

The 'Battle for Jerusalem': Assessing Strategy and Tactics

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Brief Analysis

Uneven press coverage and shocking television footage have skewed analysis of the ongoing "Battle for Jerusalem"--the week-old explosion of violence that has swept from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, to the West Bank, Gaza and Arab population centers in Israel. Seen in political and historical context, current events actually highlight a relatively low level of casualties, a general policy of restraint by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and a confluence of interests among all elements of the Palestinian political spectrum--from the Palestinian Authority (PA) leadership to the street-level Fatah tanzim to the opposition Hamas--favoring violence against Israel. Palestinian Strategy, Tactics, and Politics Whether Likud leader Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif was the cause of the explosion (as Palestinians argue) or simply a pretext (as considerable evidence suggests), PA Chairman Yasir Arafat has yet to publicly call for a halt to the violence, even in the wake of yesterday's Paris summit. Clearly, his strategy at this point is to exploit the fighting to strengthen his political position--domestically and internationally--and to set the stage for future diplomacy and/or confrontations. To accomplish this, the PA has sought to: generate international sympathy by sending thousands of youngsters (often backed by armed tanzim members and policemen) to run riot in the streets in the face of "unprovoked" Israeli violence; sap Israeli resolve by inflicting casualties through stone throwing, Molotov cocktails, and gunfire; and force Israel to abandon isolated enclaves--such as the settlement of Netzarim in Gaza and Joseph's tomb in Nablus--that are an irritant to the Palestinians.

Moreover, Palestinian politics almost surely plays a role. For the Fatah tanzim--the armed, street militia led by Arafat lieutenant Marwan Barghouti which appears to be behind much of the Palestinian violence--the clashes are an opportunity to enhance its standing vis-a-vis the security organs; for the PA itself, the fighting is an opportunity to promote common cause between the feared security services and the Palestinian people; and for opposition groups like Hamas--believed to be responsible for several roadside bombs--the fighting has provided an opportunity to apply lessons from Hizballah's war of attrition against Israel in Lebanon. In addition to its involvement in the fighting in Gaza and the West Bank and its propaganda activities on the international stage, the PA may have also played a role in opening a new front--inside Israel itself--if reports that PA provocateurs instigated riots in some Israeli Arab towns and villages prove true.

Israel's Preparation and Response Israel's main objective has been to restore order, while minimizing casualties (among both friend and foe), and responding with firmness and resolve to Palestinian attacks so as not to appear weak—an invitation for even more violence. The effort to minimize Palestinian casualties is motivated by a desire to: deny the Palestinians a victory in the court of world opinion; avoid a bloodbath that would render a return to diplomacy virtually impossible, and; prevent damage to Israel's newfound post-Camp David popularity in the international community and its relations with peace partners Egypt and Jordan. This is manifested in the tactics of the Israeli military—its use of rubber bullets, snipers, and antitank rockets and missiles (when necessary)—as well as its under-reported decision not to impose a closure on the flow of Palestinian workers entering Israel. The rationale for the latter step: to ensure that acute economic distress is not added to the lethal mix of factors fueling the fighting. The IDF appears to have drawn important lessons from previous bouts of violence with PA forces in September 1996 and May 2000. In 1996, one should recall, the death toll after more than four days of clashes was 14 Israelis and 69 Palestinians. Despite fighting that is much more widespread and intense, the death toll among Palestinians in the current violence is about the same (more than 60) after more than a week of clashes, including the death of 10 Israeli Arabs—a new and sobering development. The toll among Jewish and Druze Israelis—one civilian and two military—highlights the efforts the IDF has made in recent months to prepare for renewed fighting and limit casualties among "friendlies" (though much can be attributed to luck and poor Palestinian marksmanship).

Although the losses suffered by the Palestinians are tragic, the number of killed and wounded could have been much higher—given the scope, intensity, and duration of the violence—had the IDF not acted in a generally measured, restrained manner. Recent history provides several examples of how lethal such situations can become when discipline breaks down, units are trapped, or security/military forces are indifferent to civilian casualties. Thus, in January 1977, Egyptian security forces killed 80 and injured 800 unarmed protestors in just two days of riots caused by the lifting of food subsidies; in July 1987, 400 Muslim pilgrims (mostly Iranians) were killed in a single day of clashes with Saudi security forces during the hajj; in June 1989, the Chinese military is believed to have killed several hundred (possibly more) unarmed protestors in a single night in what to be known as the Tianamen Square massacre; and in October 1993, American forces killed several hundred Somali militiamen and civilians and wounded more than 1000 in just one day of fighting in Mogadishu in an effort to rescue U.S. troops pinned down during the snatch of lieutenants of Somali warlord Mohammad Farah Aideed.

Other IDF measures include the deployment of armored vehicles (including tanks) and attack helicopters to specific flashpoints, in an effort to intimidate the PA through a show of force. Usually, these have been deployed in the hope that their presence might lead to a halt in the violence or at least prevent Israeli positions from being overrun. Tanks have reportedly been used on at least one occasion, while attack helicopters have been used with growing frequency, directing machine-gun fire against crowds threatening to storm isolated Israeli positions and firing rockets and missiles against sniper positions in buildings and on rooftops. At the same time, the fighting has highlighted the fact that the IDF has not invested sufficient resources in procuring equipment suitable for this kind of conflict. Israeli troops and border policemen still ride into "battle" in armored jeeps, rather than better protected armored cars used by other armies that consider counterinsurgency a central mission. More than a decade after the intifada, the IDF still appears to resist equipping and organizing its forces to fight the kind of "war" it currently faces, focusing rather on the threat posed by conventional armies, missiles, and weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps this is an outgrowth of post-Oslo expectations regarding security cooperation with the Palestinians. The result however is that the IDF lacks capabilities that could afford its commanders greater flexibility in dealing with civil unrest and insurgency.

Conclusion As Secretary of State Albright tries with little success to rekindle diplomacy, it is crucial to see the Palestinian-Israeli fighting for what it certainly has become, regardless of its origin: an attempt by Arafat to use the anger and frustration on the Palestinian street and forces at the PA's disposal to wage a form of low-intensity warfare

against Israel. What remains unclear is whether his strategy is to press on with military confrontation--perhaps culminating in a unilateral declaration of independence--or to take advantage of his improved international standing in future negotiations.

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