

The 'Cycle of Violence' Fallacy

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Articles & Testimony

The Arab-Israeli conflict is often framed as a "cycle of violence." A strong Israeli policy against Palestinian terrorism will only spawn more attacks against Israel, goes the logic. Conversely, if only Israel made unilateral concessions to the Palestinians, it would find a partner for peace. This is the conventional wisdom. And it is wrong.

This past weekend, for example, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon met with his Palestinian counterpart Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) for the highest-ranking talks between Israel and the Palestinians since the second Intifada began almost three years ago. Sharon pledged to improve the humanitarian situation in the Palestinian-dominated West Bank and Gaza, at which point Mazen declared, "Palestinians promise to make a genuine and real effort to stop terror." This is precisely the type of peaceful chain reaction that the prevailing "cycle of violence" formula envisages.

Or is it? Just a few hours later, a Hamas terrorist blew himself up on an Israeli commuter bus, killing seven, wounding 20, and throwing this theory on its head. The terrorist attack was a response not to an Israeli incursion into Palestinian territory, as the "cycle of violence" theory hypothesizes, but to the kind of Israeli overtures that terrorism apologists repeatedly champion. In fact, for rejectionist terrorist groups, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the timing of the blast could not have been better. In addition to his get-together with Mazen, Sharon was slated in the coming days to meet with President Bush to discuss implementing the road map. According to Bush-administration officials, Israel had hinted that it was prepared to ease up on closures, checkpoints, work permits, and other restrictions on Palestinians, as well as release large numbers of Palestinian prisoners and detainees. The meeting was being billed as the most important between Israel and the U.S. since the July 2000 Camp David conference.

Of course, it was Camp David that demonstrated the speciousness of the "cycle of violence" theory. For a combination of political and strategic reasons, Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered the house to Yasser Arafat: Israel would withdraw from 100 percent of the Gaza Strip and 97 percent of the West Bank, dismantle 63 isolated settlements, and make Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem the capital of a new Palestinian state, with the Palestinians maintaining control over their holy places and having "religious sovereignty" over the contested Temple Mount. Revisionist claims to the contrary, Israel offered to create a "viable" Palestinian state that was contiguous, and not a series of cantons. "Cycle of violence" believers predicted a commensurate Palestinian reduction of terror.

Again, just the opposite occurred. The most generous peace offer in the history of the conflict was answered with the most sustained wave of Palestinian suicide bombings in Israeli history. In less than three years, almost 800 Israelis -- mostly civilians -- became victims of terror. Yet, significantly, the level of bloodshed over this period was not constant. After April 2002, the attacks began to plummet, from 16 in March to six in April, six in May, five in June, and six in July. For the remainder of the year, the number of Palestinian attacks dried to a trickle.

How does one explain this marked improvement in Israeli security? The "cycle of violence" theory would posit that such a reduction in terror derives from Israeli softness. Again, this logic was proven false. To staunch the bleeding from Israel's July 2000 openhandedness, the Israel Defense Forces used an iron fist. Operation Defensive Shield,

initiated in March 2002, brought the fight to the terrorists by deploying massive numbers of troops to the West Bank. This was language terrorists could understand. Evidently, it worked.

Unfortunately, the roadmap picks up where Oslo left off. Like its predecessor, the current plan is time-based, not performance-based, envisioning Israeli concessions with or without concurrent Palestinian reform. The framework for peace therefore again stands on the "cycle of violence" premise by assuming that Israeli concessions will beget Palestinian moderation, and that proactive defensive steps by Israel will only undermine Israeli security. For opposite reasons, Oslo and Operation Defensive Shield drove a truck through this theory. Israeli concessions systematically met with yet further acts of terror, and proactive defensive measures effectively limited terrorist activity. If the "cycle of violence" theory continues to hold sway, and Israel is forced to make concessions prior to genuine Palestinian reform, the road map will enflame the situation. Already, there are painful signs that this is the case. ❖

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