

Israeli-Palestinian Relations in the Bush/Sharon Era (Part I)

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Apr 27, 2001

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In-Depth Reports

I shall try to be as brief as possible in order to leave more time for questions and answers. Six months have gone by since the outbreak of the violence between Palestinians and Israelis, so Robert Satloff has asked me to review the conflict up to its present stage from the Israeli point of view, and to note any differences in character between this round of violence and former rounds. This is not the first time that we have faced what we used to call a "low-intensity conflict." I will not go into the earliest rounds of violence, from the events preceding Israel's war of independence to the Six Day War. Nor am I going to discuss the war that was fought by the Palestinians from Lebanon until 1982, when then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon decided on a large-scale war there as a response to the attacks from the northern border. Today's violence follows the Oslo agreements, which were aimed at stopping all violence; thus, it calls for special attention, because if we are looking toward the future, we will have to remember how we got to this point.

Before the present round of violence erupted in late September 2000, terrorism inside Israel had reached several other peaks. During the premiership of Shimon Peres, whom the Palestinians regarded with favor, incidents like the blowing up of civilian buses in Israel led to the first international peace conference at Sharm el- Sheikh in 1996. As usual, though, resolutions were passed but never implemented. Then, another intense round of violence took place in 1996 over the digging of the conventional canal in Jerusalem, killing sixteen Israelis and over sixty Palestinians. This erupted during the leadership of Binyamin Netanyahu. Later on, during the May 2000 negotiations which took place in Stockholm -- between our former foreign minister, Shlomo Ben-Ami, and the chairman of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Abu Ala -- yet another round of violence took place.

Since the Oslo agreement, then, Chairman Yasir Arafat has dealt with five Israeli prime ministers: Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Binyamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, and now Ariel Sharon. Five prime ministers. Arafat could perhaps argue that this or that prime minister was not to his liking because of the way he had been treated. Yet, these five prime ministers offered different outlooks, manners, and inclinations to compromise, and misunderstandings and violence occurred during the premiership of all five -- not just with Netanyahu or Sharon, but with all five.

Buses were blown up in Rabin's time as well. We tend to forget that this was the situation even then. In fact, the most important personal understanding between Arafat and Rabin was their handshake before the meeting on the White House lawn, and the signing of agreements here in Washington. That moment represented a personal and unequivocal understanding that all differences between the parties, no matter what, were to be resolved by peaceful,

diplomatic means. So what is happening today is a fundamental breach of their written undertaking. If this commitment is not implemented, all remaining undertakings are rendered meaningless. Whoever claims the right to use violence in order to impose their will on their rival renders all mutual agreements null and void.

In many ways, the effect on Israeli society of the current confrontation differs from all preceding confrontations, including Israel's limited military conflicts. The essential difference lies in the fact that this is the first military confrontation to break out despite detailed agreements signed by Israelis and Palestinians. In 1987, the uprising called the intifada broke out, and it consisted mainly of massive rioting by the people. Yet, there was no political process between Israel and the Palestinians at that time. The Palestinians could then claim that they wanted a political process, that they wanted negotiations with the Israelis, particularly since the territories and many of the Palestinians themselves were under full Israeli control in 1987. The Palestinians' demands even met with wide Israeli public support at the time. The uprising actually died down with the outbreak of the Gulf War, when Arafat supported Saddam Husayn, but the political process came eventually, after the 1991 Madrid conference.

The present military confrontation erupted after Israel had signed the Oslo agreements and eight other agreements. We tend to forget that there were many other agreements, in Taba, in Cairo -- the economic agreements, the Wye River agreement, and so forth. Because of these agreements, Israel allowed Arafat to enter the territories with his entire army, granting him control of some 39 percent of the area -- including all of the big towns, not counting parts of Hebron -- and 90 percent of the Palestinian population. These facts are at the bottom of the internal upheaval in Israel, because violence broke out after the parties returned from Camp David.

Earlier this morning, we heard Dennis Ross discussing what occurred at Camp David: how Barak proposed some far-reaching concessions by Israel, including the partition of east Jerusalem and the near-surrender of the Jordan Valley. These proposals actually led the Israeli public to vote against Barak in the elections that followed the outbreak of the bloody disturbances. In effect, the Israelis voted not only against Barak but also against Arafat and his conduct. This transition in Israel consisted of a sudden and widespread feeling that the chances of real peace with the Palestinians -- peace that would not endanger the existence of Israel as a democratic, Jewish state -- seemed to be going up in smoke; that the Palestinians were not like the Egyptians or the Syrians, and certainly not like the Jordanians. The feeling in Israel is that the Palestinians -- who attempted to devastate Lebanon and Jordan in the civil wars there -- cannot have normal relations with Israel, and that waves of violence are sure to follow further attempts to establish such relations.

A large number of Israelis even feel that Israel is back to square one: that the objective of the Palestinians is to revert to Israel's 1948 war for independence. One fact to remember is that, concurrent with the military confrontation in the territories, serious violence broke out within the Israeli Arab minority, shaking Israeli confidence still further. Many Israelis believe that what we have here is not a temporary crisis but a Palestinian return to the starting point of the dispute.

This realization was Israel's greatest blow, and to ignore it is to be blind to what Israel is undergoing. That great disillusionment defeated Barak and raised Sharon into power. This, in turn, brought about the collapse of most of the Israeli left wing. Many of its members are now among the fiercest opponents of the Palestinian claim of the so-called "right of return," which we feel would flood Israel with refugees while totally disrupting the country's demographic structure and destroying it from within. The military confrontation triggered by the Palestinians produced a new Israeli consensus whose significance the Palestinians fail to understand. Maintaining our readiness to confront Palestinian violence is very difficult. Yet, from my experiences with both Israeli civilians and military personnel, I would have to disagree with the doubts that General Brent Scowcroft expressed earlier this morning about Israel's ability to stand this kind of confrontation. As long as the consensus is there, Israeli public opinion will support the government. The consensus also supports going back to the negotiating table, and I am ready to discuss this

possibility later on. Israelis understand that the present conflict is one of the most significant in the history of our country, because it will determine the borders of the state of Israel and our long-term relationship with the Palestinians. It will have a strong bearing on Jewish-Arab relations within Israel as well. The general feeling is that the moral stamina of Israeli society -- our capacity to endure a long conflict, our firm belief in the justice of Israel's cause, and our willingness to make sacrifices -- will decide the fate of the struggle.

The Washington Institute has held several meetings on the political aspects of the present confrontation, and I would like to say a few words about the military aspects. We must pay attention to the changes in Palestinian and general Arab military thinking. Nothing has influenced it more than the withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from southern Lebanon and the Hizballah battle against Israel. According to Hizballah logic, as the Palestinians call it, the only chance that the Arabs have of defeating Israel on the battlefield is through a limited war, a war of attrition that would also eat at the civilian population. Such a fight would consist of guerilla warfare, terror, and civilian uprisings. They believe that this strategy stands a good chance of success, provided Israel does not make a sudden switch from a limited military confrontation to large-scale warfare, where it could apply its full military power as it did in 1956 and later on in the Six Day War in 1967.

Thus, different parties drew contradictory conclusions from the IDF withdrawal. Ehud Barak, as prime minister, viewed the withdrawal as a preliminary step toward a wider settlement that would include the Syrians and calm the Lebanese border. He saw it as a first step, a first attempt to reach an agreement under the auspices of the United Nations and with international support. The Palestinians, and also many Arab countries, took a somewhat different view of the withdrawal. Their interpretation was that it was done under pressure -- that the small group Hizballah had successfully imposed its will on Israeli society and, consequently, on the Israeli government and army, forcing a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon without an agreement. They saw it as a proven means of pushing Israel -- as their first military victory against us and as the best way to operate in the future.

I am quite surprised that nothing has been said yet about Hizballah in Lebanon and Iranian involvement with Hizballah-Israeli fighting in the north. It was against this background that the Palestinian strategy developed: namely, that even when negotiations are in progress, violence must continue. They believe that their interests are served more effectively this way. I can quote a long list of declarations by Palestinian leaders saying that they can negotiate with Israel while at the same time fighting Israel. Thus, I agree with Sharon -- and with our ambassador to the United States, Eliahu Ben Elissar -- that political negotiations on the resolution of the conflict cannot be held under fire, because the Palestinians are trying to continue the violence while Israel is not free to respond.

This confrontation represents another clash of strategic interests between the parties. Again and again, the Palestinians insist that they hold the key to regional stability. They warn that if their demands are not met, the confrontation will spill over to other parts of the region, thereby upsetting stability. This is not just a threat against Israel, but also against the international community and the United States. Yet as Martin Indyk, the American ambassador to Israel, said, "Those who align themselves with Hamas and Hizballah and Saddam Husayn should not be surprised if we don't treat them as our friends." Israel's stand is diametrically opposed to that of the Palestinians. Its strategic objective is to stop the confrontation from spilling beyond its present confines. Israel does not want the conflict to move in the direction of Lebanon or Jordan, nor does it want to allow Saddam Husayn to exploit the situation in order to be viewed in the Arab world as a hero. The Iraqis would stop at nothing to achieve their ends, not even military involvement. They have already deployed their forces near the Syrian border twice -- another item which was not mentioned this morning. There appears to be equal interest in this matter of regional stability between Israel and Egypt and between Israel and Jordan.

It is fit to ask at this point whether Israel can expect to win a limited war. The outcome may seem vague, but the answer is: yes, it can. Another question, then: what sort of victory can it achieve? It would not be the victory of the Six

Day War, nor the 1973 Yom Kippur War, nor the war for independence. Neither can Israel, nor even the United States, with all its might, talk of an outright victory over those who blew up American embassies or the U.S. destroyer Cole in Yemen. Yet, as has happened before, Israel can win its present confrontation on points. That is the nature of a limited conflict. Victory by scoring points depends on, among other things, the firm resolve to deny any gains to those who have started the violence and the terrorism. Such concessions would invite more violence, and only by political means can the Palestinian people achieve anything. Rabin took the same approach when he objected to a considerable part of the concessions on settlements. He believed that only by negotiations and by mutual agreement could certain settlements be dismantled, not by force.

The expansion of the clashes raises the question of the treatment of the civilian population in such circumstances. At first, the confrontation was regarded as a massive breach of public order. Soon enough, though, a limited military confrontation evolved. Many foreign ministries, as well as the international media, failed to see that more than just a police operation was needed to impose law and order. When the military confrontation began, it involved thousands of shooting incidents. Suicide car bombs went off in public places in Israel, and such incidents cannot be handled by police measures alone.

What we have been witnessing is a slow deterioration into a limited military conflict whose rules are different from those of a simple civilian uprising. It is becoming increasingly clear to Israel that official forces of the Palestinian Authority (PA) are taking an active part in the violence. Mortar shells have been fired repeatedly from the Gaza Strip into Israel's settlements and within the Green Line. Israel has responded with strikes against the PA itself, though so far, only its infrastructure has been targeted. Great care has been taken to avoid deliberate strikes against the Palestinian population, and one can see the limited number of casualties that occur when Israel launches these kinds of activities.

This has been Israel's line from the start. All Israeli war games, even before the confrontation started, have emphasized that it is not in Israel's best interests to cause a large number of Palestinian casualties, since this would only breed hostility. Although the military confrontation is expanding, it needs to be handled with care. This is not always possible, but Israel is prepared to spare the basic needs of the Palestinian population, such as water. An agreement has in fact been reached on the subject, and the present government has adopted the same line.

At this point, the Israelis are even asking themselves whether the collapse of the PA should be an objective. The answer at the outset of the confrontation was unequivocal: such a collapse would be bad for Israel. I find a somewhat different attitude today, however, and I have to underline it. Although steps should not be taken to overthrow the PA, the feeling now is that nothing should be done to prevent this if it is going to happen; it is primarily up to the Palestinians.

Reference should also be made to security cooperation with the PA, because this is a subject which comes up again and again. Genuine and effective cooperation is all well and good, but Israel cannot depend on it, as demonstrated by countless violations of the security accord. This is one of the most important lessons of recent months. As always, Israel must rely on itself alone for its security, not on the Palestinians; security cooperation is but a supplement to Israel's own capacity.

These issues lead to questions about Israel's view of Arafat himself. After the Oslo accord, many in Israel regarded Arafat as a key asset to the peace process, sensing that without him, nothing could be achieved. After the repeated negotiations and the Palestinians' turn to violence, however, I detect another nuance. Arafat can no longer be counted as a peace asset. Furthermore, the fear that he might be replaced by a more radical leader has dissipated somewhat; many Israelis believe that no such leader would enjoy Arafat's international legitimacy.

Let me conclude with a remark on a subject that was raised by Barak during his farewell speech in the Knesset.

There, he spoke a word of warning about the separation issue. According to him, Israel must try its best to separate from the Palestinians. The best way to do so would be by an agreement with them, but if this is not feasible, it would have to be done unilaterally, even at the cost of territory to Israel. If separation is not achieved, Barak warned, Israel would endanger its future as a democratic, Jewish state. I doubt that separation would ever be the policy of the Sharon government. The settlers and the right-wing parties probably hate the idea. Speaking from a military standpoint, full and effective separation would be very difficult to accomplish. Partial separation is feasible, but only partial. This controversy will not end soon and is sure to assume different dimensions if the PA decides to revive the idea of a unilateral declaration of the Palestinian state, to include a large Israeli population within its boundaries.

Ghassan Khatib addressed the conference on this same topic. [Read his remarks. \(templateC07.php?CID=92\)](#) ❖

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