

Israel's Security:

The Hard-Learned Lessons

Feb 1, 2004



Articles & Testimony

Between September 1993 and September 2000, the Middle East was the setting for a great historical experiment: the effort to negotiate a final resolution of the decades-old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The experiment failed, and disastrously so. Oslo diplomacy -- which takes its name from the site of the original back-channel negotiations between Israeli academics and Palestinian officials -- came to a standstill with the collapse of the Camp David summit in July 2000. Soon thereafter, one side, the Palestinian, opted to replace negotiations with war, launched under the misnomer of a popular uprising (intifada). More than three years later, Israelis and Palestinians continue to suffer death, injury, and economic privation.

All observers were stunned by the rapid collapse of the security arrangements that were at the heart of the Oslo concept. How could the negotiators of the various Oslo-era accords create a situation that permitted the Palestinians to prepare for terror-based war while limiting and even restricting Israel's options to respond? How could a generation of experienced, professional, security specialists -- many of them battle-hardened veterans -- fail to take into account the possibility that Oslo could be exploited by the Palestinians as a platform for war, not a basis for peace?

Answering this question is not merely an interesting historical exercise. Many well-meaning and peace-loving people -- such as those involved in the Geneva track-two effort to negotiate an Israeli-Palestinian permanent status agreement -- base their future peacemaking assumptions on the tentative security arrangement allegedly agreed upon in the summer of 2000, prior to the outbreak of war.

While many obstacles block the resumption of negotiations -- such as the illegitimacy in the eyes of Israel and the United States of a Yasir Arafat-controlled Palestinian leadership -- it is widely believed in diplomatic circles that when negotiations eventually do resume, they will begin where the two sides left off before the current hostilities. Although those same security arrangements failed to prevent -- and perhaps even contributed to -- the current Israeli-Palestinian war, that fact has not stopped planners from taking them as a base line. Indeed, in key aspects of the Geneva draft accord, those very same security arrangements have been regurgitated without a common-sense effort to evaluate what went wrong with them in the first place.

The purpose of this article is to make just that evaluation and draw conclusions from it.

Israeli Desiderata

Israeli strategists, in planning for permanent status negotiations prior to 2000, sought solutions for two possible types of security threats: a conventional military threat from the eastern front and a terrorist threat from rejectionist groups, both religious and secular, within the Palestinian territories themselves.

As for the conventional threat, Israel's approach was that security arrangements should not inhibit Israel from defending itself against a threat from the east. In practice, this meant that:

- in times of peace and low apparent threat, Israel's military presence in the territories would be minimal, limited to two or three early warning systems;
- in times of emergency, Israel would be allowed to deploy forces in specified areas in the West Bank that were defined as necessary for Israel's defense. Such deployment would occur only after Israel proved to the United States the compelling, real, and imminent need to act.

As for the threat of terrorism, planners believed that a combination of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation and Palestinian self-interest would provide an adequate response.[1] In practice, this meant that:

- the main responsibility for fighting terrorism within the area of Palestinian control was given to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and delegated to its various security organizations;
- Israel agreed to cooperate with PA security apparatuses by providing them with intelligence and assisting their efforts without violating the Palestinians' quasi-sovereignty;
- Israel would restrict its role at international transit points, such as airports and seaports, to an invisible presence so as not to appear to violate Palestinian quasi-sovereignty;
- Palestinians themselves would be responsible for protecting their external borders with Jordan and Egypt, with some support and assistance from international forces.

Together, these were the principles that characterized Israel's approach to the negotiations over security arrangements at Camp David in July 2000. They all need to be revisited in light of the war that has been waged against Israel ever since.

Control of Territory

The most significant aspect of the Oslo experiment, from 1993 to 2000, was the surrender of control over Palestinian populated areas. It was due largely to this surrender that the Palestinians were able to launch and fight a war that, in its first three years, cost Israel nearly 900 lives, mostly civilians.[2] (While Israel eventually did reassert control in populated areas throughout most of the West Bank and Gaza, the damage had already been done.) In comparison, during the final seventeen months of Israel's military deployment in southern Lebanon, Israel lost a total of just twenty-one people -- all soldiers -- resulting in fewer casualties than the number of civilians killed in many single Palestinian terror attacks.

Control of territory is an essential advantage in fighting terror. It is the key to gathering intelligence. Without control, it is exponentially more difficult to recruit agents and sources, to monitor suspects and terror sites, to question and arrest terror suspects, and to take the many measures by which counterterrorist experts learn the terrorists' modus operandi and prevent terrorists from getting close to their target. A military force without control of the territory from which terrorism emanates cannot destroy the infrastructure of terrorism (such as laboratories, training centers, and safe houses). Without territorial control, counterterrorism operations become risky, both in terms of physical danger and political cost.

Absent physical control, there are fewer counterterror operations, and the terrorists can more easily recover when those operations that do occur are concluded. When Israel maintained control of the populated areas of the West Bank and Gaza, its line of defense against terrorism was in the cities and towns from which the terrorists set forth. In the absence of such control, Israel's real line of defense is its own cities and towns. And because the terrorists target civilians, their success is almost assured.

A second lesson of the Oslo experience is that the lack of Israeli control of territory also provided the Palestinians with opportunities to enhance their own military capabilities. Compare, for example, the experience of the first major Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the real intifada of 1987-93, with the experience of the post-Camp David war.

During the intifada, Israel was in control of all the territory in the West Bank and Gaza. Despite the military challenges of that conflict, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were able to rely solely on light weapons (e.g., guns and nightsticks) and jeeps to suppress Palestinians, without resort to tanks, helicopters, armored personnel carriers, or F-16s. But once the PA had taken responsibility for security in the Palestinian areas, they built an infrastructure for launching large-scale assaults on Israel. Whereas the 69 months of the intifada saw just 160 Israelis killed, in the first 36 months of the post-Camp David war nearly 900 Israelis were killed. This means that Israel suffered more than five times the deaths in just half the time.

This wide disparity is mainly due to the Oslo security concept that deprived Israel of the ability to combat terror actively and instead gave the Palestinians the opportunity to regroup in areas under PA control. Indeed, the most important factor differentiating the intifada from the current war is the fact that Palestinians were able to maintain a safe haven for terror from 1993 until April 2002, when IDF troops finally reasserted Israeli control in populated areas.

Based on this experience, Israel must realize that it would be a grave risk if it were to cede total territorial control to the Palestinians in any future agreement. Israel suffered heavy casualties when the PA was only on the road to sovereignty; the price might be even higher were a fully sovereign Palestinian state to decide to go to war. In those circumstances, reoccupying Palestinian population centers, as Israel did in April 2002, would be more difficult, complicated, and costly. Indeed, given the IDF's structural limitations and the exponential growth of Palestinian capabilities from the intifada to the present war, it may not even be possible for Israeli forces to retake Palestinian cities in a future war.

To protect against another security fiasco, Israel needs to insist on two new principles in defining security arrangements within the context of a future peace agreement:

- If the Palestinians do not actively, persistently, and explicitly fight terror, the agreement should allow Israel to take its own counterterrorism measures in the territory under Palestinian sovereignty.
- If terrorism is conducted against Israel from Palestinian territories, then the agreement should permit IDF operations in the territory under Palestinian sovereignty.

Israel must insist on retaining the right to operate throughout the territory in perpetuity, not only for a limited number of years, not only in emergency situations, and not only upon the approval of third parties.

Border Control

A second Israeli security requirement in future negotiations concerns border control. The importance of this issue is clear from a comparison of Israel's experience in Lebanon and in the Palestinian areas.

In Lebanon, Hizbullah received a steady stream of weapons, and its ability to fight increased after every round of conflict with the IDF because of resupply from Iran and Syria. Israel's situation vis--vis the Palestinians could be even worse. The latter have already displayed an impressive ability to circumvent security arrangements through smuggling, such as the fifty tons of seaborne weapons destined for the PA that were intercepted by the IDF in January 2002. Add to this the fact that the geography and topography of the West Bank permit the Palestinians to pose a strategic threat to Israel's main population centers, something Hizbullah was never able to do. If Israel acceded to security arrangements that gave Palestinians control over their borders with Egypt and Jordan, it is safe to assume that weapons would flow freely into the West Bank and Gaza, with potentially catastrophic implications.

In any future negotiations, Israel must give a high priority to preventing the Palestinian acquisition of enhanced weaponry. Only Israeli border control can effectively prevent Palestinian efforts to smuggle weapons and munitions from neighboring countries. Israel, therefore, must ensure that the Palestinian state does not have contiguous,

unfettered contact with its Arab neighbors, Egypt and Jordan.

The same logic underlies Israel's need to control international passageways such as airports and seaports. Israel must retain the ability to check all imports into the Palestinian areas, whether personal or commercial goods. An invisible presence, with international forces or Palestinian customs agents doing the actual work -- as envisioned in previous Oslo agreements and in the recent Geneva accord -- will not suffice. Unless Israel can construct a security envelope around the Palestinian areas, controlling what comes in and goes out, it is likely to face a Palestinian threat more dangerous than anything it ever faced in Lebanon.

Israel Fights Alone

A seminal lesson of the Oslo experience is the need for Israel to retain, in perpetuity, both the right and ability to combat terror independently of other actors. From the moment the PA took control of territory in 1994, it never truly fought terrorism; despite Palestinian pretense, most Israeli and international terrorism experts knew the PA efforts were just a charade. It was a naive and costly belief -- made famous by the late prime minister Yitzhak Rabin -- that the Palestinians would fight terror more readily than Israel because they lack an interventionist judiciary (such as the Israeli Supreme Court) or vocal human rights organizations (such as B'Tselem).

While Israel should welcome the cooperation of others -- including the Palestinians -- it now knows from bitter experience what can happen when it handcuffs its own ability to fight terror for the sake of a political accord. Israel should accept no restraints. It must retain its capability to collect intelligence inside the Palestinian area. This means insisting that in any permanent status accord, the Palestinians must accept continued collection by Israel of human intelligence as well as an agreed set of aerial reconnaissance flights (by day and night). Israel also must insist that Palestinians recognize Israel's right to detain, arrest, and interrogate terrorist suspects in the event the Palestinians do not take action against such suspects themselves. Moreover, mechanisms must be created by which the Palestinians share all terrorism-related information with Israel; full transparency is essential.

Should these terms not be included in a permanent status agreement, Palestinian extremists are certain to expand their terrorist capabilities.

Fewer Forces and Guns

When the first Oslo agreements were signed (Oslo I in 1993 and Oslo II in 1995), most of Israel's negotiators never conceived of Palestinian security and intelligence organizations as potential enemies. Instead, they sought to strengthen these institutions as much as possible so they could play their expected role in fighting terror.

Unfortunately, these terror fighters -- including PA police and intelligence organizations -- were themselves terror purveyors. They played an active role in such episodes of terrorism as the 1997 Hasmonean Tunnel riots and the launching of the post-Camp David war in 2000.

Israel needs to re-think the Oslo-era assumption that stronger PA security forces mean more security for Israel. Instead, Israel should seek to limit Palestinian security organization to the smallest and weakest force capable of providing necessary police functions in PA territory. This would mean a reduction in the number of competing and overlapping forces, shrinkage of the total manpower, and collection of most of the weapons in the hands of the various forces.

A weak military force will contribute to peace and stability in Palestinian society and in its relations with Israel. The emphasis on strong police forces, instead of providing the PA with the tools to fight terror, only fed the PA's authoritarian power and its appetite for more terror against Israel. And at least in the security realm, one may reasonably question the new conventional wisdom that maintains that more centralization and clearer lines of control are conducive to peace. In an authoritarian regime, centralization may certainly improve efficiency, but that is only desirable if the security forces themselves are committed to fighting terrorism.

The 1993-2000 experience also underscores an important lesson about another key feature of Oslo security arrangements: the supposed benefits of security cooperation. The fact is that six years of Israeli-Palestinian joint patrols and combined headquarters contributed virtually nothing to mutual understanding on both sides. In practice, the daily regimen of "jointness" provided no barrier against terrorism and did not even prove to be an obstacle to the use of Palestinian security forces in direct conflict against Israel. In the future, a wholly different approach is called for: both parties would be wise to restrict security cooperation to those situations and areas in which neither side is able to act solely by itself.

Agreed Separation

Across the political spectrum, from the moderate left to the moderate right, Israelis have embraced the "security fence" as a solution to a seemingly insoluble epidemic of terrorism. The fence has become the answer for those who see no hope for diplomacy, at least in the foreseeable future.

While most see no need for a bilateral agreement regarding the fence -- after all, it can be built unilaterally, as is currently the case -- few take into account that unilateralism is a two-way street. It frees the other side to take certain actions that may be deleterious to Israel's security interests. In this respect, Israel's security would be significantly enhanced if it could reach agreement with the Palestinian side on construction of the fence. Such an agreement might commit Palestinians to take action to prevent, or at least not assist, efforts to destroy the fence and may even win Palestinian commitment to certain security measures that inhibit infiltration. Of course, such an agreement with the Palestinians would come at a price.

Proponents of the fence should also realize that it is not a panacea. For example, the fence will not only impede terrorist infiltrators, it will also serve as a barrier to the free action of IDF troops. For one threat in particular, the fence is no solution at all: the use of mortars or katyushas. For this reason, even if there is no agreement over the fence, Israel should insist in future negotiations that Palestinians accept responsibility for preventing all fire from their territory and that Israel have the recognized right to take action against sources of fire in the event the Palestinians do not take adequate measures to stop or prevent it.

Here, the key issue is confidence, not sovereignty. Despite periodic terrorist attacks that emanate from Jordanian territory, for example, Israel does not feel it has to send the IDF into Jordan to take action on its own. That is because Israel is confident that Jordan is doing its best to prevent terrorism -- the 100-percent-effort yardstick so often cited by diplomats and journalists. With the PA, Israel's level of confidence is closer to zero.

When the time comes to demarcate the final border between Israel and the future state of Palestine, important security lessons from the Oslo experience need to be taken into consideration. Chief among these is the need for buffer areas to give Israel adequate depth to defend strategic roads and targets that are close to the border. Israel, for example, should insist on retaining control over an area at least three kilometers to the north of the main east-west road leading from Tel Aviv to north Jerusalem, which cannot be permitted to run so close to Palestinian-held territory. Similarly, Israel needs to retain ample space around its Central Command headquarters north of Jerusalem and around the area that controls the approaches and runways at Ben-Gurion International Airport.

As Israel defines its territorial interests vis--vis separation, it needs to include within its control not only West Bank territory needed to accommodate consensus areas of Jewish settlement but also territory that is essential solely for security reasons.

Lessons Learned?

It is said that military planners often make the mistake of preparing for the next war as if it will resemble the last war. In Israel's case, the even greater error would be to remain willfully blind to the lessons of the last war.

Incorporating the post-1993 lessons into Israel's strategy for peace negotiations may help avert a future Palestinian-

Israeli war that will make the current conflict pale in comparison.

It is important to note, however, that security arrangements are not the real hurdle to resuming negotiations. For Israel, the core problem is much deeper: it is a fundamental lack of trust of Palestinian intentions. It is the belief that Palestinians are using diplomacy to gain time, territory, weapons, and people with which to wage the next round of war against the Jewish state. Only profound change in Palestinian attitudes and behavior can address the lack of trust that Israelis across the political arena evince for the Palestinians.

To regain the trust of mainstream Israelis, Palestinians will have to address the belief that Palestinians do not recognize the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state in the Middle East. This manifests itself in two main ways:

- Palestinian refusal to fight anti-Israel terrorism, which can be viewed as an outgrowth of the ongoing war against the Jewish state. This can only be rectified through demonstrable and persistent efforts to fight terrorists, arrest the leaders of terrorist organizations, collect their weapons, and destroy their infrastructure. In this context, half-measures, such as ceasefires (what the Palestinians call hudnas), are not only inadequate but also dangerous because they provide terrorists with the breathing space to prepare for the next round of war. Once the Palestinians prove their bona fides in this regard, Israel can reciprocate by easing restrictions on the freedom of movement within and between Palestinian towns and villages and undertake other civil measures. But the first step must be a concerted, relentless, and unconditional Palestinian fight against terrorism, even terror that emanates from within elements of the PA itself.
- Palestinian incitement against Israel and Jews, which attacks the legitimacy of a Jewish state and even the humanity of Jews. Such incitement did not stop with Oslo; it got worse. In the future, Israel should condition any further peace negotiations on visible and deep-seated efforts by the Palestinian leadership to stop incitement and promote Palestinian recognition of the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state. Even if incitement is difficult to prevent completely, the PA wields such control over Palestinian media and education that it could effectively stop it if it chose to do so. A litmus test of Palestinian acceptance of Israel is a renunciation of the so-called "right of return," which constitutes a demand for Israel's dissolution.

A further way in which the Palestinians could earn the trust and confidence of Israelis is by changing the character of their internal political system. In the case of Egypt and Jordan, Israel was ready to make peace with authoritarian regimes that committed themselves to regional stability even if they had little respect for democracy and human rights at home. In the case of the Palestinians, who are entwined with Israel geographically, economically, and demographically, the situation is different: Palestinian democracy is an Israeli interest. Although this is a generational project, progress toward real Palestinian democracy -- such as the development of democratic institutions, the rule of law, and a vibrant, liberal civil society -- will go far toward building a healthier relationship between Israelis and Palestinians.

In the meantime, Israel should insist at least on a reduction in the level of corruption in the PA. Corruption is not only a cause of considerable suffering to the Palestinian people, but it also feeds an environment in which terrorism flourishes. The development of more accountable and responsible Palestinian governance is thus a direct Israeli interest. It is a vital way station along the road to a democratic future in which both Palestinians and Israelis will find security.

A final word: to many, the conditions and yardsticks outlined above may seem severe, especially in light of Israel's lax approach to security arrangements and political requirements throughout the Oslo era. Yet in some ways, these constitute Israel's minimum requirements. For even if Palestinians meet these demands, incidents and problems are sure to arise. However, in an environment in which Israel's Palestinian partner is viewed as doing everything possible to fight terror and maintain mutually beneficial relations with Israel, the level of risk becomes manageable.

The far more important question is whether creating the sort of regime outlined here is even possible. It would require that the Palestinian leadership accept significant limitations on Palestinian sovereignty in perpetuity to allow for Israel's security needs. The Palestinians will no doubt demand more. Yet one thing is certain: for Israel to accept anything less would ensure a future Palestinian-Israeli war on a scale never seen before.

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Notes

1. The possibility that the Palestinian Authority might actually view terror as advancing its own interest by serving as a pressure point against Israel was wholly contrary to the thinking of Israeli officials in this period. When, for example, intelligence experts told the Israeli government in 1995 that the PA might use terror as a tool of negotiations, a minister responded that the very idea did not make sense.
2. Yedi'ot Aharonot (Tel Aviv), Oct. 8, 2003. The 889 dead included 628 civilians and 261 members of the security forces. ❖

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