

Monitory Policy

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Articles & Testimony

After throwing away Palestinian statehood, 98 percent of the West Bank, a chunk of Jerusalem, and peace in the Middle East, Yasir Arafat still wants to cloak himself in the mantle of peacemaker. A return to calm would be possible, Arafat tells anyone who will listen, if only international monitors would come to the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem. But being a peacemaker and playing one on TV are two very different things. Arafat might have a thousand and one reasons to want observers, but a quest for peace is not among them. He may pretend that he doesn't know better, that he doesn't know full well the sorry history of international monitors in the Middle East. But the U.N. Security Council, which on Monday again took up the tired question of sending in monitors, should. Monitors and international observers have a long history in the Middle East and, almost without exception, one which has led to the escalation of conflict and more bloodshed for all involved parties.

Take the "U.N. Disengagement Observer Force," deployed since 1974 on the Golan Heights, for example. Many view it as a success at keeping the peace between Israel and Syria. But at what price? Rather than cementing peace, the monitors' presence encouraged Syria to take its fight underground, leaving a legacy of civil war and guerrilla activity in neighboring Lebanon.

In Lebanon, the monitors caused even more damage. In 1978, following a massacre of Israeli civilian bus passengers by terrorists infiltrating from Lebanon, Israel briefly occupied southern Lebanon to push back Palestinian guerrillas. The U.N. created its Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in March 1978 to monitor Israel's withdrawal (which came three months later). But rather than lay the groundwork for peace, UNIFIL contributed to the escalation of war as it failed to stop increasingly frequent Palestinian terrorist and rocket attacks upon Israel launched from the very area that the monitors patrolled. The resulting escalation of violence under the monitors' collective nose posed a sufficient threat to Israel's security to provoke its 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

When Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon in May 2000, U.N. monitors were supposed to confirm Israel's full withdrawal, yet continued to display an appalling lack of neutrality. After Israel transferred a few military positions to UNIFIL, the observers turned around and gave some to Hezbollah guerillas to occupy, rather than wait for the Lebanese army. On October 7, Hezbollah guerillas--allegedly dressed in UNIFIL regalia--kidnapped three Israelis. After nine months of denial, UNIFIL admitted it had a videotape that might shed light on the incident. UNIFIL's excuse for nine months of lies? Releasing the video would be partisan. In other words, it would be inappropriate for monitors to find fault with those fighting Israel.

In the West Bank and Gaza, observers are simply unable to find fault with Israel's opponents, which only escalates the tension on both sides. Take the case of the Temporary International Presence in Hebron, an observer force of Scandinavians, Italians, and Turks, that on August 20 ended its six-year monitoring mission in the West Bank town. Few residents were sorry to see the monitors go. One Israeli 14-year-old told The Washington Post in July, that the monitors were "a bunch of tourists from Denmark." Palestinians also admitted the monitors' impotence. Monitors in the West Bank and Gaza can never prevent attacks, since neither Hamas, nor Islamic Jihad, nor Arafat's multiple militias allow observers to tail along on ambushes and suicide bombings. Without access to intelligence, monitors

are impotent.

American officials sometimes discuss a continued role for Central Intelligence Agency or State Department officers to man an observer mission. While Israeli officials agreed to limited CIA security monitors under the terms of the 1997 Wye River Accords, by 1999, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak concluded that the CIA monitors actually gave a disincentive for direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Regardless, adding American monitors now would be perhaps the quickest way to increase bloodshed. A contingent of American monitors would create a target more tempting than that of the U.S. marines in Beirut, where, in 1983, 241 U.S. monitors attempting to separate warring factions in Lebanon's civil war were killed in a devastating explosion in their barracks.

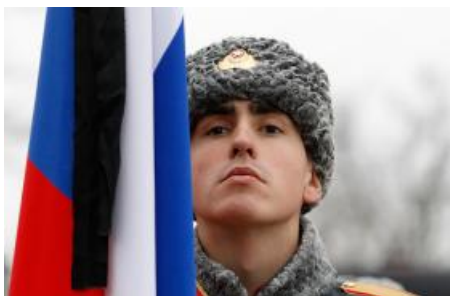
To be sure, there has been one unqualified success among Middle East monitoring forces. The Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) stationed in the Sinai has separated the Israeli and Egyptian armies since 1982. But there's a significant difference between the Sinai in 1982 and the West Bank in 2001: The MFO did not make peace. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin did. Both countries wanted peace, and the monitors came afterward.

History tells us that unless both warring factions are serious about peace, monitors create more problems than they solve. Until Arafat gets serious about negotiating peace instead of waging a violent guerrilla campaign, monitors will lead to the spilling of more blood--Israeli and Palestinian alike. While the U.S. could use its Security Council veto to stop the U.N. from sending in monitors--and ought to, if it comes to a vote--it shouldn't need to. The State Department could exercise real leadership by halting this sorry charade before it begins. Discussing failed ideas simply deflects attention from the real issues at hand and legitimizes Yasir Arafat's decision to seek violence and war rather than statehood and peace.

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