

Deterioration on the Israeli-Palestinian Front: Assessing Options

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Dec 13, 2001

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Brief Analysis

The decision by Israel's security cabinet last night to sever contact with Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasir Arafat, declaring him "irrelevant" in halting current Hamas suicide bombings and attacks, marks a new nadir in Israeli-Palestinian relations since the 1993 Oslo accords. Israel is frustrated by how little the PA has done to arrest Hamas members and other terrorists who are allegedly connected to the ongoing violence. But Israel's options are limited.

Arafat's Actions and Foreign Response to Them

Israel is not asking Arafat to engage in an Algerian-style civil war with his own people. Rather, Israel wants Arafat to engage the twelve PA security forces, whose heads all report directly to him and who have an estimated 40,000 people under arms, and arrest the estimated three dozen people who are considered linchpins of terrorism. Israeli officials say the Palestinians have put ten people under house arrest, but there have been no interrogations; furthermore, no cells are being dismantled. (Israeli officials say three of those on the list are linked to the killing yesterday of ten Israelis in a bus ambush.) In stark comparison, Arafat issued a broad crackdown detaining 1,100 people in 1996 when Hamas carried out four suicide bombings in Israeli cities. The PA announced last night that it is closing Hamas and Islamic Jihad offices, but so far, it seems only declaratory.

Israel is not the only one exasperated with Arafat's performance. The Bush administration was told by Arab interlocutors in the Middle East several times during the last few months that favorable statements would elicit favorable responses; this has not come to pass. In response, President Bush said at a speech before the UN that the United States has a "vision" of a "Palestinian state." Secretary Powell said at a subsequent Middle East policy speech in Louisville that America wants a halt to settlements and called for an end to occupation, which would be negotiated by the sides. These steps were also coupled with the dispatching of retired Marine general Anthony Zinni—an appointment that was cheered by Arab leaders who recognized Zinni as someone well acquainted with the region from his days as the commander of the U.S. Central Command, which covers the Middle East outside of Israel. Yet, none of these steps has elicited a PA crackdown that would reduce the violence, much less end it. Quite the contrary, the latest wave of violence began right after the United States launched its initiative with the Powell speech and the

Zinni mission.

The evidence of the Bush administration's frustration can be seen in both public and private statements from the top echelons, suggesting that Arafat is incurring serious risks. Today, while traveling in Europe, Powell called on Arafat to "get rid of these terrorist organizations, such as Hamas," saying the group may "destroy the Palestinian cause." In a television interview on Monday, Vice president Dick Cheney said, "the thing that [Arafat] puts at risk here, I think, is his own continued operation with respect to the effort to establish a Palestinian homeland." According to press reports from the United States and Israeli press, and people familiar with a meeting that Bush held with Jewish leaders at the White House on Monday, Arafat's failure to arrest terrorists puts him and the Palestinian Authority at risk. It is unclear if the president meant that noncompliance would bring about Arafat's eviction from the leadership, but it is a statement that could be interpreted as either endorsing tough measures, or at minimum, that Arafat was losing time.

And in a landmark move this week the European Union called upon the PA to pledge that it is "dismantling of Hamas's and Islamic Jihad's terrorist networks." Even Arab leaders, who reflexively back Arafat's actions, are considered to be privately upset with Arafat's lack of response. Moreover, despite the heightened tension, this week the Organization of Islamic Conference did little more than repeat the rote condemnation of Israel and support for the Palestinian cause, without offering specific assistance to Arafat.

Scenarios for Possible Israeli Action

There are different scenarios the Israeli government might take as the situation continues to deteriorate, one of them being coercion to gain compliance. Israel's current approach is to hit PA security infrastructure in the hopes that this will compel compliance since Arafat will suffer continuously for non-action. It is predicated on the idea that people around Arafat will press the chairman into action since strikes could lead to the overall collapse of the PA, and thus their own power. Finally, such actions substitute for attacking Hamas directly, since its military wing Izzadin el-Kassam does not have formal offices, and Israel does not want to hit Hamas clinics, schools, or mosques for fear of hurting civilians.

It is unclear if this strategy will succeed. Given Israel's commitment to the United States not to harm Arafat, the Palestinian leader has reason to believe that Israel does not want to kill him. And Arafat, having studiously avoided appointing a successor, might not be concerned about a palace coup. He is aware of the divisions to succession based on personality, geography (West Bank v. Gaza), generation (older v. younger), and outside support (Egypt and Jordan among other places). He knows that Israel's chance to appoint his successor is virtually nil. Seared into Israel's consciousness since the disastrous 1982 effort to install Bashir Gemayel as president of Lebanon is an Israeli admission that it cannot engineer Arab domestic politics. Anyone that Israel would openly embrace would not have Palestinian legitimacy.

Israel Deports Arafat?

Deporting Arafat is a scenario that Israel would like to avoid. While Israel's Police minister Uzi Landau called for such a move today, Arafat would undoubtedly seek to marshal international opinion and say he is the latest Palestinian "refugee" while claiming that he can have no responsibility for what occurs in the territories anymore. Instead, he would probably use his position as icon of Palestinian nationalism to encourage chaos and denounce anyone who may cooperate with Israel. Thus, the move by Israel to declare him "irrelevant" is seen as essentially saying that Israel can neither live with or without Arafat. There is no evidence that Israel would ever consider killing Arafat, realizing that it would be blamed by all and such a move could radicalize the succession process and have destabilizing regional consequences.

U.S. Ultimatum to Arafat

This approach may possibly hold the best hope for halting the deteriorating situation, although it is not risk-free. The United States has yet to publicly put its own relationship with Arafat on the line. If indeed Arafat has any intention of arresting terrorists but merely does not want to be seen as buckling to the Sharon government, indeed, it would be easier for him to explain his actions to his own people as cracking down in response to the United States' demands rather than Israel's. Arafat's crafting of a U.S.-PA relationship over the last eight years has been one of his prize achievements, notwithstanding public comments last week deriding America. If Arafat wants to act, a U.S. ultimatum would give him a rationale. Moreover, it would stave off the Israeli drive. If Arafat does not want to act under any circumstances, it is hard to imagine that relations with him will remain durable over time. And, for the United States, heightened political pressure on Arafat is the one way to avert heightened Israeli military pressure.

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