

The Ritual of Violence: Israeli-Palestinian Clashes

May 17, 2000



Brief Analysis

The May 15 clashes between Israeli troops and Palestinian civilians and policemen on the occasion of the Nakbah ("catastrophe"), a Palestinian memorial day protesting the establishment of Israel, were the most violent since the September 1996 opening of the tunnel entrance in Jerusalem's Old City. Five Palestinians were killed and over 300 were wounded in this week's clashes, along with over ten Israeli soldiers wounded in the fighting.

Background During its thirty-year occupation of the Palestinian territories, Israel was often said to utilize a "carrot and stick" policy toward the Palestinians. Since the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority (PA) appears to have adopted much the same policy toward Israel. The recent clashes between Palestinian civilians supported by policemen and armed security officers were part of a pattern that repeats itself every few months. Fatah members, usually armed, organize demonstrations that then turn violent — sometimes in only a few places, sometimes in many spots in the West Bank and Gaza. The use of Fatah members in these clashes serves several objectives: giving the violence a popular character (as distinct from appearing to be semi-official), allowing frustrated Fatah activists to let off steam, enabling Arafat to display the power of his administration to Hamas members, and above all, enabling Arafat himself to control the clashes.

But many times the dynamic of the violence is rather a consequence of local decisions made by lower-level officers, not by senior commanders. Much the same pattern was followed this time. In the days before May 15, the Palestinian national leadership paved the way for the Nakbah demonstrations throughout the Palestinian territories in interviews and declarations made in the Palestinian, Israeli, and foreign media. Still, Arafat, according to Yedlor Aharonot, promised Israeli officials on the evening of May 14 to prevent any escalation of the planned demonstrations, saying that under no circumstances would he permit the use of firearms. But Fatah members in the demonstrations were armed; when they would use their weapons and drag Palestinian policemen into doing the same was just a question of time. Israeli officers suggest that the Palestinian policemen opened fire on Israeli troops by local initiative and not on the orders of their officers.

Palestinian Prisoners In organizing the demonstrations, Palestinian officials wanted to emphasize the most painful issue for the Palestinian public: the Palestinian prisoners remaining in Israeli jails. On Israeli radio in Arabic on May 15, Sa'eb Erekat, a senior Palestinian negotiator, responded to a question about Palestinian responsibility for calming down the demonstrators; "What do you want? When you talk about the issue of the prisoners you are talking about every home . . . do you want the PNA to confront all the Palestinian people?" On Palestinian radio the same day, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) went further. "We in the Palestinian government are responsible for the fate of the prisoners,, because they are our flesh and blood." Such statements gave legitimacy to the violent rage of the Palestinian public that soon developed into violent clashes with Israeli troops.

Israeli leadership has not necessarily understood the sensitivity of the Palestinian public toward this issue. For many Palestinians, the prisoners, along with the Israeli settlements, remain the most important symbol of Israeli occupation and the continuation of Israeli "colonialism." The release of all Palestinian prisoners and the evacuation

of the settlements are more important to Palestinians than the question of whether Abu Dis or other towns are handed over by Israel to Palestinian rule — and are even more important on the daily level than having an independent Palestinian state, Therefore, any demonstration organized by PA leadership around these issues is a "green light" to violent riots that may lead to the use of firearms.

The arrest a few days earlier by the PA of Muhammad Deif, the most senior wanted Hamas member who enjoyed great popularity among the Palestinian public in general and Fatah members in particular, also contributed to the mood on May 15, Palestinians resent the arrests made by the PA in response to Israeli security concerns.

Lebanonization? Another major factor behind this week's demonstrations was public pressure felt by Arafat related to the tension and unrest among Fatah ranks, In recent months, there have been periodic reports of clashes between factions within Fatah, combined with expressions of frustration by Fatah members who feel their organization is losing ground to Hamas, both in the Palestinian territories and in the refugee camps in Lebanon. Furthermore, the senior commander of Fatah in Lebanon was arrested last month by the Lebanese authorities. On May 2, the Jordanian Islamic weekly al-Sabil reported severe clashes between members of the two main security forces in the West Bank over the control of Fatah, occasioned by internal elections in various branches of the organization. And over the last year, Hamas political activists defeated Fatah candidates in student elections that took place in most Palestinian universities, including the nationalist Bir Zeit University — not usually thought to be popular ground for the religiously-minded Hamas. Under all these circumstances, it was useful for Arafat to let Fatah members show their strength and let off steam by organizing and leading demonstrations, carrying their arms in public, and using those weapons against Israeli soldiers.

The central question is whether the May 15 demonstrations represent a trend toward the "Lebanonization" of the Palestinian territories — that is, a tendency to use violence against Israel for political gain. Some in the Palestinian community are impressed with the fact that Hizballah guerilla warfare brought about a unilateral withdrawal by Israel from southern Lebanon. They suspect that violent events could promote Palestinian goals by playing off the psychological exhaustion of the Israeli public — a great portion of which is willing to make further compromises if necessary to avoid more violence. Lebanon's Hizballah has recently acquired a new level of support among Palestinians. The first-ever large demonstration in the West Bank or Gaza supporting the organization was in February 2000, when Palestinian students reacted violently to the visiting French prime minister's description of Hizballah as a terrorist organization,

This is not the first time that violence has been used to achieve Palestinian goals in the post-Oslo period; the events of September 1996 brought then-Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu to withdraw from Hebron. But support for the "Lebanese pattern" in the Palestinian public, encouraged by Hamas, could lead to the greater frequency of violent clashes, especially if there is no real progress on the issues that matter most to Palestinians, including the gradual release of more prisoners by Israel. It would be incorrect to worry about a new intifada, but more frequent clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinians are possible.

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