

Israeli Security Strategy:

Facing Multiple Fronts

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Brief Analysis

A Combustible Middle East Recently, four factors have combined to make the situation in the Middle East far more combustible than it has been for a long time. These elements are:

- Iraq has managed to break out of the boundaries imposed by the UN sanctions regime and to evade weapons inspections. Saddam Husayn is now stronger than ever and ready to play a role in the region. He has signaled this intention by his deployment of troops on the western borders of Iraq just before the Arab summit in Egypt. Although he has since pulled them back, this maneuver was intended to send the message that Saddam Husayn is a force to be reckoned with from now on.
- Iran has enhanced its efforts to use a consortium of terrorist groups against the remnants of the peace process. Intelligence information shows that Iran has deployed long-range Katyusha missiles in Lebanon and that it is encouraging Hizballah activities against Israel.
- Syrian president Bashar al-Asad has disappointed most analysts, who hoped that he would focus on addressing Syria's economy and other domestic concerns. Instead, his speeches both at the Arab summit in Egypt and at the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Qatar have been extremely bellicose. In addition, it is clear that the recent kidnappings by Hizballah and a Palestinian group's attempt to infiltrate Israel through Lebanon could not have taken place without at the least a green light from Damascus, even if Bashar himself did not authorize them specifically.
- Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat has evidently changed course from negotiation to confrontation. So far, the Palestinian cause has proven to be a uniting force in the Arab world; under certain circumstances, it might also serve as a good pretext for resumption of full-scale hostilities.

Arafat's Assumptions and Goals The Israelis hoped that Arafat would become a Palestinian version of David Ben Gurion — a leader who would accept the best deal he could obtain in order to have a state for his people. Instead, he seems to harbor messianic goals, aiming at becoming a modern-day Saladin who wants to expel the Israeli "crusaders." If so, he is badly misreading Israelis, who are not foreign invaders.

Arafat believes he can bring an international force into the West Bank and Gaza, ostensibly in order to protect the Palestinians. Such a presence, according to his view, could force Israel to accept demands it has hitherto rejected, such as a greater measure of Palestinian control over the holy places in Jerusalem. This strategy proceeds from the assumption that a better proposal than the one Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak presented at Camp David is a possibility. As far as the Israelis are concerned, however, their best offer was on the table in Camp David; anything more far-reaching is not realistic. It is not realistic to talk, as some Palestinian negotiators have recently, about a

right of return for large numbers of refugees, such as the 300,000 Palestinians in Lebanon.

Arafat is still the leader of the Palestinian people. A clear order from him to stop the violence would be respected. At the very least, such an order would bring about a significant decrease in the level of violence. So far this has not happened. In fact, a high percentage of the shooting attacks on Israelis have come from the Palestinian security forces, rather than from independent or opposition forces.

Israel's Options In responding to the violence, Israel's best option is to continue its current policy for as long as it takes. Many kinds of alternative, non-lethal military options have been considered, but the ones that are effective are illegal and the ones that are legal are ineffective. The orders given to Israeli soldiers in the field are to exercise maximum restraint, but the mixture of both armed and unarmed Palestinians confronting the soldiers sometimes leave them no choice but to react in a manner that may lead to civilian casualties. While no efforts are spared in the attempt to carefully define targets and limit the casualties to those responsible, bystanders will almost inevitably be injured; this a direct consequence of the guerilla warfare that, as the Palestinians acknowledge, is now underway.

Using more force would be a serious mistake, because it could lead to the kind of provocation which would be Arafat's best chance for achieving the international pressure he wants. All it would take would be one missile that missed its target and hit a Palestinian school or hospital, and the pressure on Israel would be great. After all, Israel will always be accused of using excessive force, since it is the militarily stronger party.

While Israel is not eager to resume talks with the Palestinians, it is willing to do so. Israel realizes that there is no other solution besides diplomacy – especially since this is not a classic military conflict, where Israel can display the relative advantages of its military force. The current Israeli government was elected on a platform of peace and negotiation with the Palestinians, and is still committed to achieving these ends. Arafat must understand that statehood can only be achieved through negotiations and a willingness to co-exist. Furthermore, he is not expected to accept all the Israeli demands en masse, but simply to return to the negotiating table. This would allow him to present to his people tangible, durable achievements, and not just symbols such as flags and passports.

The basic premise of Oslo was that in return for an internationally recognized Palestinian state, Arafat would commit himself to combating terrorism. Israel sees this premise as still valid today, and will accept such a formula. The majority of the Israeli public, if not the majority in the Knesset, would support a Camp David-style agreement, as long as it included a measure of finality. This is as true now as it was three months ago, although the margin of support has lessened. If the deal presented to the Israeli people included the end of conflict and stronger security measures, it would be acceptable to most Israelis.

Complete separation between Israel and the Palestinians is impossible for many reasons; not only because of the presence of 180,000 Israeli citizens in the West Bank and Gaza, but also because of economic, political and constitutional considerations. But if Arafat takes unilateral action, Israel will be forced to build a clear line demarcation and protect its citizens. This "defensive disengagement" will not take place unless Arafat's moves make it necessary. Nor would it include any dismantling of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, because to do so would reward the violence of the last weeks, and Israel will not reward violence.

The U.S. Role The United States needs to build a strategic coalition of states committed to moderation. At the moment, this is difficult, given the attitude of many European and Arab countries. The U.S. should also help in achieving a cessation of violence. Once this most urgent need is met, there can be a return to talks. While Arafat would like to see the United States cast aside, Israel believes its role to be very important and helpful.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rachel Stroumsa.

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