

Israel, the Peace Process, and the War against Terrorism

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Brief Analysis

Despite the current tense situation, there has been no change in the fundamentals of the Israel-U.S. relationship. Israel understands the unique character of the relationship and will do what it can to accommodate vital U.S. needs. If post-September 11, the United States needs Israel to maintain a lower profile, so be it. Since that date, the United States has been very helpful in pressing Arafat to desist from terrorist attacks, and Israel appreciates that effort.

However, it is undeniable that many in Israel believe that the country has been placed in a difficult and awkward position in the aftermath of September 11. Many, for example, were concerned that President Bush's remarks about Palestinian statehood presented Israel with a blueprint for its future about which it had not been consulted. Israel has felt marginalized in the past by the United States, such as when it was surprised by the presentation of the Reagan peace plan in 1982. It is in this context that one should understand why Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has expressed anxieties about the direction of the antiterror campaign and Israel's role therein.

Bin Laden and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

The United States is not fighting its war against terror on Israel's account, but because it must fight those who attacked America. In bin Laden's worldview, Israel is a side issue. Contrary to what he would have the world believe, bin Laden's main enemy is moderate Arab regimes, not Israel. Bin Laden should not be allowed to exploit the Arab-Israeli conflict for his own purposes.

It would be nice to think that resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict would bring an end to terrorism. Unfortunately, the closer Arabs and Israelis come to peace, the more likely terror becomes. This was seen twenty years ago when the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty legitimated Israel, and Sadat was perceived as a traitor and then killed. This is seen today with the onset of the Palestinian uprising against Israel so quickly after Israel made wide-ranging concessions at the Camp David summit.

Israel's Demographic Imperative

Since 1967, neither Israel's right nor its left has implemented its ideology when in power; the right did not annex the West Bank and Gaza, and the left did not withdraw from those territories. This has resulted in uncertainty there is no clear sovereignty, and frustration has grown among both Palestinians and Israelis over the absence of some resolution that would leave Israel with fixed, secure, and recognized borders. Demography brings this into sharper relief, for even with massive Jewish immigration, the number of Arabs living west of the Jordan River is growing faster than the number of Jews. As time goes by, this factor will become ever more important, since the war that the Israelis and Palestinians are fighting may eventually be won by simple demography. Israel's priority must be to find a way to maintain the safety and security of its borders while taking into account immutable demographic trends. This imperative the need to maintain the Zionist ideal of a Jewish majority in a sovereign state drives the search for a solution to the Palestinian issue.

The Palestinian claim to a "right of return" underscores the demographic nightmare for Israel. Perhaps there is some

hope on this issue. Sari Nusseibeh, Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat's new representative in Jerusalem, has said that he would be willing to accept a peace agreement without a Palestinian right of return. If he meant what he said, that would be a major breakthrough. Repartition of Palestine may be difficult but necessary as a solution to the problem, but it can only work if Israel and the Palestinians divide the right of return as well: Jews ought to be able to return to Israel and Arabs to their state, Palestine. Were Arabs allowed to return to Israel en masse, a Palestinian state would exist but Israel would not.

In the meantime, it is clear that the attempt to reach an overall agreement has failed. Following from this, there is no final resolution in sight for the conflict. But both sides can hope to limit the hostilities, preventing them from flaring up. Perhaps an interim agreement can be achieved if Arafat understands that he will not get everything he wanted at Camp David.

The PA and Terrorism

The Oslo Accords created the PA and placed Arafat in the position that he currently holds. Over the years, however, the PA has broken every commitment it has made. One response to these blatant missteps would be to call for the dismantling of the PA. That is not the approach of the current Israeli government, because it needs an entity to handle security matters, even if this entity is not a full partner in peace. The PA shirks its duty to arrest terrorists and continues to lie to Israel about its inactivity toward that end. The only recourse for Israel is to pressure the PA. The most important type of pressure is that applied by the international community, led by America and Europe. Sometimes, however, this is not enough, and Israel must apply military pressure.

An analogy can be drawn between Israel's need to work with the PA while simultaneously taking military action against it, and the United States' attack on the Taliban while simultaneously offering the Taliban the option of giving up bin Laden. If the United States did not attack the Taliban, they would not understand the need to give up bin Laden. Likewise, Israel must take action against the PA in order to make its position clear. Military pressure accompanied by international pressure has not been a perfect solution, but it has been more effective than others.

The killing of Israeli tourism minister Rehavam Ze'evi was a terrible tragedy. Since the Israeli authorities knew the identities of the murderers, there were a number of avenues they could pursue. One option was to demand that the PA arrest and extradite the murderers, which is what the Israeli authorities did, in line with the agreement that if one side demands extradition, the other side must accede. Had the Palestinians turned them over, they would have received a fair trial. But few arrests or detentions were made. Therefore, the Israelis took another course of action, capturing a number of the murderers in military operations. Israel could not sit on its hands after a minister was killed, which is why the decision for Israeli military action was unanimously approved by the cabinet.

This Special Policy Report Forum was prepared by Seth Wikas.

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