

Israel's Strategy in Curbing Palestinian Violence

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Brief Analysis

Many argue that Israel's current war on Palestinian terror lacks a coherent strategy. Indeed, the obvious mission—to reduce the amount of terror and the damage caused by it—cannot serve as an outline for the direction of the war. The first strategic goal of this war should be to change the mindset of Arab leaders who believe that Israel can be forced to make concessions. The second strategic goal should be to create a new kind of leadership within Palestinian society. The only way to achieve both goals is to fight terror relentlessly; this is the Israeli government's obligation to its citizens.

Throughout this conflict, certain constraints must be kept in mind. Israel will have to negotiate with the Palestinians at the end of the day—another reason beyond the obvious why all efforts must be made not to harm civilians while fighting terror. Moreover, Israel must endeavor to achieve its objectives with minimal friction and maximum legitimacy from the international community, though without sacrificing its own vital security interests.

Changing the Mindset of the Arab World

When Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat realized in September 2000 that he would not get all he wanted, he launched a war of terror against Israel. The Palestinians and other Arabs shared the view that Israel would collapse under a wave of terror; Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 had only reinforced this belief. Therefore, the Israeli war on Palestinian terror must change this mindset throughout the Arab world (especially in Palestinian society), making clear that no negotiations or concessions will be offered under fire. Achieving this goal requires three components. First, Israeli society must remain steadfast. Second, the United States should refrain from pressuring Israel into measures that could be seen as capitulation. Third, Israel's leadership must maintain its determination not to make any political concessions while under fire. Terror must be seen as an illegitimate and futile tool.

The first signs of change in Palestinian society are becoming visible. Some Palestinian leaders are saying, either privately or publicly, that terrorism is harming the Palestinian cause and should cease immediately. In general, however, few Palestinians are standing up and calling for an end to the violence.

Waiting for Responsible Palestinian Leadership

Israelis want to negotiate—and, in the end, sign a peace treaty—with responsible Palestinian leaders. The current Palestinian leadership does not meet this criterion, however, and new leaders must emerge who are willing to fight terror. In the meantime, Israel is doing everything possible to ensure that Palestinian society does not disintegrate; again, at the end of the day, Israelis and Palestinians will have to negotiate with each other.

The Palestinian leadership must develop four characteristics as a prerequisite for any negotiations. First, they must actually fight terror, not just denounce it. Second, they must change the public discourse about Israel, which would include ending the incitement and inflammatory language used by the Palestinian media and educational system. Third, they must show signs of movement toward accountability, less corruption, and the beginnings of a civil society that will one day become a democracy. Fourth, they must internalize the fact that a final peace agreement

will require them to abandon the notion of "right of return" for all refugees and to acknowledge the right of the Jews to have their own sovereign, Jewish state in the area that is now Israel. Without these prerequisites, any future negotiations are destined to fail.

It should also be noted that in the first months of the war, Israel left the security organs of the PA untouched in the hopes that they would fight terror. After some time, however, it became apparent that these organs—which Israel helped to build and train during the Oslo years—were actually participating in the terror. Hence, Israel began destroying PA security installations, a move that has garnered much criticism from the international community.

Changes in Israeli Perceptions

In the end, the Israeli government has sole responsibility for defending its citizens, and it will do whatever is necessary to accomplish this goal. This should be the third strategic principle guiding Israel's war on terror. One would think that this principle would be a given, since it is the natural right of every other state in the world. But after signing the Oslo Accords, Israel seemed to have given up that right. Israel's recent efforts to reclaim this right have been difficult, resulting in criticism from many other governments. Yet, Israeli perceptions have indeed changed, a fact symbolized most powerfully by the IDF's Operation Defensive Shield (March-April 2002), which made Israel realize that terror must be met by force. Although terror cannot be completely prevented, Israel must go after the terrorists themselves (including the planners, supporters, and leaders), everywhere and constantly.

Such perceptual change has also influenced Israel's policy of preemptive action. Although Israel would prefer to bring terrorists to justice, this is sometimes impossible; in such cases, the terrorists have to be intercepted, not as punishment or revenge, but in order to keep them from committing terrorist acts in the future. Interception is used solely as a last resort, when it is the only way of preventing a terrorist attack. Arresting and interrogating suspects is far more valuable because it is the best way to obtain intelligence about terrorist organizations and prevent attacks.

In order to fight terror, control on the ground is essential. This control is needed so that Israel can eliminate, as much as possible, the infrastructure of terror. History teaches that there is no way to fight terror without controlling the areas in which it is occurring and from which it operates. This fact can be seen in the case of Bethlehem: in the months following Israel's withdrawal of troops from the city, the terrorist infrastructure managed to rebuild itself and launch attacks on Israelis, proving that control on the ground is crucial.

The International Community

Israel is a small country that needs the support of the international community; inevitably, this fact places constraints on Israel's actions. In order to ensure that international pressure is placed on the Palestinians rather than on Israel, the Israeli government must be very careful in its actions and operations. This becomes complicated when terrorists use civilians as their shield, forcing Israel to fight terrorism in densely populated areas; on rare occasions, such operations result in civilian casualties. Saying that Israel can fight terror only so long as it guarantees no collateral damage is equivalent to saying, "Don't fight terror." Israel places many risks on its soldiers in order to safeguard Palestinian civilians. As important as international legitimacy is, however, Israel cannot stop its war to ensure that it has attained such legitimacy.

Moreover, a successful U.S.-led attack on Iraq would definitely affect the Palestinian issue. Individual terrorist organizations would remain unaffected whether regime change occurred or not. If Saddam Husayn were deposed, however, the Palestinian leadership would see that reform is inevitable in the long run—that the only way to negotiate is without terror. Hence, action in Iraq could be an important factor in changing the mindset of the Palestinians and, perhaps, other Arab leaders.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Dan Feferman.

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