A Year of Middle East Violence:

Balance Sheet and Prospects in the Aftermath of September 11

by David Makovsky **(/experts/david-makovsky)**

Sep 27, 2001

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Brief Analysis

At the direct and repeated behest of the Bush administration, Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat met yesterday at the Gaza Airport—their first meeting since June. Given the extraordinary circumstances of the September 11 attacks and the U.S. desire to fashion an international coalition against terrorism, the meeting is bound to raise hopes that the latest ceasefire will take hold. As previous Israeli-Palestinian ceasefires have collapsed, however, the implications of this meeting cannot be predicted with any certainty. This Friday, September 28, marks the first anniversary of the violence that has engulfed Israelis and Palestinians and scuttled the peace process. Such an occasion presents an opportunity to assess the impact of this violence and to consider the future in light of the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington.

Yasir Arafat's Balance Sheet

Any Palestinian balance sheet must begin with lost opportunities. The peace process that culminated in the Clinton Plan last December offered the Palestinians a recognized state, approximately 97 percent of the West Bank and Gaza (including the removal of many Jewish settlements), and Arab neighborhoods of east Jerusalem (including much of the Old City and Temple Mount). Yet, Arafat refused to accept both this offer and a last-ditch Israeli offer made at Taba; a comparable proposal is inconceivable for the foreseeable future.

Although Palestinians sharply reject Israeli military assertions that the violence was a premeditated instrument orchestrated in the spring of 2000 to extract Israeli concessions during negotiations -- instead blaming Ariel Sharon's stroll on the Temple Mount—it is undeniable that when the violence did break out, Arafat made no public call for calm so that negotiations could proceed. Instead, he released dozens of terrorists from prison, including suicide bombers. This silence did more than hurt Arafat's international stature. Yezid Sayigh, a Palestinian intellectual at Cambridge University who was involved in the negotiations, wrote recently what others have said in private; namely, that Arafat's actions during this period represent the loss of an historic opportunity which may not return any time soon, and that Arafat is a tactician rather than a strategist..

Over the last year, Palestinian setbacks in various spheres have greatly outweighed their gains:

Domestic. Approximately 600 Palestinians are dead and 15,000 are wounded, while the Palestinian economy and

infrastructure are in ruins.

International. Arafat's request for UN forces as part of a bid to "internationalize" the conflict shows no prospect of success.

Regional. Arafat has been frustrated by his inability to parlay the sympathy of Arab publics into effective, united action by Arab governments. The Arab League has not gone to war on his behalf, despite its incendiary rhetoric. The conflict has not spilled over into a regional Arab-Israeli war. Despite a myriad of pledges, Arab support has not even translated into serious financial backing of Palestinian violence.

United States. Arafat was the most frequently received foreign visitor to the Clinton White House, but until now, he has been completely shut out of the Bush White House. From the beginning of his term, President Bush has agreed with Israel's insistence that a reduction in Palestinian violence must precede any peacemaking. In addition, Israel has asserted that its preemptive killings of alleged terrorists are justified as self-defense given Arafat's refusal to arrest those he released from jails; these strikes have been met with only pro forma American opposition (and in the case of Vice President Dick Cheney, outright support). No bans have been placed on Israeli use of American weaponry during the conflict. Even the pro forma opposition is likely to dissipate in light of the New York and Washington attacks.

Arafat has made no inroads into American public opinion either, according to a string of Gallup polls. Although the Palestinian intifada of the late 1980s did capture public attention, Americans have been more skeptical of Arafat's intentions this time around, given Clinton's efforts and the manner in which the violence has morphed from a popular uprising of rock-throwing protesters to a shooting war run by state-backed militias and security agencies, coupled with Islamic militant suicide bombings. According to Gallup, after almost a year of violence, American public sympathy for the Palestinians has remained at 13 percent. Until September 11, support for Israel had remained where it was at the outset of the violence: 41 percent. But in the aftermath of the attacks, the figure has climbed to 55 percent—the highest level since Scuds fell on Israel during the 1991 Gulf War—while support for the Palestinians has dropped to its Gulf War low of 7 percent.

Israel. Arafat's steepest fall has been inside Israel. Israel has made no significant diplomatic or land concessions under fire. Instead, Arafat has "succeeded" in enabling Prime Minister Sharon to win the biggest landslide in Israeli history, decimating Israeli doves. Absent any indications of Palestinian desire for reconciliation, the violence has produced no "pendulum" effect leftward, nor any opportunities for Foreign Minister Shimon Peres (or others) to seize fissures within the Sharon government. Indeed, Israel is united around Sharon, as polls consistently show that 75 percent of the public want the unity government to continue. Polls also show that if elections to the Knesset were held today, the right-wing and religious allies would win an astounding 74 of 120 seats.

Although the balance sheet shows a staggering number of setbacks, Arafat can point to two possible, if partial, achievements. First, he demonstrated that Sharon has no "quick fix" means of suppressing violence as he did while serving as regional military commander in Gaza in 1971. Sharon has offset this liability in the eyes of the Israeli public, however; polls demonstrate that Israelis do not think anyone else in the domestic political spectrum has better ideas, and Sharon has so far been able to frame the violence as a war of attrition that requires perseverance. A second quasi-achievement for Arafat has been the American adoption of the Mitchell Report, which commits the United States—for the first time since the presidency of Jimmy Carter—to some variation of a freeze on existing settlements. This is a rather small achievement given that the Clinton Plan would have uprooted, not just frozen, dozens of settlements; it has also been mitigated by Sharon's success in convincing the Bush administration to accept his idea that a period of quiet must precede any action on settlements.

Ariel Sharon's Balance Sheet

The Sharon government's balance sheet has been improved by some of the tactical steps mentioned above, but his greatest success has been to deprive the Palestinians of the enemy they wanted—the Ariel Sharon of 1982. Sharon of 2001, and not 1982, realized that violence in the West Bank and Gaza cannot be combated by an all-out conventional war. Such an offensive is not only military ineffective (since it is designed to combat armies and not militias), but it is also likely to result in the international political backlash that Arafat seeks.

Furthermore, Sharon's current strategy has not alienated the two key constituencies that were at bitter odds with him in 1982: Israeli moderates and the United States. Sharon has succeeded in keeping his disparate, broad-based coalition together only because Arafat has provided the glue of an external threat. Apart from an almost fateful misstep in resisting a key Bush administration request in the aftermath of September 11, Sharon has largely avoided confrontation with Washington. He has succeeded to date as a tactician with stamina, one who navigates the shoals. If he is potentially vulnerable, it is to questions of whether he is a farsighted statesman who has a long-range vision for the country and for coexistence. Relatedly, Sharon has failed to create political distance between the Palestinian public and the violence. Palestinian support for the violence has consistently run over 80 percent, but Sharon has barely tried to articulate to Palestinians—many of whom have access to Israeli media in Arabic and Hebrew—how their lives would improve in the absence of violence and how he views coexistence between their two peoples in the future.

Incredibly, Arafat has played to Sharon's strengths, not to his potential weakness. Arafat has not demonstrated the political agility to probe—or, in his mind, expose—Sharon at the peace table.

The Impact of September 11

In the aftermath of September 11, a balance of pressures may be established in the short term that limits both Arafat and Sharon's room to maneuver. The fear of being on the bad side of the Bush administration right now may lead to a reduction of violence, but this is not a certainty. The key will be whether Arafat arrests his own Islamic radicals and demonstrates a 100-percent effort in counterterrorism; otherwise, there will be speculation that there is a "good cop, bad cop" approach at work, and Israel may then feel forced to retaliate.

As international attention focuses on the United States gearing up for war against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, making precise predictions about the intermediate impact of these events on the Arab-Israel situation is risky in the face of many unknown variables. President Bush says that the effort against bin Laden is only the first in the war against terrorism with "global reach," but whether this effort will be followed up by U.S. military attacks or other campaigns against Iraq, the Hizballah in the Beka'a Valley, or others is an uncertainty at this point. Amid fears that America may deem them adversaries, several Arab leaders have so far decided that they will incur greater risk should they alienate America than should they side with domestic Islamic rejectionists. (This belief may shift with time, but senior Bush officials such as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice now publicly refer to "coalitions" in the plural in order to suggest that the United States will not be constrained by any one coalition against Afghanistan.) Arafat's instant willingness to donate blood for September 11 victims is emblematic of this belief, as are the instant denunciations by several Arab political leaders, who condemned the attacks in a way that did not condemn past terror. It remains far from certain whether such declarations will be matched by a tougher domestic stance against terrorism. Even though America feels much more victimized than it did during the Gulf War, it is important to note that the United States is not asking its Arab friends —at least not at this stage—to actively go to war against another Arab country, but rather to engage in low-profile activities such as intelligence sharing or logistical assistance. The key test for the Arabs may be domestic, especially in dealing with elements that are part of a terror network with "global reach."

The United States could put forward mechanisms to test the sincerity of these Arab states, and not just blithely accept words of solace or pints of blood. For example, the United States could put Syrian president Bashar al-Asad to

the test—a test that he will not want to fail. In the aftermath of September 11, Asad sent Bush a condolence letter asserting that he would join a worldwide effort to "uproot terrorism in all of its forms and to ensure protection of the simplest of human rights, namely the right of peaceful and safe living everywhere in the world." Action will speak louder than words, however, in whether Bashar will dismantle Hizballah training camps in the Beka'a Valley and shut down the offices of Palestinian rejectionists in Damascus who are on the U.S. State Department's terrorism list. The United States could also test Arafat by observing whether he indeed dismantles the infrastructure of Islamic Jihad and the Hamas military wing. Arafat dreads confronting his rejectionists—some critics even insist that this is why he did not want to reach a peace deal with Israel: the pain factor would have been too high. Some may also say that Arafat needs a pretext to act against rejectionists and thus make peace more palatable, but there will never be one greater than the international revulsion surrounding September 11.

Former President Bush's strike against Iraq a decade ago dealt a major blow to Middle East radicalism and, coupled with the end of the Cold War, reshuffled the regional deck in a manner that paved the way for the landmark peace conferences in Madrid and Oslo. In short, 1991 demonstrated that regional action against radicalism was a prerequisite to, and not the outgrowth of, peacemaking. Thus, it seems fair to say that the current Bush campaign against terrorism is more likely to have an ultimately favorable impact on Middle East peacemaking if direct American action—or even the specter of future action—is felt throughout the Middle East and not just at its periphery, Afghanistan. Hopefully, this campaign will serve as a clarion call for action to ensure a safer region.

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