

The War against Terror:

A View from Inside Israel's National Unity Government

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Brief Analysis

The events of September 11 have underscored the connection between two parallel wars: one pits the United States against terrorism, while the other is the battle between Israel and its terrorist foes. No one is more interested in the success of America's new war than Israel. Israel has no intention of interfering in this effort. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his administration understand the priorities of the United States and the need to turn off other foci of tension and violence in the region. At the same time, it is important to recognize that Israel's top priority must be the defense of its citizens.

A Year of Terror

For the last thirteen months, Israel has lived under the constant threat of terrorism. Two hundred Israeli citizens—mostly civilians—have died as a result of terrorist acts. In comparative proportion to the United States, this total is equivalent to 9,000 American deaths. The heavy toll terrorism exacts on Israeli society obligates the Israeli government to intercept terrorists. If this task is not fulfilled, the Israeli government has not lived up to the duty it owes to its citizens.

Since October 2000, Israel has succeeded in capturing or killing fifty terrorists. No one can assess the number of lives saved by intercepting terrorists before they carry out their attacks. The only way to calm the current volatile situation without military action is to exert heavy pressure on Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat. If Arafat issues clear orders to all Palestinian factions and organizations to cease the violence, attacks can be reduced by 90 to 95 percent. Furthermore, he must take the important and visible step of arresting those responsible for terrorist attacks on Israeli citizens. If this action is taken, then Israeli military operations against terrorists will not be necessary.

Iran As a Sponsor of Terrorism

Israel considers Iran to be the powerhouse of terror in the Middle East and beyond. The Iranian government gives direct support to terror organizations such as Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and Hizballah in the form of financial and training assistance. The financial support, for example, reaches into the hundreds of millions of dollars for these terrorist groups. Iran has deployed thousands of rockets in southern Lebanon that have been targeted at northern Israel. Since the end of the Cold War, Iran is the only state to deploy missiles in one country for the purpose of threatening another. There is also an ongoing effort by Iran to produce long-range missiles and acquire nuclear weapons. The acquisition of nuclear arms by Iran poses a grave threat and is much more dangerous to the international community than any previous terrorist threat.

Many observers have argued that Iran should not be considered as one of the state sponsors of terrorism. Israel strongly opposes any such reclassification of Iran so long as Tehran still sponsors organizations that seek the destruction of Israel. Iran is the primary sponsor of terrorist activity against the Israeli people. Many of the suicide bomb attacks in Israel can be directly traced to Iranian support. There are no signs of change in Iran's policy of

supporting terrorism.

The Iranian people do not wish to live under a theocratic regime, and the day will eventually come when the present government will be replaced by a secular democratic regime.

Hope for a Peace Process

The government of Israel, led by Prime Minister Sharon, is dedicated to the peace process with the Palestinians through commitments such as the Tenet plan and Mitchell recommendations. Israel is prepared to implement its commitments the moment terrorist acts cease. Furthermore, the Sharon government is committed to implementing all previously signed agreements such as those made at Sharm el-Sheikh and the Wye River. The Tenet plan and Mitchell recommendations are the basis for resuming negotiations; there is no need to formulate or invent new peace initiatives.

Arafat has the ability to play the role of a partner for peace with Israel. He is neither Osama bin Laden nor Mother Theresa; he is the leader of the Palestinian people and, as such, the figure with whom Israel must negotiate. His strategy of violence over the past year, though, is unacceptable. There is no readiness in the Israeli government to accept Arafat's half-hearted efforts and bluffs masked as ceasefire attempts; he must commit himself fully to the peace process. The majority of Israelis and Israeli government members desire to work with Arafat if he genuinely seeks peace. If negotiations resume, they should take into consideration proposals made at Camp David and Taba last year, but they need not be based on them.

Continued financial assistance to the PA is important to bring some measure of stability to the Palestinian people; it is also useful to complement efforts against fundamentalism. As long as Arafat practices or allows terrorism, however, the United States and the European Union should use financial assistance as leverage against him. Donor states should be very generous with Arafat only after he takes firm actions against terrorism.

National Unity

The unity government in Israel is comparable to a marriage of two very different philosophies of government. The current violent situation, however, has forced the Labor and Likud parties to work together to find practical solutions to end the state of war for Israel's people. Though the Labor party is currently in disarray due to the controversial primary election for a new leader, the war against terrorism calls for cooperation above party squabbling.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Aaron Resnick.

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