

Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority: Impressions from a Regional Tour

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Brief Analysis

At Camp David/Taba, the Palestinians left the Israeli bride at the altar, so to speak, by turning down the agreement. Regional actors have responded differently. Some Arab leaders, especially Egyptians, are in denial, arguing that former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak's proposals are still valid and that the peace process is still salvageable. Many Arabs blame the failure of Camp David/Taba on the "arrangements" -- technical problems, miscommunication, or poor timing of proposals that caused the talks to fizzle. If only these problems were fixed, they argue, an agreement could be worked out.

At the same time, many Arab officials change the plot by focusing attention on Yasir Arafat's weaknesses and the still-unaddressed claims of 1948 refugees, rather than on the issue of rejecting a generous offer from Israel. In the Arab street and media, there is a return to rejecting the basic interest and identity of the other side, highlighted by an upsurge of anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish sentiment, along with (to a lesser extent) a reaction against the United States. In Egypt, senior officials seemed conscious of this reality and tried to preemptively deflect criticism of the trend.

On the Israeli side, senior officials evince a sense of righteous indignation, accompanied by a delight that international opinion has turned against Arafat. The second reaction is a sense of liberation and relief: now that Oslo has unmasked Arafat as not wanting peace, tough decisions about major concessions, in their view, are not in the offing. Overall, most officials and analysts spend their days trying to understand what goes on in inside Arafat's mind.

Neither side has any expectation of getting back to Oslo any time soon; both seem to be preparing for a long war of attrition. The Palestinians and Israelis are able to face this prospect in part because they have a very real, intense commitment to their respective ideologies. Both sides appear unified and resolved, in spite of their respective losses. This is partly facilitated by the perception that the conflict has moved from a dispute over territory to a clash of ideologies. Oslo was based on the idea that territorial compromise could resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; that belief has waned and in its place is an existential conflict in which compromise is impossible. As Palestinian Legislative Council Speaker Abu Ala has said, the Palestinians will not discuss a proposal or a counter-proposal that involves concessions on territory or rights "for the next 1,000 years." Instead, the two sides look to the United States

for ideological arbitration and endorsement of their moral positions.

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General impressions. The region is empty. There were no tourists in the Old City of Jerusalem -- where there has not been a single intifada event -- or even in the major sites in Cairo. Nevertheless, life goes on amidst the violence, on both sides. For Israelis, the violence is not only in distant Gaza but faced daily on the roads, especially those surrounding Jerusalem. Palestinians, too, feel the stress of the current situation daily, given the unprecedented tightness of the "suffocating closure" now implemented. Many people seem stuck in a time warp. This is true not only among grass-roots political leaders, as in the Palestinian refugee camps, but also among Arab-and especially Egyptian-diplomats, who believe the Taba negotiations are still relevant.

Most importantly, the intifada is not just another phase through which the parties are passing, like the 1996 tunnel riots or the Nakba protests in the spring of 2000. It is a transformative event, on par with 1948 and 1967. Indeed, the intifada has sounded the death knell for the "negotiated two-state solution"-the formula that most observers thought for the last generation held the key to the solution of the conflict. Sadly, no better ideas have emerged, meaning that the parties will be locked in a war of attrition until one or more basic variables of the situation change.

With the formal acceptance of the document brokered by CIA director George Tenet on June 13, a new phase began. Each side, however, views the ceasefire differently:

- Israelis no longer focus on 100 percent effort; their yardstick is 100 percent results. Violations will, in Israel's view, start the clock over from the beginning of the six-week cooling off period. For the Israeli government, the definition of violence now includes stone throwing and Molotov cocktails, which have not historically been included in the U.S. definition. Israel puts both re-arresting terrorists released during the intifada and putting a stop to incitement on par with ending violence itself, and the government also demands that Palestinians prevent attacks outside of Zone A- especially on the roads, where most of the attacks occur.
- For their part, Palestinians have no intention of re-arresting individuals guilty of past terrorist activities, only those currently involved in planning future attacks. For the Palestinian Authority (PA), the biggest concern is the lack of political context within which the ceasefire now falls, meaning the absence of direct linkage to the resumption of negotiations.

Tenet may very well have accomplished the best that was possible under the circumstances, but his agreement has many holes. Tenet's document fails to define violence or incitement; it leaves vague the issue of re-arresting terrorists; and most of all, it offers no clues as to how the monitoring system will work. For the United States -- the monitoring party -- this is essentially a political question, not a technical question, since to figure out how monitoring works means to figure out in advance how the ceasefire could end. The experience of monitoring the Wye agreement is instructive, but it cannot serve as a model given the vast difference in ambiance.

This is a ceasefire with a strong likelihood of failure; contrary to its previous practice, Israel will not this time overlook Palestinian violations in order to keep the larger process going. Therefore, before this period begins, the United States must decide whether it will speak truth, unlike the past-not knowing whether such truthfulness will avert an Israeli military response or provide the rationale for it -- or whether it prefers a U.S. -- Israel confrontation over Palestinian violations.

Assuming the ceasefire works -- and the likelihood is slim --the next stage will consist of implementing confidence-building measures and past agreements. Israel believes that the top items on this list should be:

- cutting in half Palestinian security forces to the limits set in the Wye agreement, from about 40,000 members to 18,000;

- licensing and confiscating illegal weapons in PA areas; and
- dismantling the infrastructure of terrorism.

As for the issue of settlement freeze, the Ariel Sharon government is unlikely ever to utter that phrase; nevertheless, in practice it is coming quite close. Sharon's administration has discarded the concept of "natural growth" for the new phrase "current needs," and it has already rejected more than 100 requests for "natural growth" construction within existing settlements. Perhaps most importantly, it is sending a clear hint of a willingness to negotiate the issue.

This all may be hypothetical, however, since few believe the ceasefire itself will work. Israelis all testify to the fact that agreements with Arafat are never implemented, and they expect the United States to declare the PA a terrorist entity if the ceasefire collapses. On the security level, the Palestinian side has admitted that without a direct link to political benefits they do not believe the ceasefire will hold either. Moreover, on the political level, Palestinians have confirmed what many Israelis have been saying for months—that the red lines are the 1967 borders, the right of return, and Jerusalem. This means that for the Israeli leadership, the current situation may well be for the long term, and in this case Israel's strategy would be to allow Arafat's position to erode over time. (No Israeli official suggested hastening the demise of Arafat's regime.)

More generally, many in the region believe that the situation has reverted to a zero-sum, 1948-style conflict. Radical groups -- both old and new -- are proliferating, and we heard first hand the legitimization of suicide bombers from fairly mainstream Islamist legal authorities. This increasing radicalism is, of course, a regional phenomenon, and we heard many complaints around the region about the nefarious effect of Arab satellite television. Indeed, Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinians alike complained about how much pressure they feel they are under from the daily bombardment of television coming from around the Arab world.

Given the diplomatic dead end that seems to define current reality, the alternatives heard during the tour consist of the following:

- Doing Oslo better. The Egyptian version of this solution pins its hopes on the emerging victor from the September 4, 2001, Labor Party primary, whoever that may be.
- Unilateral disengagement, for which Barak has the most detailed plan. Although people across the board refuse to rule out this possibility, any disengagement in a period of conflict is likely to be rejected by Israelis as an unnecessary sign of weakness and an erosion of deterrence.
- Destroy Arafat/PA—a position enunciated with great clarity by Brig.-Gen. (ret.) Effi (Fein) Eitam. This option is based on the not-unreasonable assumption that the Oslo experiment failed, revealing that Arafat cannot be a partner. In Eitam's scenario, the solution is to go back to treating Jordan as Palestine. The government currently believes that, although a situation without Arafat may provide more opportunities, there is no certainty that this will be the case, and therefore Israel will not attempt to destroy the PA.
- Impose a solution from the outside, given that the parties can never negotiate one themselves. Ironically, this is the preferred option of liberal thinker former foreign minister Shlomo Ben Ami as well as Israel's radical Islamic fundamentalist movement.

Unfortunately, the most likely scenario is a long-term war of attrition, until one or more of the variables change. For the United States, this means recognizing that the foreseeable future is about conflict management, not conflict prevention, let alone conflict resolution. As with a military action, we should have a sense of much we are willing to invest in the situation diplomatically, as well as an exit strategy should circumstances deteriorate—all the while keeping in mind our larger interests of insulating our allies and ourselves from the fallout and preventing wider

regional war.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rachel Stroumsa.

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