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Escalating to Nowhere: The Israeli and Palestinian Strategic Failure

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The Second Intifada has been an asymmetric war from the start; fought by two peoples with asymmetric values and asymmetric goals, and using asymmetric methods. This inevitably makes it even more difficult to resolve the conflict than usual, and the problems involved are compounded by the fact that Israeli and Palestinian are intermingled or live in close proximity, and feel they have a seeming incentive to escalate or prolong the conflict.

Both sides also face the reality that they can only win the battle for public opinion if they describe their war process as a peace process – or at least a ceasefire process. They “win” if they can label the other side as resisting peace and/or as responsible for the violence. This means the both sides have a reason to publicly agree to any new ceasefire proposal, regardless of whether they intend to honor it. It also means that Israel has a strong reason to call Palestinian tactics as “terrorism,” while the Palestinians have an equal incentive to label Israel as using “excessive force” and as an occupier. Both sides also believe in these labels, but they have made them political weapons in an effort to de-legitimize the tactics and methods of the opposing side.

The Legitimacy, Illegitimacy, and Alegitimacy of Asymmetric Warfare

From a purely military perspective, it is not clear that this labeling exercise has any particular moral, ethnical, or military validity. Israel uses modern weapons and superior force because it has the necessary assets and their use minimizes direct Israeli casualties, while the Palestinians have only limited ability to respond in kind. The Palestinians are a lightly armed and divided proto-state, forced to use guerrilla and insurgent methods including suicide bombings and attacks on civilians, while they have every incentive to smuggle in arms and weapons. The Israelis can fight as formal, uniformed combatants. The Palestinians must generally fight as paramilitaries and covert action groups in civilian dress.

Labeling either side’s methods as illegitimate is highly questionable. Each side fights in the way it finds most advantageous, and the moral and ethical difference between Palestinian suicide bombings and Israeli “collateral damage” seems dubious. As is the case with the fighting in Northern Ireland, the Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Kashmir, asymmetric warfare is almost always unpleasant and almost always results in high civilian casualty rates. The present civilian body count does seem to total about three to four times as many Palestinians as Israelis, but this does not make Israel’s methods “wrong” or Palestinian violence against Israeli civilians “wrong.” The basic rule in asymmetric warfare is to fight on the most advantageous terms possible,

What is striking about the present fighting, however, is that both sides seem to be committed to a process of enduring conflict and escalation that is unlikely to offer either side serious mid to long-term advantage, much less victory.

The Israeli Strategic Failure

The Israeli example is most striking at the present time. Sharon has deployed the IDF in some of the most serious fighting since 1982, and his failed invasion of Lebanon. He has called up some 31,000 reservists and well over 10,000 IDF troops are deployed forward. In the process, they have become deeply involved in urban warfare in most of the Palestinian cities and towns on the

West Bank, as well as broadly deployed in perimeter defense in many contact areas in the occupied territories.

The sheer shock of the IDF offensive has temporarily halted – or at least seemingly reduced – the number of suicide bombings and put the Palestinians on the defense, but net results are like to ultimately be unimpressive at best and more likely to be counterproductive to Israel's interests.

- The IDF has gravely weakened the Palestinian Authority and its security services, but its broad sweeps and arrests only seem to have had limited success in locating and disarming the younger and more hardline elements like the Fatah Hawks and major terrorist groups like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.
- It is easy to issue rhetoric about rooting out terrorist infrastructure and also impossible to actually do it without prolonged occupation and total control of the areas being occupied. Some IDF planners felt it would take 6-8 weeks of occupying an urban area to do this. It is unclear that any amount of time can find most of the youths involved or prevent large numbers of arms from being hidden, and it seems nearly certain that the IDF won't get the time it needs.
- The IDF probably is breeding more future guerrillas and suicide bombers that it is arresting. Civilian casualties and collateral damage are relatively high, IDF discipline has often been poor and trigger happy, and contact between the IDF and ordinary Palestinians has been alienating. No one seems cowed or deterred.
- Palestinians are learning that cities, towns, and built-up areas are great military equalizers where Palestinian knowledge of urban terrain and ability to hide in civilian facilities makes it very difficult for the IDF to exploit its advantages in firepower and technology – even when using UAVs and advanced intelligence sensors. The end result is either short-range firefights or the use of tanks, artillery, and aircraft in strikes that inevitably increase collateral damage and civilian casualties, have limited effectiveness, and have media and political costs that offset their military advantages.
- The Israeli informer network seems to be suffering badly. In the past, Israel could rely on good internal intelligence sources within the Palestinians and the use of special action teams with excellent Arabic, the ability to blend in, and which could use Toyotas instead of tanks. Israeli action has led many informers to turn away from Israel and a number have been executed as collaborators
- The IDF invasion has done more than undercut and weaken the Palestinian Authority security forces. It has done much to unify Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and pro-Arafat fighters like the Fatah Hawks.
- IDF actions have done much to convince the Palestinians they have nothing left to lose. Much of the success of ceasefires, counter-insurgency, and peace efforts depends on the expectations of the opponent. The broad destruction of civilian infrastructure, collateral damage, and civilian casualties may temporarily suppress existing insurgents, but it breeds future violence.
- Israeli action is likely to trigger an escalation of Lebanese, Iranian, and Iraqi support of Palestinian extremists, action across the Israeli border with Lebanon, and the smuggling of more advanced arms and technology into the West Bank and Gaza.

- Israeli action undercuts Jordanian and Egyptian ability to take strong action to block arms smuggling and infiltration. While there is little risk of a broader Arab-Israeli war in the classic sense, broader Arab and Islamic support for asymmetric war is already taking place.
- There have been few strikes on Israelis and Jews outside Israel for nearly the last decade. Israel may well however, push the Palestinians, Islamic extremists, and other radical Arab groups to export their attacks to other nations and regions. European Jews may be particularly vulnerable.
- There are no rules or pressures that force the Palestinians to focus on suicide bombings. As the Hezbollah showed in Lebanon, the use of sophisticated timing devices, booby traps, and long-range weapons can – if anything – reduce the casualties to the terrorist while leaving the IDF with the option of having to escalate broadly in strikes on civilian areas where the weapons are located or the sponsoring groups are believed to be located.
- As Al Qaida has already shown, the exercise of this kind of military supremacy can easily trigger efforts at decisive terrorist attacks using chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons. Covert biological attacks are a particularly disturbing option.
- The end result is a disaster for Israeli in terms of international relations and the media. The sympathy gained by suicide bombings has been lost without any clear benefit. While the US public still is sympathetic – more because of the heritage of 911 than any real cause – world opinion has moved sharply against Israel.

The broader risk for Israel is alienating US public and Bush Administration support over time. Sharon clashed with Bush once before. This time, Israel threatens to become an active strategic liability to the US without providing any convincing evidence it is really acting to enhance its own security. The tacit bargain in US-Israeli relations is not that Israel should not act in its own defense, but that such action should be clearly justified, balanced, and effective. The IDF military campaign to date cannot meet any of these three tests.

The Palestinian Strategic Failure

If anything, the Palestinian failure in strategy is more serious than that of Israel. A reversion to guerrilla and insurgent warfare would have made sense if the Palestinians had no hope of a favorable settlement of the kind offered at Camp David or Tabah. Triggering a process of unending low-level violence could force Israel to create a Palestinian state on more favorable terms. Such a state could also result if the violence promised to trigger some form of decisive outside intervention that was more favorable to the Palestinians by either the international community or some decisive Arab military intervention.

None of these options are really open to the Palestinians. If anything, the Second Intifada has already severely limited Palestinian options in negotiating favorable terms with Israel. The human and economic cost of has already offset any limited territorial gains that the Palestinians might get from international intervention. Meaningful outside Arab military intervention remains unlikely and would either be unsuccessful and/or incredibly costly to the Palestinians if it occurred.

The Palestinians do have many ways to escalate over time. Regardless of how successful Israel is in the current series of sweeps, it will have triggered a climate of mass violence in the West Bank and Gaza that is far more intensive than it has ever been before. The recruiting base is nearly

equal to the population and the distinctions between religious extremists like Hamas and the PIJ and secular radical groups like the Fatah Hawks has been severely undercut. The Palestinian Authority security forces have been gravely weakened and alienated at the same time. Much of the Israel network of informant and intelligence agents in the West Bank and Gaza has already been destroyed.

The key to destroying guerrilla and insurgent movements is not only to defeat their current structure and manpower, but also to remove the support that breeds new movements and the causes that create new terrorists. Israel cannot succeed in either of the latter goals. If anything, it is likely to create a hydra-like structure of small, disparate movements and cells operating at comparatively low levels and self-directed and based on popular support. The end result will lack Arafat's central direction and control and be almost impossible to locate and defeat. It can be suppressed for a time in individual areas and cases. But like the IRA and similar movements, it cannot be defeated.

The Arab states and Iran have been give a far greater incentive to host Palestinian armed movements, allow arms smuggling, and stonewall any international counterterrorist efforts. Israel may be able to limit the flow of arms, but it cannot prevent it totally. Almost inevitably, longer-range rockets, mortars, and other weapons will flow into the West Bank and Gaza. Anti-tank guided weapons, manportable anti-aircraft missiles, sophisticated timers, and better explosives will flow as well. Even if the Hezbollah do not create an active threat on Israel's northern border.

Under such conditions, Israeli efforts to separate Israeli and Palestinian, and even the use of mass expulsions and relocations, will simply breed new forms of violence. It will increase the incentive to provide longer-range weapons and for the Palestinians to use weapons of mass destruction in covert attacks. The risk of a serious Northern Front with Lebanon will grow as will the risk of destabilizing or polarizing Jordan. It is hard to think of a stupider Israeli strategy than creating a "Palestinian" Jordan and a serious permanent enemy on its borders that would align itself with Iraq and other radical regional states. Egypt may be forced into tolerating infiltration into Gaza, and the Sinai peacekeeping mission may take on an entire new character or fail.

Yet, for all of Israel's potential strategic futility, the end result is strategic futility for the Palestinians as well. Whatever Arafat's motives and calculations in hoping armed struggle would be more favorable than following up on Camp David and Tabah, the fact remains that no combination of new forms of Palestinian violence, outside pressure, and Arab-Islamic action offers as good a mid to long-term end game. Palestinian and Arab escalation cannot force a rigid return to the 1967 boundary or undo the fact of "greater Jerusalem". Longer-range attacks may well lead to more expulsions and more civilian deaths and collateral damage. It may trigger more extreme Israeli measures to deprive Gaza and the West Bank of power and water. While economic warfare will hurt both sides badly, it will hurt the Palestinians more.

Mass violence on the part of the Palestinian effectively precludes education, investment, and economic development, as well as any chance of benefiting from Israel's economic strengths. As so many similar conflicts show, it wastes generations in the name of the past, delaying – if not destroying – the future. Syria locked itself into another generation of pointless confrontation with Israel when Hafaz Assad refused to compromise with Ehud Barak. Even the most successful Palestinian pursuit of armed struggle will be far, far more costly and destructive.

Escalating to Nowhere and the “Least Bad Option”

The sad fact about this pattern of Israeli-Palestinian escalation is that it is leading nowhere. It can alter the balance of violence on each side for a time, but it cannot give either side real victory. In Israel’s case, it simply defers violence today at the cost of breeding future violence. It also may do much to create the kind of long-term specter that Yitzhak Rabin feared most: A hostile Arab and Islamic world equipped with weapons of mass destruction and missiles that could, in some future escalation, use them. If anything, that situation may be worse than Rabin feared. Instead of missiles with nuclear weapons, it could be covert attacks with biological weapons.

In the Palestinian case, the butcher’s bill is not even deferred. There is no practical prospect of a better future than was offered at Camp David or Tabah. The Second Intifada has already wasted the assets – if not the lives – of a new generation of Palestinians. No war can bring them closer to 1967 “borders” (or 1948 armistice lines) without devastating the land and cities at issue and victory in such a problematic war seems unlikely at best. Time is being wasted that is desperately needed for economic development if a “Palestine” is ever to cope with its grim demographics and population growth, and a lack of resources and skills. The prospects for any kind of effective economic integration with Israel continue to diminish. The Palestinians outside the West Bank and Gaza remain trapped in de facto concentration camps with no practical hope of return to territories that are already overpopulated and without capital or any near-term development prospects.

Unfortunately, this escalation to nowhere is also an argument for international diplomatic intervention, and possibly armed peacemaking, rather than rational bargaining on the part of Israel and the Palestinians. Both sides are where they are as much out of self-inflicted wounds as any fault of their opponent. Both sides have failed to reason out the consequences of their strategies and military actions.

Without firm external pressure, they will drift almost endlessly in and out of violence. Their only hope of peace will be one of mutual futility and exhaustion. This is a grim prospect for the international community as well because any intervention based on practical and fair solutions is likely to incur serious opposition from both sides and even make them turn on the peacemaker. The failed leaders and strategies of Israel and the Palestinians can also defeat both negotiation and any form of international observers and peacekeepers. The price tag of standing aside, however, is simply too high and such an international effort increasingly seems to have the uncertain merit of being the least bad option