

The Intifada, One Year On:

Israeli-Palestinian Relations and the War against Terrorism

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Brief Analysis

The events of September 11 have created new urgency in finding a way to end the intifada and ensure the stability of the U.S.-led coalition against terrorism. Now, more than any time since the start of the violence last September, the United States must take strong steps to help Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) end continuing violence if the global coalition is to gain legitimacy in the Middle East. The steps are in place for PA chairman Yasir Arafat to rein in on Palestinian violence and for Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon to reciprocate. A path back to negotiations can only occur after a ceasefire is established and confidence-building measures are implemented. After September 11, the international community can no longer afford to leave the conflict to its own devices. It is time for the Bush administration to take a more active role in alleviating the violence.

The Need for Greater U.S. Intervention

A new envoy should be appointed by President Bush with the mandate to help Arafat and Sharon implement steps outlined by the Tenet Plan and the Mitchell Report. The envoy must have credibility with the Palestinians and the trust of Israelis. Both parties can take measures to calm violence—however. U.S. participation is critical to achieving a path back to negotiation and providing incentives for both parties to make conciliatory gestures.

In light of September 11, the United States has a fleeting opportunity to ensure that the current ceasefire holds. The United States has leverage with Arafat because he is eager to have a receptive audience in the Bush administration and build a relationship with the president. Furthermore, he does not want to be identified with terrorist organizations or as a sponsor of their activities. In the current climate, Washington can effectively press Arafat to live up to established commitments and in turn press Sharon to reciprocate. Violence must end for negotiations to resume; negotiating under continued violence undermines the basic logic of the peace process. Negotiations are the only way to address the bleak situation affecting the Palestinians and their grievances such as border closings and checkpoints. Both sides were once headed toward an agreement and the only way back to that course is through ending the violence and then resuming the negotiations.

Without greater U.S. involvement, including the appointment of an envoy, the intifada will continue with increased terrorism and stronger retaliation. Throughout the past year, Hamas has grown in strength and popular support. If Arafat does not act to rein in violence and Hamas/Islamic Jihad activities, the PA will become less effective and the situation may deteriorate to the advantage of these more radical forces. The dangers to the region as a whole may become great enough for Jordan and Egypt to feel compelled to respond.

A Year of Intifada

Arafat was not responsible for initiating the uprising a year ago. However, he did little to rein it in and has sought to reap political advantages from it. He evidently thought it was to his advantage to allow the intifada to continue and play for time until President Clinton left office, believing that the Bush administration would be more sympathetic to his grievances. But Arafat has clearly been mistaken; the violence has led to vast casualties and the devastation of the

Palestinian economy. Arafat has become persona non grata in Washington, and he has lost the support of the Israeli Left. The intifada has failed to generate significant Arab support or international intervention.

By June, Arafat was looking for a way out. The suicide bombing that left twenty-one dead at the Dophinarium discotheque in Tel Aviv on June 1 put him in a very tight corner. Within weeks, he approved the Tenet Plan and the Mitchell Report. He apparently made headway in convincing Hamas to stop suicide bombings and the Tanzim to quell the shooting of Israeli motorists. Though he had difficulties in suppressing violence in Rafah, Gaza, and the northern West Bank, Arafat succeeded in stopping much of it. This was the precise moment when Washington should have pressed him to fulfill all pledges. Instead, the Bush administration walked away. The result has been more bombings and tighter Israeli control of the territories.

The attacks on September 11 changed Arafat's thinking. He convened all Palestinian groups and factions and stressed the need to halt all forms of violence. He declared a unilateral ceasefire in English and Arabic, and ordered his forces not to shoot back when fired upon. In the wake of the formation of the U.S.-led coalition to combat terrorism, Arafat had the explanation for ending the violence that he needed. He was given the stick of being treated as a leader of terrorist groups, and the carrots of coalition membership and warmer relations with Washington. Indications of his new thinking include his Rafah trip to try and personally end the violence, and the arrests of lower-level Palestinian terrorists sought by Israel.

Israel's Options

After Sharon's election, Israeli officials privately constructed plans to consider alternative ways to end the conflict; three options emerged. The first, using the Israel Defense Forces to crush any violent activity and to prepare for reoccupation of the territories, and the second, unilaterally withdrawing from most of Gaza and the West Bank and separating both areas entirely from Israel proper, presented significant problems and were thus rejected. That left the option of convincing Arafat to stop the violence—the option Sharon decided on soon after his election. Indications of this intention include meetings between his son Omri and Arafat, and Sharon's total acceptance of the Tenet Plan and the Mitchell Report.

The events of September 11 presented a new situation to Sharon. Israel wanted to be seen by the United States as contributing to the war against terrorism. Sharon stopped initiated actions against the Palestinians and agreed to a meeting between Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Arafat. Sharon understands that he has to be viewed as taking steps to defuse the current violent situation if he is to gain favor with Washington and the international community.

Next Steps

The fragile ceasefire will not hold if it is left to its own devices. Without continued U.S. engagement in the process, not enough incentives exist for Sharon and Arafat to enact the necessary measures that will lead to a resumption of negotiations.

For the United States, the post-September 11 priority is to assemble a broad base of support against terrorism. Continued Israeli-Palestinian fighting could be a major distraction to marshalling such support and threatens regional efforts to combat terrorism.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Aaron Resnick.

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