

Assessing Palestinian-Israeli Violence:

Two Years On

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Brief Analysis

The intifada is not yet over; thus, the Israeli-Palestinian situation has the potential to deteriorate or to improve. Several key changes have taken place over the past two years, affecting the lives of both Israelis and Palestinians. First, the violence that has been exercised by both sides has reversed the gains achieved by the peace process. The Oslo Accords outlined a basic bargain: ending the occupation in exchange for ending the violence. That arrangement has been negated as a direct result of the open-ended nature of the peace process, which spurred Israel to create certain conditions on the ground and the Palestinians to preserve their ability to inflict suffering on Israel. Second, the intifada has reversed many of the major strides that Israelis and Palestinians had made toward accepting each other. Currently, confidence in the peace process has evaporated on both sides. Israeli support for reoccupation is at its highest level, as is Palestinian support for violence against Israeli civilians. Both societies have been radicalized, exhibiting a shift toward right-wing groups and extremist elements. The notion that there is no partner for peace has been cemented among radical elites on both sides, and such sentiments are rapidly spreading among the mainstream. Despite these negative trends, nearly two-thirds of Israelis today accept a two-state solution and are in favor of evacuating the settlements, while nearly three-quarters of Palestinians are in favor of reconciliation with Israel.

Third, both sides have incurred major economic losses. The Palestinians in particular have witnessed a near total collapse of their economy. This collapse has been most devastating for the average Palestinian, as the unemployment rate is currently near 60 percent. If the Palestinian Authority (PA)—which is nearing total collapse itself—were to stop paying its workforce, the unemployment rate would rise to about 80 percent overnight, immediately resulting in anarchy. Indeed, the domestic legitimacy of the PA has been severely damaged. Its ability to provide services has been crippled, and the standing of Yasir Arafat and Fatah has dropped dramatically. The PA and Arafat have also lost much of their international legitimacy, as demonstrated by calls for his resignation.

The Palestinians have made some gains during the intifada. First, they have shown Israel that an imposed solution is neither sustainable nor conducive to Israeli security. This understanding is illustrated by the widespread consensus among Israelis that settlements are an impediment to peace and by the increased calls for unilateral separation from

the Palestinians. Second, the Palestinians have accepted the inevitability of reform. Given its effects on the Palestinian leadership's domestic and international legitimacy, the intifada has ushered in a new phase in Palestinian political discourse.

One of the more unfortunate developments resulting from the intifada is the changing definition of victory on both sides. For example, although 95 percent of the Palestinians identify their current situation as horrible, 70 percent believe that the intifada has helped them achieve Palestinian national rights, despite the fact that the process of ending the occupation, which was underway before the intifada, has been reversed. In the opposing camp, two-thirds of Israelis support the recent attack targeting Hamas leader Salah Shehada, which led to the death of 15 Palestinian civilians. The same percentage support more such attacks even if they result in more civilian casualties, although they acknowledge that such attacks are not likely to reduce Palestinian violence. Clearly, neither side is basing its notions of victory on reducing violence or making gains, but rather on its opponent's losses.

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The intifada has had a devastating impact on Arafat's leadership, presenting the most serious challenge to his authority since 1983, when he faced a rebellion in his ranks in the aftermath of the 1982 war in Lebanon. Arafat's legitimacy has been under assault from all directions—not just from Israel, but also from the United States, Europe (albeit quietly), and most important, from the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Legislative Council, his own constituency.

On the other side, Israel has witnessed a restoration of its deterrent capacity. This capacity had eroded somewhat during the Gulf War, when Israel did not respond to the missiles that were fired at it by Iraq. The erosion intensified upon Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 (although this withdrawal was nevertheless quite important), and further still during the first few months of the intifada, when some Palestinians saw the Israeli position shift under fire and began to regard violence as a negotiating tool. Thus, restoring deterrence has become the prism through which the Israel Defense Forces view the current conflict with the Palestinians. Israeli commanders believe that they have nullified the notion of eroding deterrence during the intifada. The military establishment in Israel sees that as its greatest success of the past two years.

President George W. Bush's historic June 24, 2002, speech calling for new Palestinian leadership has also been a factor in creating a new dynamic that is favorable to the Israelis. Many third parties initially criticized the speech, but Arafat's international standing has diminished since its delivery. The lack of a U.S. envoy to the region during this period has also had a positive effect, focusing the Palestinians' attention internally and preventing Arafat from using an envoy's presence as an indicator of his credibility.

With the rise of a Palestinian reform movement and the erosion of Arafat's authority, the time has come for Israel and the international community to signal that Palestinian reform will be met by flexibility from all parties, including Israel. Such a signal would empower reformers to persist in their endeavors. Avoiding provocations that would trigger new rounds of violence is also vital in fostering an environment that can lead back to the negotiating table. The prospect of elections in the not-too-distant future will give incumbents on both sides extra incentive to forestall violence, since quiet would improve their chances of reelection.

During the past year, all parties have been preoccupied with other issues. The United States has focused on Saddam Husayn, Arafat has focused on the reformers, and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has focused on Binyamin Netanyahu and Israel's next election, which will be held within the next twelve months, if not much sooner. When this period of preoccupation ends (perhaps once the Iraq issue is dealt with), a more focused approach to Israeli-Palestinian peace is likely to emerge, culminating in a return to the negotiating table and a sturdier foundation for all parties.

This report was prepared by Mohamed Abdel-Dayam.

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