Anger and Action

Mar 30, 2002

Articles & Testimony

I was at a Seder in the Jerusalem suburb of Mevassaret Zion when I heard news of the terror attack in Netanya. We were waiting for my university colleague's extended family to arrive. They were coming from the coastal plain. It was pouring rain, but given Israeli driving habits, downpours wouldn't account for the hour-long delay. Finally, they stumbled through the door. "Sorry about that," the uncle apologized, "There was some sort of attack in Netanya, so we got caught in a traffic jam on the outskirts."

Israel is a tiny country, and many people learn about attacks not from television news, but from family members and friends who live in the area. Everyone knows someone "clear across the country," which in Israel's case is at most a 45-minute drive, if that. Geography remains at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it frustrates Israelis to no end that the chattering classes in Europe and the armchair academics in the United States have very little concept of how small Israel is. When I lectured at Yale, I could see a pizzeria, nightclub, and library from my office. From my desk at Hebrew University, I can see across the entirety of the West Bank, the northern tip of the Dead Sea, and, on a clear day, I can pick out villages on the Jordanian highlands.

When I lived in Tajikistan in 1997, the U.S. defense attache gave me a pearl of wisdom: "When you hear gunshots, carry on. But if you hear return fire, get under a desk." It was a simple lesson I somehow missed in my years of Quaker schooling, but one that has come in very handy in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. After all, lone gunshots probably mean a drunk checkpoint guard, a guy just got engaged, or the girl's father wasn't impressed with her suitor. Return fire is much more serious: a gun battle between rival political groups.

In Israel, there is a similar rule with sirens. If an ambulance passes, no one looks up. It's probably just a heart attack. Two ambulances, and people look up, though it's probably just a case of food poisoning from gefilte fish gone bad. But three or more ambulances means trouble, and Israelis rush to their radios and start dialing every number on the cell phones to make sure friends and family are okay. Israel is small enough that it is often not the television anchors that break the news, but relatives or family friends. Living in Jerusalem, I've been within earshot of three suicide bombings. People still go out, but are increasingly cautious. For example, in a cafe I make sure whomever I'm with sits between me and the door (which probably explains why there have been so few second dates recently).

On Friday, I was in my Aza Street apartment when I heard the first sirens. I counted twenty. A couple minutes later the radio reported that a suicide bomber -- a 16-year-old girl -- blew herself up in a Jerusalem supermarket. People who knew my roommate was going shopping started calling to see if he was okay. He came back an hour later. He had indeed been headed for that market. But, at the last minute, he and his friends had decided to go to a different shopping center.

Up my street was the Moment Cafe, a Xando-like establishment that was blown apart by a suicide bomber on March 9. Eleven Israelis died, including two students from the university and a cousin of a graduate school colleague. By the next morning, the blood was cleared, and by evening, most of the broken glass and debris hauled away. The bombsite became a makeshift shrine, with dozens of yartzeit candles and bouquets of flowers. By the next day, it had become the site of dueling demonstrations -- Peace Now calling for a unilateral withdrawal from the territories, and the right-

wing calling for Sharon to take a tougher stance. Israelis increasingly side with the right.

The Palestinian leadership and the various rejectionist groups have gravely misinterpreted the situation. They see public debate as a sign of Israeli weakness--proof that terrorism brings concessions from an increasingly soft Israel. On January 9, leading officials of Syria, Lebanon, Iran, the Palestinian Authority, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad gathered in Beirut for a two-day conference. Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah, Hezbollah political leader, urged the Palestinians to adopt Hezbollah's strategy of guerilla attacks and terrorism to drive the Israelis to withdrawal. The conference concluded that such "martyrdom operations are national principles that cannot be changed...."

But rather than weaken, Israel's resilience is strengthening. Professors at Hebrew University and Israeli newspapers like Ha'aretz remain overwhelmingly leftist, but their audience has lurched to the right. Yossi Beilin, an architect of the Oslo Accords, and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres may be popular in the coffee houses of Europe but are openly ridiculed on the Israeli street. Walking to the cinema last week, an Israeli friend commented, "If the Palestinians started shelling the Knesset, Beilin would call for concessions." Few Israelis -- whether in the non-Kosher cafes of Tel Aviv or in the ultra-Orthodox haredi community -- fault Sharon for yesterday ordering the siege of Arafat's Ramallah compound.

Many Israelis no longer believe Arafat wants peace, regardless of any concession they may offer. In July 2000, Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered the Palestinians 98 percent of the occupied territories and a part of Jerusalem. Arafat turned down the offer. Settlements are not the issue, since the Camp David II agreement would have led to their dismantling in Palestinian territory. Likewise, the Israelis no longer trust that a unilateral withdrawal can bring peace, since pulling back to the U.N.-certified border with Lebanon only encouraged Hezbollah terror.

Israelis perceive Europe and the United Nations as part of the problem. In December, Daniel Bernard, France's ambassador to London, showed the Quay d'Orsay's true colors when he called Israel "that shitty little country." Few European politicians questioned where Arafat got the cash to buy 50 tons of Iranian mortars and missiles; many Israelis suspect it came from European aid money. Television footage of the September 2000 shooting death of 12-year-old Muhammad al-Dura fanned the intifada, with European and Middle Eastern commentators almost universally condemning Israel for killing Palestinian children. Few if any networks issued retractions when, on March 17, 2002, the German television station ARD, itself frequently critical of Israel, examined the entirety of the French footage and concluded that a Palestinian gunman likely shot al-Dura. While U.N. officials criticize Israeli raids into Palestinian camps, few question why bomb factories exist in U.N.-administered refugee camps.

It is not Israel that is responsible for the death of the peace process, but rather the practice of moral equivalence in international diplomacy. If all sides are equally to blame for the escalation, then the Palestinians might as well radicalize their positions. When Bill Clinton brokered a comprehensive peace agreement at Camp David II, Arafat to the surprise of even his own negotiators walked away. But moral equivalence dictates that blame must be spread equally. Moral equivalency eliminates responsibility. Arafat freed Passover Massacre bomber Abdel al-Baset Odeh from prison, but if Israel responds to the slaughter of her citizens at a religious ceremony, then in European and U.N. eyes, Israel shares equal if not superior blame. Since Europe and the United Nations will protect Arafat from the consequences of his actions, then terror becomes a viable tool. Having rejected the Camp David II linkage of peace with Israel and Palestinian independence, Arafat now wants the international community to impose an independent Palestine without peace. But, as he has throughout his career, Arafat has misjudged the current situation. He may soon have time to reflect on that from an office in Beirut or Baghdad. ❖

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