

Israel's Peace Strategy

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Brief Analysis

After two years of armed conflict, Israeli-Palestinian strife still persists. Palestinian terrorism in general, and suicide bombers in particular, pose a serious threat to Israel, create a distressing environment for Israelis, and engender a challenge for the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) counterterrorism strategies. The Palestinian Authority (PA) and its chairman, Yasir Arafat, have done little to abate terrorism and have offered Israel no assistance in countering it. Although Israel reaffirms its commitment to peace, the government must simultaneously protect its citizens from hostile threats stemming from Palestinian terrorism, Hizballah action on Israel's northern border, and a potential Iraqi retaliation in the event of a U.S. attack against Saddam Husayn's regime.

Palestinian Terrorism and Israeli Reaction

Unlike the first intifada (1987-93), the second wave of violence that erupted in September 2000 is not a popular uprising; rather, it is a coordinated campaign managed by a top-down hierarchy. Most recently, the lull in terrorist attacks is not an outgrowth of PA prevention. On the contrary, PA security forces fail to prevent terror and, in fact, assist it. The IDF intercepts and arrests terrorists on a daily basis. If the PA were to assume this responsibility and produce tangible results, Israel would consider resuming negotiations.

While IDF operations against West Bank terrorist cells are often interpreted to be a collective punishment of Palestinians, Israel repudiates this accusation and asserts its duty to protect its population and ensure its territorial integrity. Thus, basic steps such as checkpoints and roadblocks, in addition to more involved actions such as "Operation Defensive Shield," are necessary. These responses to terrorism are not intended to express Israeli sentiment against the Palestinian people, only against Palestinian terrorism.

In an effort to curtail terrorist penetration, Israel began constructing a security fence between it and the West Bank in July 2002. This fence, however, should not be interpreted as a de facto political border. The security establishment engineered it in order to create a viable defensive system. The government opposes unilateral separation because it believes this to be an unstable, and therefore unsustainable, strategic alternative. Furthermore, the Sharon government contends that unilateral separation cannot ensure an end to terror attacks.

PA Reforms and Israel's Commitment to Peace

Israel welcomes the prospects for PA reforms and supports its transformation from a junta to a civilian regime with legal separations of power, checks and balances, and transparency. Reform of the PA's security infrastructure remains the primary short-term objective, however. The Palestinians ought to dismantle the current security apparatus and replace it with a single, unified, and hierarchical command answerable to a civilian authority. Although Israel also supports European involvement in the drafting of a Palestinian constitution, Sharon's government is apprehensive about the PA's January 2003 elections. The day after U.S. president George W. Bush's June 24 speech calling for new Palestinian leadership, Arafat fixed the election date despite initial remarks welcoming Bush's message. Israel expects these elections to be neither free nor fair and, as such, does not take them seriously.

Since Oslo, Israeli governments have encouraged political procedures over bellicose pathways to resolve the conflict. This is true with the current administration, where Sharon himself presented the idea of a two-state solution—the first such mention by a Likud prime minister. On numerous occasions, Israel's unity government has implored the PA to renounce violence, assume counter-terrorism responsibilities, and choose a political pathway rather than violence. Once the Palestinians demonstrate their ability to establish a non-corrupt democratic government, Israel will resume negotiations.

Initially, Sharon's government called for a seven-day quiet period before it would consider new negotiations. Israel suggested that the PA exhibit a 100 percent effort in combating terrorist plots. Such effort encompasses a number of counterterrorism measures: collecting illegal weapons; dismantling terrorist organizations; preventing daily mortar attacks on Israeli soil; renouncing violence and ceasing incitement; and arresting and jailing terrorists, among other preventative measures. The PA, however, has accomplished none of these steps.

Despite its firm commitment to peace, Israel cannot make unilateral concessions. It must await genuine Palestinian gestures, especially once the PA explicitly divorces itself from terrorist complicity. While the Camp David proposals of 2000 are off the table, new interim agreements may facilitate confidence building. This could derive from joint ventures such as water desalination, which is too costly for one country to bear. Ultimately, Israel would fashion agreements with the Palestinians once they acknowledge that violence cannot beget political objectives and agree to a pragmatic trade-off between their political needs (e.g., independence, sovereignty, and control over their population) and Israel's security needs (e.g., secure borders and cessation of terror).

All Quiet on the Northern and Eastern Fronts?

Although ongoing Palestinian terrorism perpetuates a debilitating situation for Israel, it also faces threats from outside this theater. The majority of these threats derive from Hizballah aggression on Israel's northern border and potential Iraqi missile attacks in the event of a U.S. invasion of Iraq. Both circumstances pose serious risks for wider confrontation in the Middle East.

Hizballah aggression. Since the IDF's unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon, Israel expected U.N. Security Council Resolution 425 would be upheld. Yet, there has been little compliance on the Lebanese and Syrian parts. Specifically, Syria prevents Lebanon from deploying its army at its southern border with Israel, and Syria (along with Iran) supplies Hizballah with arms such as katyusha rockets that threaten over one million Israelis in the northern Haifa industrial region. Also, Lebanese and Hizballah attempts to divert water from the Wazani River, which feeds the Sea of Galilee, violate international norms and constitute—both historically and at present—a *casus belli*.

Israel practices maximum restraint despite Hizballah provocations. Should there be an escalation, Syria, which occupies Lebanon militarily and politically, and houses the headquarters for eleven other terrorist organizations, will bear the consequences for attempting to derail the peace process as well as for failing to prevent Hizballah attacks.

Iraqi threat and a post-Saddam scenario. Israel has no official role in any U.S. plan to attack Iraq, aside from the fear that Saddam Husayn may retaliate. As it occurred during the Gulf War in 1991 when Israel absorbed 39 Iraqi scud missiles, the Sharon government has reason to believe that a similar pattern may be repeated, only this time with the use of nonconventional weapons. Thus, Israel reserves the right to prepare its population defensively.

By financing the families of suicide bombers, assisting terrorists, and attempting to smuggle weapons into Gaza and the West Bank through the Jordan River, Iraq has a history of exacerbating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As such, the political implications for a post-Saddam scenario could offer positive shock waves vis-a-vis the Palestinians and (perhaps) even the Iranians, sending a clear message to other regimes that condoning and supporting terrorism will not be tolerated. Regime change, however, should not entail the disintegration or dismemberment of Iraq. Rather,

the challenge in this crisis is to manage a transition from Husayn's autocracy to a democratic government. Ultimately, Middle East countries would benefit from a democratic Iraq, which could foster greater stability in a volatile region and offer better hopes for an end to years of conflict.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Eran Benedek.

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