

The 'al-Aqsa Intifada' and the Prospects for a Wider Arab-Israeli War

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Brief Analysis

Palestinian officials have threatened an intensification of violence, should -- as is expected -- Ariel Sharon be elected prime minister of Israel tomorrow. The Palestinian leadership that "rewarded" Prime Minister Ehud Barak's diplomatic flexibility with the "al-Aqsa Intifada" thus seems poised to "punish" the Israeli public for electing Sharon with an escalation of the bloodletting. Its goal would be to force Israel to soften its negotiating position, and perhaps provoke a harsh response that would place world opinion -- largely unsympathetic to Sharon to begin with -- squarely on the Palestinian side.

In the Arab and Muslim worlds, the "al-Aqsa Intifada" has reinforced perceptions of Israeli weakness, hardened popular attitudes toward Israel, recast the Arab-Israeli struggle in religious terms, returned the "question of Palestine" to the center of Arab politics, and led extremists -- from Hizballah to Saddam Husayn -- to call for the "liberation" of Palestine by force. All the ingredients for an explosion are in place; containing the violence, and preventing it from sparking a wider Arab-Israeli war, is likely to be the most pressing Middle East policy challenge facing the Bush administration.

Possible Escalation Paths

There are at least three ways in which Israeli-Palestinian violence could lead to a wider Arab-Israeli conflict or war:

- 1) Hizballah provokes an escalation along the Israel-Lebanon border, leading to a clash between Israel and Syria;
- 2) Iraqi pressure on Jordan leads to the entry of Iraqi forces into that country, and an Israeli military response, or;
- 3) Palestinian terrorists launch a chemical or biological (CB) attack against Israelis, using materials provided by Syria, Iraq, or Iran, prompting Israeli retaliation against the suspected state sponsor.

The Israel-Lebanon Border Hizballah might respond to an increase in Israeli-Palestinian violence by intensifying cross-border operations in a show of solidarity (as it did at the start of the "al-Aqsa Intifada"). Abandoning restraint, Israel might lash out against Lebanon, and perhaps against Syrian targets there; Hizballah could -- with Iran's encouragement and Syria's blessing -- respond with rocket attacks on northern Israel; Israel might then retaliate by hitting targets in Syria itself. Damascus could then roll out its SCUD missiles as a warning to Israel (as it did during

the 1981 Lebanese missile crisis and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon), with Egypt beefing up its forces in the Sinai to reinforce this warning and demonstrate solidarity with Syria.

Things could end there, although a resumption of communal violence in northern Israel might tempt Syrian president Bashar al-Asad to launch a limited military operation -- perhaps with Iraqi assistance -- to regain part of the Golan. Asad might believe that the closure of roads by Arab rioters in the Galilee (as occurred last October) could greatly hinder the mobilization of Israeli forces, and provide him with a unique opportunity to score a limited military success against Israel. Even a limited triumph -- political, if not military -- would greatly enhance his domestic and regional standing.

Iraqi Pressure on Jordan

Iraq might repeat a gambit it tried at the start of the "al-Aqsa Intifada" when it moved elements of four to five divisions toward Syria in a gesture of solidarity (apparently by prior agreement with Bashar al-Asad). Saddam might this time unilaterally move units toward Jordan to burnish his reputation as an Arab leader who stands up to Israel, and perhaps to generate popular pressure on Amman to allow Iraqi forces to enter Jordan (assuming he actually wants to go that far). A number of factors, however, will probably limit the size of a prospective Iraqi expeditionary force -- including Iraqi security concerns (Saddam still needs most of his army at home), Jordanian distrust of Iraqi intentions, and the inability of the Iraqi army to support and sustain forces so far from home (due to the lingering effects of war and sanctions). Were Amman to feel compelled to allow Iraqi forces to enter the kingdom (in violation of the peace treaty with Israel), Jordan might find ways to constrain the Iraqi military presence to reassure Israel, and thereby prevent a clash between Israeli and Iraqi forces on Jordanian soil. Alternatively, Iraq might launch one of its few remaining al-Husayn missiles against Israel in a symbolic act of defiance, in the belief that not only is the erosion of sanctions unstoppable, but that such a move would help strengthen that trend, at least among Arab and Muslim states.

A Covert CB Attack

According to published CIA assessments, the Palestinian Hamas has shown an interest in acquiring chemical weapons. Thus far, none of the "rogue states" in the region are known to have passed on CB weapons to terrorists. Should Israeli-Palestinian violence escalate, however, this could change. A terrorist group using CB against Israel would probably try to maintain deniability regarding its role and that of its state sponsor. Should Israel obtain evidence of state sponsorship of a covert CB terror attack (Syria, Iraq, or Iran being the main suspects), it might seek to retaliate against the alleged state sponsor by various means, perhaps prompting additional acts of terrorism (although the severity of Israeli retaliation would depend on the number of casualties).

U.S. Policy Options

An escalation of Israeli-Palestinian violence would likely inflame Arab opinion, and create pressure on Arab governments to take steps that they might otherwise prefer to avoid. (Jordan's decision to enter the 1967 war and to support Saddam Husayn following his 1990 invasion of Kuwait are two examples of this.) In particular, an attack on Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem by Jewish extremists could trigger popular outrage that Arab leaders might find difficult to contain.

To help prevent a broader Arab-Israeli war, the United States should take several steps:

- 1) warn the Palestinian Authority that a failure to take all reasonable measures to prevent violence could prompt Washington to suspend economic assistance and curtail bilateral diplomatic relations;
- 2) urge Israel to remain vigilant against possible attacks by Jewish extremists on Muslim holy places, while counseling restraint vis-a-vis Palestinian provocations;

- 3) warn Syria and Iraq of the damage they would suffer if the former were to encourage Hizballah, or if the latter were to move forces into Jordan, thereby prompting a major Israeli military response;
- 4) indicate to Iraq that the United States is committed to defending Jordan against threats to its stability and independence;
- 5) initiate a long-term effort to bolster the stability of the "pivotal" state of Jordan by encouraging foreign investment in the Hashemite Kingdom, to render it more self-assured and less vulnerable to Iraqi influence and pressure;
- 6) encourage moderate Arab states that could be destabilized by a regional war -- Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf states -- to advise Syria, Iraq, and Iran against trouble making, and;
- 7) enhance Israeli deterrence by affirming the "unwritten" alliance with Israel, by presidential statements, high level meetings, and acts -- such as joint military exercises -- that underscore the continued strength and vitality of the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership.

While preventing a wider regional conflict may require the Bush administration to wade into the mire of Arab-Israeli diplomacy both earlier and deeper than it might like, experience shows that preventive diplomacy -- no matter how difficult and frustrating it might be -- is always easier than dealing with the costly and tragic consequences of war.

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