

Operation Defensive Shield:

Lessons and Aftermath

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Brief Analysis

The IDF began planning for the contingency of carrying out extensive military operations throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip long before the deployment of Operation Defensive Shield in late March 2002. As early as 1998, during a period when hopes abounded for peace with both the Syrians and the Palestinians, the IDF's general staff faced the challenge of preparing for the failure of negotiations and the possibility of violence. Israeli intelligence reports anticipated the hostilities that eventually materialized in September 2000, following the unsuccessful talks at Camp David. A number of short-term and structural reforms within the IDF began in early 2000, aimed at improving readiness and maximizing efficiency. The optimistic tone of the times, however, had led to budget cuts for the military; eventually, the government was forced to allocate an additional \$150 million in order to prepare soldiers for the anticipated violence.

Two Phases in the Violence

The groundwork for the Palestinian terror campaign was laid down well before September 2000. The unilateral Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon was interpreted as a victory for the method of armed resistance, and the failure of negotiations at Camp David did nothing to change this perception. Beginning in September 2000, then, the Palestinians exercised the option of strategic terrorism, based on the assumption that Israeli society would not be willing to pay the price of extensive bloodshed and would realize that security was impossible to maintain as long as the West Bank and Gaza Strip were occupied. The use of suicide bombers formed a significant part of this strategy; beyond the obvious and immediate threat that such a tactic poses to the Israeli public, it also threatens to become a tool of terror organizations throughout the Western world if it is not contained.

Israeli-Palestinian violence since September 2000 can be divided into two distinct stages. The first was the "Palestinian initiative" stage, which lasted until the Seder Night Massacre on March 27, 2002. This stage was marked by low-intensity conflict and by a reactive strategy on the part of Israel. The events of September 11, 2001, led to an increased level of sophistication in the Palestinian diplomatic approach to the conflict—as Chairman Yasir Arafat condemned the tragedy in order to maintain American support—but there was no significant change in the Palestinian strategy of terrorist attacks. In fact, toward the end of this phase, it appeared that Palestinian terrorists intended to carry out a major terrorist attack on a high-rise building or oil depot in Israel, although no such attack actually occurred.

A number of factors eventually led Israel to initiate the second stage of the conflict: that is, to adopt a more proactive stance that would create a new strategic reality. These factors included: the waves of terror attacks that culminated in the Seder Night Massacre; Israeli restraint during the Zinni mediation efforts, a two-week period during which nearly fifty Israelis were killed; the growing involvement of the Fatah organization in Palestinian terrorist attacks; and, most important, Israel's recognition that it needed to take the responsibility for its security into its own hands. The resultant military initiative was referred to as Operation Defensive Shield.

Operation Defensive Shield: Goals and Accomplishments

The extensive military operations carried out by the IDF in Operation Defensive Shield had several goals beyond establishing a new security reality favorable to Israel. These goals included neutralizing the terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, highlighting the Palestinian Authority's (PA) involvement with terrorism, and isolating Arafat, who was seen as the principal stimulator of violence. All of this was to be accomplished without escalating the violence into regional conflict and with minimal harm to the Palestinian population. At this point, the Palestinian objective became to survive the Israeli operation while mobilizing international pressure through the media, to which Israel successfully responded with media efforts of its own.

Operation Defensive Shield has had several important consequences. First, the distinction between territories designated as Area A and Area B has been blurred somewhat, at least from a security standpoint; that is, Israeli military forces have made limited incursions into Area A when they felt they had sufficient reason to do so. Second, although Palestinian terrorist groups still have support and may try to recover from the blows dealt to them by the Israeli military, they will grow weaker in the long term. Third, exposure of the ties between the PA and the perpetrators of violence, as well as evidence that the PA has mishandled its funds, have led to criticism of Arafat and strengthened calls for reform of the PA. Fourth, the notion that Israel is merely a paper warrior—a notion often propagated by individuals such as Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah—has been shown to be only an illusion. Israeli intelligence is now in a position to prevent as much as 90 percent of all terror attacks, although the remaining 10 percent continue to cause a significant degree of damage.

The use of terror tactics and violence will not help the Palestinians achieve their goals—only a return to negotiations can do that. The rehabilitation of the PA is therefore a precondition to progress, and such rehabilitation cannot take place as long as Arafat continues to hold the reins of power. True reform must focus on changing the PA from an entity that funds and supports terrorism to one that is fully committed to fighting it. Structural changes will be significant only if this more fundamental, ideological change occurs as well.

In order to fight terrorism effectively, one must show both intention and effort—elements that are still generally lacking from the PA. This lack adversely affects both Israel and the Palestinian people. The terrorists have no regard for the suffering that they impose on ordinary Palestinians. Consider that over the last few months, a number of terrorist attacks have been carried out in the Karne and Erez industrial areas in Gaza, aimed at preventing Palestinians from working there. In addition, due to corruption within the PA, money intended for the Palestinian people has been placed in the hands of terrorist organizations, to the growing dissatisfaction of its rightful recipients. Clearly, Palestinian leaders could do much more to benefit their own people.

The current conflagration is in many ways the deepest, longest, and most difficult conflict that Israel has ever faced. Unfortunately, even Operation Defensive Shield failed to convince Arafat to stop supporting violence and turn instead to the negotiation table. Whether the long-term consequences of the operation will convince the PA that change and negotiation are the best ways to move forward remains to be seen.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Naysan Rafati.

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