

Between Terrorism and Truce:

Developments in Middle East Violence

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Brief Analysis

Bombing and Truce

The truce reached today should be interpreted very cautiously, given both today's terror bombing in Jerusalem, which killed two Israeli civilians, and the two previous failed ceasefires recently brokered by the United States in Paris and Sharm el-Sheikh, respectively. Palestinian Authority (PA) leader Yasir Arafat was due to announce the truce but instead opted to have other PA officials announce it on Palestinian television and radio. Moreover, Hamas quickly declared that it is not bound by the terms of the ceasefire. Prime Minister Ehud Barak's office nevertheless announced that the ceasefire is in effect.

Islamic Jihad's claim of responsibility for today's Jerusalem bombing was broadcast by al-Manar, the Iran-backed Hizballah television station in Beirut. This fits with Iran's efforts to facilitate cooperation between Hizballah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Al-Manar recently announced that it was extending its broadcasts from four to eighteen hours a day in order to "encourage the Arabs and show them a model of resisting the enemy."

The PA cannot escape culpability, since during the recent violence, it released several Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists. PA representatives say that the terrorists have been re-arrested, but Hamas officials deny this. Any truce that does not include the rearrest of terrorists is doomed.

Method and Timing

Perhaps the current truce talks presage a more active role for Israeli Regional Cooperation Minister Shimon Peres, who hammered out the agreement with Arafat. Arafat and Peres are known to enjoy a close relationship, while Arafat and Barak lack chemistry and trust.

Some may read into the timing of the truce a desire by Arafat to wind down the violence as the U.S. presidential campaign ends, believing the U.S. will tilt more in the Palestinian direction once the White House no longer faces Jewish-American electoral pressure. This school of thought recalls the U.S.-PLO dialogue of 1988, which emerged during the transition between the Reagan and Bush administrations.

Tellingly, Barak chose not to join forces with the Likud's Ariel Sharon this week, but instead quietly worked out a

tacit arrangement with the Sephardic Shas party in a bid to wrest at least another month of political breathing space. This can only be interpreted as Barak's desire to give diplomacy one last try, although it remains unclear whether Barak seeks a revival of Camp David or a more limited, incremental accord.

Re-Palestinization of Arab Politics

Ten years ago, Palestinians were perceived as having come of age in the world of international diplomacy and not really needing the supportive wings of Arab states. In recent weeks, this trend has been substantially reversed. The crucial question confronting the region's new leaders is whether or not they will become plagued by the same Arab-Israeli politics that bound their parents. As much as King Abdullah of Jordan, President Bashar al-Asad of Syria, and King Mohammed of Morocco attempt to escape such a possibility by focusing on economic reform and domestic restructuring, it currently appears that Yasir Arafat exercises more leverage over them than they have over him.

Potential for Miscalculation

With the exception of Saddam Hussein, no Arab leader wants war. Hostilities, however, can occur even against the wishes of politicians. Leaders sometimes misinterpret each other's actions and end up with results very different from what they intended. Such scenarios are not far-fetched. For instance, what would happen in the case of a suicide bombing that claimed many Israeli fatalities? In such an instance, the likelihood of Israeli reprisal is very high. Images of Israeli reprisals broadcast in the new Arab satellite media would intensify rage in Arab cities. Street crowds would continue to grow and might even channel their anger into anti-government protests. Arab leaders would be quick to respond and might even decide to re-deploy troops as a sign of pro-Palestinian support. Israel, in turn, might misinterpret these types of measures as a sign of pending hostilities, paving the way to inter-regional violence. In short, the current violence could readily lead to regional deterioration that virtually no government wants.

Strategic Design vs. Tactical Miscalculation

PA chairman Yasir Arafat is seemingly either an artful manipulator or a weak leader; his ambiguous behavior can be interpreted as reflecting either strategic design or tactical miscalculation. Perhaps Arafat initially believed that violence might bring some tactical value, only to see the situation spiral out of control. Alternatively, maybe he was trying to test the Camp David framework in an effort to obtain a "Camp David plus." Or could it be that Arafat is aiming to reverse the entire structure of Camp David by internationalizing the negotiations?

In recent weeks, the strategic design argument has received a boost. Mahmoud Zahhar, a leading figure in Hamas, declared that his group and Islamic Jihad consult regularly with PA leadership. Marwan Barghouti, the official head of the Fatah Tanzim, has also claimed that he confers daily with Arafat. Most of these negotiations are carried out under the guise of a joint committee consisting mainly of Fatah principals.

There are numerous variations on the "tactical miscalculation" theme. The hypothesis that Arafat was swept away by recent events cannot be totally dismissed. To understand this claim, we should consider the membership of the makeshift Fatah Tanzim. The majority of Tanzim participants come from refugee camps and have supported Arafat in the hope of returning to Israel. Such a situation is indicative of a major problem with Arafat's leadership, namely, that of creating popular expectations and then feeling boxed in by them. Most of the refugees believed they would return to their pre-1948 homes in Israel and felt betrayed when Arafat was unable to deliver on his promises. In light of these considerations, some of the current demonstrations can be interpreted as directed against Arafat's leadership as well.

Where Do We Not Go from Here?

The Oslo accords, from which the Camp David "final status" negotiations originated, had two fundamental tenets:

cooperation and territorial partition. With cooperative efforts now in tatters, a number of scenarios confront the region. The least workable include the following:

Re-occupation. After twenty-six years of Israeli control over the West Bank and Gaza, Israelis have no interest in re-occupying Palestinian populated areas.

Camp David revival. The "grand deal" embodied in the formula of sharing holy places, refugees' right of return, and a negotiated "end of conflict" were dealt severe blows with the recent outbreak of violence. The Camp David approach is, therefore, unlikely to be resurrected soon.

Unilateral separation. The current concept of "unilateral separation" does not envisage consolidation of settlements, meaning dismantling a few dozen isolated settlements. Prime Minister Ehud Barak's political weakness does not permit such an outcome. On the other hand, unless Jewish settlements are consolidated, territorial partition will be impossible. In addition, we should not forget the trauma Israel experienced by unilaterally pulling out of Lebanon. It may be very well be beyond the capacity of (nor would it be advisable for) any country to stage unilateral strategic withdrawals on two fronts, especially within a short period. Moreover, there are indications that Israel's move out of Lebanon has been interpreted by the Arabs as a sign of Israeli weakness. Witness, for example, the Hizballah flags now fluttering in the West Bank and Gaza.

Return to Incrementalism

This is perhaps the most likely scenario under which the peace process could be revived. In effect, it would be a paring back of the Camp David approach. There are two alternatives. One option is a comprehensive territorial approach along the lines of Israel's offer at Camp David that would yield the Palestinians approximately 90 percent of the West Bank; enable Israel to annex at least four settlement blocs, where 80 percent of the estimated 190,000 settlers reside; and defer issues such as Jerusalem and refugee issues until confidence is restored. This would provide both sides with contiguous territory. This is a "fences with windows" approach, allowing for security and economic cooperation and regulated access for those with permits of entry. A second approach would be to enable Arafat to declare a Palestinian state in areas A and B (approximately 40 percent of the West Bank), to allow Israel to control settlement blocs (approximately 10 percent), and to agree that Israel and newly created "Palestine" would negotiate the remaining 50 percent. A return to this type of incrementalism is not as inspirational as the "grand deal" once envisioned at Camp David, but more modest goals are required if trust is to be restored. Meanwhile, the first task is to halt the hemorrhage and avoid regional deterioration.

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