

Israeli Defense Policy: Responding to Challenges Near and Far

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Brief Analysis

"In the new world reality that emerged after September 11, it is easier for everyone to understand that there are no good terrorists and bad terrorists; it is not true that one man's terrorist—as some try to tell us—is another man's 'freedom fighter.' One man's terrorist is everyone's terrorist. . . . In this new world, it is very important that we show no tolerance for those who try to play a double game between us and the terrorists, for those who try to sit on the fence, one leg here, one leg there. In our region, some players still think, still feel, that they can continue the old game, playing both ends. The message must be clear: the old game is over. Make your choice, make it clear, and make it work. . . .

"The Palestinians try to argue that this is a popular uprising—'riots and demonstrations'—and therefore it is not their leadership which broke its word. But this is not a replay of the first intifada, and you have to believe me when I tell you that our intelligence capabilities, which enabled us to pinpoint a ship at sea hundreds of miles away, are also good enough to have a keen sense of what is happening daily right next door. This conflict is run 'top down'—through the Tanzim and some elements of the security forces, close to the chairman himself (such as Force 17 and the Naval Police). Unlike the situation back then, today the vast majority of Palestinians live under their own authority, which is capable of restraining terrorism, breaking its infrastructure, and restoring order—if it wants to. Instead, it chose to go to an armed conflict short of war—short only because we keep restraining ourselves in the face of terrible events. It ignited the conflict when a viable offer, a far-reaching offer, of a Palestinian state on almost all the territory in dispute, was on the table. . . .

"Our message to [Arafat] is clear: we shall never allow the Palestinian Authority (PA) to become a strategic threat, linked to Iran, in the model of Lebanon. After September 11, such a link to Iran and Hizballah terrorism is simply intolerable. Sadly, our conclusion is that Arafat himself—who still calls the shots in the Palestinian system—is a large part of the problem, and, unlike previous peacemakers in the region like [Anwar] Sadat or King Hussein, is unable to be part of the long-term solution. This is not to say that he has no role in the efforts to return to stability and calm: this responsibility continues to rest on his shoulders. . . .

"This is the purpose of our military measures—this, and not (as some people argue) any wish to see the PA destroyed or run out, or to see the 'A areas' reoccupied. We are not seeking to impose unilateral solutions—we are seeking to recreate the conditions for a compromise. Ultimately, it is not the Palestinian people who are our enemy, but terrorism and radicalism. We know that at the end of the day, we must coexist if we want to exist. "It is because of Arafat's choices that the Palestinians now find themselves in this terrible social and economic misery. I fully realize that this is not a conflict which can be solved by military means only. At the same time, the days are over when we were willing to negotiate in the morning and go to the funerals of terror victims in the afternoon. We will not negotiate on the substance of things under fire. We first must stabilize the security environment.

"We must never let go or despair of the search for peace, and I am personally committed to look for each and every opportunity to promote it. We must remind ourselves that even after the terrible miscalculations of the current

conflict, we and the Palestinians will still be living side by side, in two entities which guard their history and identity but nevertheless need each other."

Summary of Question-and-Answer-Session Responses

The American leadership clearly understands the difficult situation that the Israelis face, and realizes that Arafat is the primary obstacle to achieving the cessation of violence and a lasting peace. The U.S. administration, along with Arab leaders who rely on stability in the Middle East, should put more pressure on Arafat. He is able to stop the violence, but he does not want to do it. He is committed to the past, while Israel and the Palestinian people are committed to the future. New voices are emerging from the Palestinian public, and more people are asking the question: what has the intifada achieved? The United States should open a dialogue with these more realistic Palestinian leaders.

Israel's requests that the United States ignore Arafat are not personal. If Arafat begins to act as a leader tomorrow, then he is relevant; if he does not, then he is irrelevant. Arafat is the only leader who can order Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas to stop the terror and violence.

Recently, many Palestinians have said that while they are fully aware of the actions they have to take in order to end the violence, they need a better environment in which to do so. They want an end to targeted killings, a lifting of the squeeze on their society, and some time to demonstrate their capability to halt attacks against Israel. Israel is ready to pull out all of its forces and roadblocks, and to open access within Gaza, but only if Arafat starts to control security matters. For instance, when Gen. Anthony Zinni visited Israel recently, the Israel Defense Forces pulled out from Jenin; hours later, a bloody attack occurred in nearby Afula, killing seventeen people.

Israel does not hit everywhere, but only places where there is clear-cut evidence that terror plots have been planned, or places that are clearly connected to terrorist activities. Although these targeted strikes do not have a huge effect, Israel must respond somehow. In the past, Israel has kept quiet and inactive for weeks at the request of its allies or the U.S. government, and paid too high a price in lives as a result.

The Labor Party will continue to be part of the national unity government as long as Israel continues to face security problems and existential threats. The party is there to demonstrate the unity of Israel, both left and right wings, for the sake of peace. The Labor Party still believes that peace can be achieved by the current government. The primary difference between Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Binyamin Ben-Eliezer is the depth of the compromises that each is willing to make. Once Ben-Eliezer is convinced that the Palestinians will bring an end to violence and to additional demands, and move toward real peace, he will be willing to make maximum compromises for a better future. At the end of the day, Israelis and Palestinians need to coexist as neighbors living on the same soil.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jacqueline Kaufman.

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