

## The War Ahead

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Articles & Testimony

**P**resident Bush should deliver one unambiguous message to Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) when they meet this Friday in Washington: The Palestinian Authority is going to war -- the only question is with whom. As Israel begins withdrawing from parts of Gaza and the West Bank, the Palestinian prime minister faces a choice: Either wage war against the terrorists or allow the newly created power vacuum to become a safe haven for them to regroup and launch a fresh round of attacks against Israelis.

If the former prevails, Abbas will honor the roadmap by dismantling the terrorist infrastructure. But if the latter wins out, he will become Yasser Arafat's understudy, guilty of talking peace while fanning violence. A showdown with Israel will be all but assured. Will Abbas stand up to the rejectionists or be their latest accomplice? The answer will determine whether he fights Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade or Ariel Sharon.

The good news is that a full 73 percent of the Palestinian public supports the 90-day Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire declared last month, according to the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), a top polling agency on Palestinian public opinion. The dire state of Palestinian society has evidently rekindled interest in negotiations with Israel. And the Bush administration's discreet but tough diplomacy calling on European and Arab capitals to threaten terrorist groups of funding has surely helped bring them to the table. Israel's controversial policy of targeted assassinations has apparently reinforced the point -- the terrorists are under the lens, at least for now -- so negotiate or else.

The bad news is that the current ceasefire does not mean that the terrorists have come to terms with a two-state solution. There is a modification of tactics not strategy, an expedient decision to temporarily take their hands off the trigger. When Palestinian Information Minister Nabil Amr recently suggested extending it beyond the three months, Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi mocked the idea as "dreams." This, after all, is Hamas's ninth ceasefire since the late 1980s. And it will probably not be the last. Leaders from the other major Palestinian opposition group, Islamic Jihad, have likewise publicly questioned agreeing to the momentary respite.

The problem is that Palestinian society continues to be gripped by the same decade-old paradox. According to the PSR data, about three-quarters of the public routinely conveys support for negotiations with Israel. But notwithstanding the cease-fire, half of all Palestinians condone the "armed intifada" -- code for terror. The unsaid assumption is that the best way to pursue talks with Israel is to supplement -- not supplant -- them with suicide attacks.

Such logic is not just deeply disturbing, it is unsound. While terrorism may bring international attention to the Palestinian plight, it will not improve it. Until the moderate majority distances itself from the extremists, the entire Palestinian public will de-legitimize itself as a viable partner for peace. This was the story of the Oslo "war process." As the leader of the moderate majority, Abbas must ensure that the rejectionists do not again hijack the negotiations with Israel.

Regrettably, the other paradox is that while three quarters of the Palestinian population now believes that terrorist

attacks "impede a return to the peace process," the vast majority of Palestinians still oppose efforts to confront head-on the spoilers to peace. Only 36 percent of Palestinians support "arresting individuals conducting violent attacks on Israelis" and only a quarter of the population agrees with "cutting off funding for groups engaged in terror and violence against Israelis." Clearly, Palestinian society still places greater value on maintaining peace with the terrorists than with Israel.

The trick for Abbas is to strike the terrorists when they are weak and not kick the can down the road. The conventional wisdom is that Israeli concessions can by themselves resolve the "terrorism problem" by bolstering support for the moderates. This view assumes that preemptively withdrawing from Palestinian dominated areas and easing travel restrictions into Israel will improve the lives of Palestinians, making terror a self-defeating and therefore unpopular policy. In this way, by giving the Palestinians a "stake in the system," terror can be delegitimized without having to confront it.

This position, while intuitively attractive, needs rethinking. The polling data over the past decade suggests that Palestinian terrorists, for the most part, are not motivated by economic considerations. True, the more moderate Fatah party routinely cites poverty as its primary concern and membership levels rise when times are good. And Hamas, the largest opposition group, has been able to attract thousands of supporters with its dense network of social welfare organizations. But these "swing voters" are generally not the "ticking time bombs" the Israel Defense Forces worry about.

The real question is what to do with the 10 to 15 percent of the Palestinian population that consistently ranks the destruction of Israel as its leading objective, well ahead of economic revitalization. This hardcore rejectionist nucleus has historically neither ebbed nor flowed in response to improvements or relapses in their economic livelihoods or any other yardstick for Israeli-Palestinian relations. Such data militates against the widespread notion that progress in the "peace process" will automatically eliminate terror.

If the past decade is any guide, diplomatic momentum will only enliven this violent rejectionist contingent, not cause it to fade away. This does not mean that Abbas is merely a stooge of the West as he is often portrayed in the Arab world. Already, his strong rhetorical stand against terrorism has contributed to the brief cessation of suicide attacks. But now is not the time to dither and launch recriminations against Israel. The Sharon government will have no choice but to fulfill its own Roadmap obligations if Abbas seizes this opportunity.

Bush should be clear: Will the untested Palestinian prime minister challenge the terrorists before they reconstitute their forces or defer the job to his Israeli counterpart? Both Israelis and Palestinians will be infinitely better off if it is Abbas who steps up to the plate. ❖

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