties since the beginning of 2004. Tehran is deeply involved in sponsoring these activities from behind the scenes; Syria, albeit under external pressure of its own, still allows the headquarters and operatives of the main terrorist groups to operate from its soil. Hence, efforts to stabilize the situation on the Palestinian front will require dealing with both the internal and the external sources of instability.

As for Arafat, he is gradually weakening and certainly lacks his stature of earlier years. But while he no longer has the ability to create something new and positive, he still possesses the power to undermine and destroy any positive gains coming from another source. He has already succeeded in paralyzing the two Palestinian prime ministers appointed during the uprising, Abu Mazen and the current premier, Ahmed Qurei (a.k.a. Abu Ala). In blocking the empowerment of new Palestinian leadership, Arafat effectively helps create the vacuum that allows the most negative trends in Palestinian politics to operate and gather strength.

After four years, the question of the day is "What is to be done about Arafat?" Because he retains the power to be a spoiler, most observers agree that ignoring him is not going to make the problem disappear. For some Israelis, the conclusion is that Arafat should be forcibly taken out of the picture; the Israeli government may hold this view in principle but is reluctant to implement it for fear it may backfire. For some Europeans and Arabs, the conclusion is that efforts to stabilize Palestinian politics have to go through Arafat once again, despite all the problems he poses. More and more people within and outside the PA, however, believe that Arafat must be marginalized as a prerequisite for progress toward peace, and that the best way to achieve this, over time, is by separating Arafat the symbol from Arafat the power broker, through internal and external pressures.

Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog (Israel Defense Forces), former top military aide to Israel's minister of defense, is currently a visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute.

[Read Part II of this two-part series. \(templateC05.php?CID=2172\)](#) ❖

Policy #474

---

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

# Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

## TOPICS

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](/policy-analysis/peace-process)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](/policy-analysis/terrorism)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](/policy-analysis/palestinians)