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Israel and the Challenges of the Second Intifada

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There is something peculiarly arrogant about trying to lecture people fight a real war on a subject like the Second Intifada. The same is true about trying to lecture Israelis on a war on terrorism. The most I can do is to offer an American perspective, and to point out some areas where I believe Israelis need to ask themselves questions. I also wish to stress the fact that I no longer work for the US government, that I am not a member of the Bush Administration, and that my views are my own.

The Background of Vietnam

Let me begin by taking you half way around the world, outside the Middle East, and to a very different war. Last fall, I spent nine days in Vietnam touring old battlefields with an old enemy. My escorts were all either ex-North Vietnamese soldiers or serving ones.

I am not about to wax nostalgic, or claim many parallels between the Second Intifada and Vietnam, but there are some points I would like to make:

- First, wars really do end, and old enemies can become friends. Time is a healer, even in the most bitter of conflicts.
- Second, the last thing I expected was to be told again and again by Vietnamese, how the conversion of Vietnamese agriculture to the market system virtually saved the country, converting it from an food importer to an exporter in two years. The same was true of being told that our presence in Asia was an important deterrent to Chinese expansion in the region.
- Third, during my trip I went through the North Vietnamese positions in Hue, Da Nang, and around Saigon. During that time I was reminded how during the war we constantly reported on our military edge, and our intelligence constantly told us that we were exhausting our enemy.
- Fourth, as I visited Vietnamese military museums, I was reminded how we had won battle after battle, while ultimately losing the war for public and world opinion.
- Fifth, during one visit to a small Vietnamese memorial outside Hanoi, I suddenly realized that this memorial in a relatively isolated rural area had tablets with the names of 53,000 dead. Close to the total number of Americans on the “Wall” memorial in Washington.
- Finally, the most telling single moment of my trip was in the departure lounge in Hanoi airport. One counter had toys and there were four combat aircraft. All had American markings, including a Russian Su-37 fighter. The news counter had the “Investor’s Journal” in both English and Vietnamese. The bottle of mineral water I bought was called “USA Water” and the back proudly announced that it was purified using a 14-step process develop by NASA.

In retrospect, Bernard Fall was absolutely correct. Dominoes do fall in two directions. More than that, the great irony of Vietnam is that a strategic defeat for the US has become a grand strategic victory for both the US and Vietnam.

The Second Intifada

Let me immediately say, that this experience is no promise for the outcome of the Second Intifada. Our experience with North Korea and Iraq has been totally different. It is a grim fact of life that not every tragedy has a happy ending. It took nearly a quarter of a century, much of it filled with oppression, for Vietnam to change. Ho Chi Minh and General Giap were not Yasser Arafat, and Vietnam was not on our borders.

I have described this experience, however, because I now want to raise several unpopular issues about your war, and do so in a region where a friend of mine in the IDF once warned me that, "if people do not feel you are 100% for us, they will always be afraid that you are 100% against us."

Let me preface my remarks, therefore, with the comment that I believe you should and must defend yourselves. I do not advocate some blind return to the 1967 lines or sacrifice of Israel's security interests. I do not see Yasser Arafat as a martyr and I think that the charge that he is a man who never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity is at least partly valid. I do believe that the Palestinian Authority deliberately preserved armed struggle as an option, sometimes manipulated terrorism before September 2000, and has seen the Second Intifada as more of a war than a peace process.

I hold no brief for terrorism, and unlike most Americans, I have been the subject of such attacks and I had friends die in them long before 9/11. Nevertheless, I fall far short of 100% support for much of what I see in the Israeli approach to the current struggle.

A Special Kind of Blindness

The first issue I would like to raise is the problem of perception. I learned long ago that it is very hard to see your enemy through your enemy's eyes, and even harder to see yourself through your enemy's eyes. We failed in Vietnam. You may be failing now.

I can only speculate on what might have happened if Prime Minister Rabin had lived, but he did not. I also can only speculate what might have happened if both sides had been more realistic from the start. What would have happened if they had seen that the choices were violence without peace or peace with violence, had accepted the fact that some level of terrorism was inevitable, and had not made promises that could not be kept.

More than that, I can only speculate as to how much damage the delays under Prime Minister Netanyahu did to the prospects for a true peace, or what the impact was of Prime Minister Barak's decision to turn to Syria first.

Most of all, I can only speculate as to what would have happened if the expansion of the settlements had stopped even under Rabin and Peres, and if it had ever been truly clear to the Palestinians that Israel was committed to rolling back enough of the existing settlements to create a meaningful West Bank state. I can only speculate as to what would have happened if the status of East Jerusalem had been clearly on the table from the start, and a settlement-free Gaza had been seen as a key priority for economic development and not as a convenient ghetto for locating the Palestinian Authority.

I should note in raising these points that one of Israel's leading military analysts pointed out to me that he felt that the key motive for Palestinian insistence on preserving violence as an option was the settlements, and that in some ways, the key difference between the perceptions of each side is, "settlements versus suicide bombings."

You opponents are guilty of many mistakes, all of which everyone in any Israeli audience can list in long detail. You, however, are seen by the Palestinians as the occupiers. Your delays, your settlements, the words and arrogance of those at the far extreme of Israeli politics, the actions of your politicians, occur in a different context from the mistakes of your opponent. In the years between Oslo and September 2000, you too did much to shape the tragedy that has followed.

One-sided chronologies of terrorism, violence, and the failure of the Palestinians to negotiate are good ways to fight the political dimension of your current war, but dangerous to believe in. Palestinian violence must be kept in an honest perspective, and I believe that Israel is failing to do this.

I would also note that you have made such mistakes in the past. Israelis never quite seem to understand how much Egyptians remember the assassination of Sadat and the images of your invasion of Lebanon. It seems all too easy to forget that the Shi'ites initially welcomed the IDF into Lebanon and the cost we both have paid over the years in having illusions about the Maronites. No one seems to want to remember that at one point Israeli intelligence saw Palestinian Islamists as a potential counterweight to the secular threat of the PLO.

Winning the Second Intifada will never be more than a prelude to the next struggle, unless you can also win the peace and reshape Palestinian and Arab attitudes over time. To do this, you must see through your opponent's eyes as well as your own. Your chronologies must include all of your own mistakes, and all of the events that provoke the Palestinians, not just their own mistakes and violence.

You must put yourself in their place. You must honestly ask what would your sons and daughters do under the same circumstances. If they would not commit suicide, would they avoid armed struggle? Is 2002 really all that different from 1948? Is the courage of your fathers all that different from that of the Palestinians we see today?

A Peace Process versus a War Process

The second issue is the difference between a peace process and a war process. Both sides are now blaming the other for a failed peace, failed ceasefires, and failure to negotiate. The reality, however, that no one should ever forget that peace is made between enemies and not friends. Unless one side can negotiate from a position of total dominance, there is always a thin line between a peace process and a war process. In fact, peace is inevitably an extension of war by other means.

It did not help to pretend this was not the case after Oslo, and that the struggles before 1948, the war of 1948, and the wars of 1967, 1970, 1973, and 1982 would soon be forgotten. It was impractical and unrealistic to believe that the Palestinians would abandon the option of armed struggle any more than Israelis abandoned it under the British and UN mandate.

It is also a military fact of life that wars are fought on the most advantageous terms each side can find. When there is a major imbalance in conventional strength, wars become asymmetric in means, goals, and the struggle for world opinion.

Since 1967, the struggle between Israeli and Palestinian has been such an asymmetric war, and Israel's conventional superiority and its greatest potential vulnerability – its unwillingness to take civil casualties – has pushed the Palestinians toward unconventional attacks and terrorism.

Almost inevitably, this has led to a situation where Israel and the US condemn every such Palestinian act because it strikes primarily at the innocent and the defenseless. At the same time, it has led to a situation where the Palestinians attack every use of modern weapons and conventional troops as excessive force and as a massacre, and where they are supported by the Arab world and much of Europe.

The asymmetric military battle involves an asymmetric political and media battle, and one where Israel is far less successful – just as the US was in Vietnam. It is also a grim fact of life that suicide bombing not only is a horribly effective tactic, but one that contributes to these asymmetric perceptions. So does the body count. Israelis count Israelis and Palestinians count Palestinians, and the world sees more dead Palestinian civilians than Israelis. Furthermore, each new cycle of violence breeds a reaction and then a counterreaction, coupled to new levels of anger, frustration, and hatred.

In saying this, I do not criticize IDF for its actions or tactics. Urban warfare is inherently brutal and the IDF generally fought with as much restraint as any army in recent history. We fought battles in many Vietnamese towns that were far more destructive as the fighting in Jenin. Our operation Phoenix penetrated deep into North Vietnamese and Viet Cong held areas and caused collateral damage and civilian casualties.

Yet, where is this war process going? Is it really so surprising that Arafat never abandoned armed struggle, and can you ever be sure that any successors will do so? Several months ago, I asked three IDF officers if they were Palestinians, would they have tried to import arms as the Palestinians did with the Karin A. One immediately said yes. The second said, “we did” – meaning the arms imports before 1948. The third said, “but we shouldn’t say this in public.”

The Palestinians can be suppressed for a while, but probably only at the cost of new hatreds, breeding new fighters, and forcing them to adapt. The fact the Czarist secret police killed Lenin’s brother did not stop Lenin. A single bombing can now stop a ceasefire or negotiation.

Moreover, if we look beyond suicide bombings, what is next? Rockets? Attacks on fuel depots and utilities? Manportable surface-to-air missiles? Attacks on Israelis overseas? A power shift inside the West Bank and Gaza to violent Islamic and secular extremists? A rebirth and tolerance of terrorist attacks by Palestinians outside the occupied territories? Attacks on US targets because we are your allies?

The Cost of Winning Every Battle

The third issue is the true value of military victory without political victory. We won virtually every battle in Vietnam. We had a decisive military edge in conventional war fighting and it was so decisive we could exploit it in jungles, river deltas, and in the highlands. Like you, we showed that we could fight in a city like Hue -- although at great cost in collateral damage and civilian casualties. While no one knows the real body counts. Vietnamese estimates indicate that we inflicted casualty ratios of more than 10:1.

Our time in Vietnam was a military triumph in many ways. But, each battle we won meant new casualties and political and economic costs. We failed to win in the political struggle inside Vietnam, in the US, and in the world. Oh yes, another problem is that we ultimately lost the war.

One critical difference between the US and Israel is that we could afford to lose. Our grand strategic failures and pretenses never threatened our existence, our geopolitical position, or even our position in Asia. The cost of winning every battle for Israel can be different.

I see two sets of existential questions here:

- *The first set of questions is where will Israeli military victories lead in the short-term? Will it really exhaust the Palestinians, paralyze the Arab world, and bring them to peace? If so, how? If not, will the end result be to institutionalize hatred, train the Palestinian people to fight an ever more sophisticated form of low-level conflict, and catalyze the Arab and Islamic world to provide steadily larger amounts of money arms, training? Can the Palestinians really be defeated, or like the Hezbollah, will they improve and adapt. I do not know the answer. Do any of you?*
- *The second set of questions grows out of concerns I heard Prime Minister Rabin express after Oslo. What will the longer-term impact be in a proliferating world? What happens once genetically engineered biological weapons become a common place? What happens if those of us who join you in warning about Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian proliferation see the worst case become a reality? How reckless or extreme will the worst leaders, extremists, and terrorists be? Israel may never be the main target of the most serious proliferators, but it may be? Worse, it may become a diversion in another regional conflict. Where will Israel be a decade from now, and can missile defenses, border security, deterrence, and proliferation ever be a substitute for peace?*

Changing Leaders

The third issue I would like to raise is the Israeli demonization of Arafat. Please do not misunderstand me. I believe that just as Asad made a tragic mistake of monumental proportions in refusing Prime Minister Barak's offer to return the Golan, Arafat never knew when to limit and abandon armed struggle as an option, and horribly miscalculated at Camp David. He chose asymmetric warfare over peace after Taba and Prime Minister Sharon's election and did so without real understanding of the costs to his own people. He has lied and delayed and he had failed to halt violence and terrorism to the full degree he could so.

Israel's leaders too, however, have sometimes failed since Oslo. Democracies are perfectly capable of making mistakes for domestic political reasons. Historians tell me this may even have happened in the US – although long before my birth.

I also can remember being in the Pentagon on the day Ngo Diem and his brother were killed, and the near rejoicing among some of my colleagues. I remember the peculiar climate of optimism and euphoria; the feeling that all we had to do to solve the problem that South Vietnam was not a real nation and had no broad, effective leadership, was to kill the devil we knew. We did not get a new devil as a result, but we also never got a new Vietnamese leadership that was truly popular or effective.

I would also caution you about the assertion that the Second Intifada is not really an "Intifada" because it is not "popular" with all or a vast majority of the Palestinians. First, the majority of ordinary people almost always want peace or simply to be left alone. "Popular" and guerrilla are almost always fought by a minority of hardliners and true believers at the margin of their societies or nation. They succeed as they gain the support of more and more of the young, and as more and more of the people involved lose hope and feel they can no longer stand aside. Intifadas of all kinds are fought with weapons and not opinion polls. Boy stop throwing stones when they begin to dream of rifles and noisy martyrdoms.

I do hope that reform will occur in the Palestinian leadership because this is better for the sake of the Palestinians, Israel, and the world. This, however, is a decision for the Palestinians, and the chances of two perfect leaderships emerging on each side, at exactly the right moment, fully committed to peace and riding out all of the problems that follow are virtually non-existent.

I have sometimes heard from Israelis that they are ready to make the hard compromises necessary for peace, but cannot act because they lack a real peace partner. There is all too much truth in such comments, but Israelis need to ask themselves two sets of questions. First, are Israelis really any more convincing as peace partners? Are Israel's current leaders really all that much more credible than Arafat from a Palestinian perspective? Do the Palestinians see "settlements" when they see Israeli leaders, just as you see "suicide bombings" when you see Arafat?

Second, can you honestly define how much reform will be enough for you to deal with the Palestinians and is that definition credible as one the Palestinians can live with? If Israel makes its calls for reform an excuse to delay or limit a peace, or tries to wait for the right leader to emerge, the results may be far worse than the removal of Diem. The end result may be a divided Palestinian leadership competing to be the most successful enemy. It may be the steady strengthening of those who hate and Islamic extremists in Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. I see great dangers, and little promise, in trying to end the Second Intifada by adopting the posture of the characters in Samuel Becket's play, "Waiting for Godot."

The Attitudes of the Arab World

The fourth issue is the steadily escalating impact of the fighting on the Arab world. The Arab world is being steadily pushed towards having to fund and justify Palestinian actions. What are the risks of an escalation on Israel's borders? A new Northern front and potential struggle with Syria? Instability in Jordan? The Gulf states becoming a financial and political adversary, and possibly Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco?

Right now, the more moderate elements of the Arab world remain moderate. But moderation is relative. It is almost absurd to expect Saudi Arabia and other Arab states to not fund the Palestinian cause. An organization like Hamas, which is both terrorist and one of the most effective and honest Palestinian charities is going to get money. Playing politics against Saudi Arabia because of its role in the peace process can lead to far more backlash than it is worth. So can putting more stress on Jordan than it can bear, or making demands on Egypt to not act as an Arab leader in Arab, not Israeli terms.

The Second Intifada does help Saddam Hussein. It does help Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda and other Islamic extremists. It does help Iran's extremists. It does help those who argue for proliferation. It aids them not only in arguing for attacks on Israel and the West but in the most important struggle involved – which is the clash within Islam and the Arab world.

So far, it is far from clear that Israel has any real vision of how to deal with these facts. To go back to an earlier point, it not only does not seem to be able to look through Arab eyes, but far too often it seems to be looking for enemies and unwilling to accept 50% support, 30% support, or even 30% less hostility -- when this is far better than active support for armed struggle.

The Strategic Impact on the US and the Broader War on Terrorism

When it comes to the Second Intifada, however, the issue it raises in terms of its impact on the broader war on terrorism is that it is a serious strategic liability for the US. This does not mean in

any sense that the US commitment to Israel's security will weaken. President Bush and the Congress have made this clear, so do public opinion polls in the US, and I have never seen any serious argument in the US foreign policy and strategic analysis community that the US should behave in any other way.

My concern, however, is that Israel fully understand that we do pay a cost for the Second Intifada, and so does Israel. It is easy to be strident about Iran and Iraq and to cry wolf. The problem is that we need to be able to act, and to do this requires at least the tolerance – and often active support – of other Arab states.

We need to be able to strike against terrorists in Islamic countries without a pack of noisy supporters of Israel and political opportunists condemning Islam, condemning the Arab world, and making impractical demands for levels of cooperation we will never get. We too are fighting an asymmetric war, where the battle of perceptions and future actions is as important as the military battle and far harder to win.

Our fight does not mean we have any right to ask Israel to sacrifice its security. It does mean that we need to be sure that Israelis think about the future threat from Iraq and Iran, about our relations with the Arab world, and our broader strategic interests as they choose between options. It means that active Israeli support for the peace process is critical, as well as as much tolerance as possible for the Palestinians.

It means that Palestinian civilian casualties, collateral damage, and major battles and collateral damage must be carefully evaluated in term of the backlash they create for the US and the broader struggle against terrorism. We have no right to ask anything more, but we have every right to ask nothing less.

Furthermore, please spare President Bush and the US loud calls to make our war on terrorism a war that serves all of your goals, and a war against every current and potential enemy of Israel. Trust the President to act against Iraq if this can be done, and stoop trying to export the myth that an attack on Iraq is somehow the first step in changing every regime in the Arab world. We have problems enough in dealing with the backlash from the Second Intifada. Moreover, we will only have Gulf allies in dealing with Iraq, Iran, and proliferation if they believe we act in their interest as well as our own. We will not have them at all if they believe we are acting help Israel or are acting in the first step in some mindless fantasy of a conflict to change the entire Arab world.

To Return to the Place Where You Began and to Know it For the First Time

Let me conclude, with one last issue: The question of whether there is a credible alternative to going back to where this war began: The final settlement compromises of Camp David and Tabah?

I can see one alternative possibility shaping up in the near-term. Fences and buffer zones between Israel and the settlements and most of the West Bank, the isolation of Gaza, far more stringent security rules in the greater Jerusalem area, preemptive and punitive IDF raids deep into the West Bank and Gaza, economic warfare, and the creation of a Palestinian half-state that offers an incentive for some kind of peace that is better than the Second Intifada. This alternative might work, it might even be a transition to a more real peace. But, quite frankly, I doubt it. No one in this audience would accept it for themselves, any more than the founders of Israel accepted a somewhat similar set of promises in the past.

Another alternative is a virtually endless struggle. This too is a very real possibility. As I said earlier, not every tragedy has a happy ending. And, be warned that expulsion or even the more drastic forms of separation will not mean security but ongoing struggle. Any drastic measures may mean losing the support of Jordan or putting unbearable pressure on its Hashemite rulers. More moderate measures may tar Israel's image throughout the world with charges of "ethnic cleansing." It will create images and realities that not only threaten enduring and broader conflict, but your very legitimacy as a modern state.

A third alternative is to return to something like Camp David or Taba. I know just how difficult and uncertain a future this is. However, in a famous poem by TS Eliot, he refers to understanding life as being, "to return to the place where you began and know it for the first time." Perhaps the most bitter irony of the tragedy that began in September 2000 is that both sides face a future where returning to the place where they began is the happiest ending their struggle can have.

This does not mean surrender for Israel any more that it does for the Palestinians. I do believe that Israel can retain most of greater Jerusalem, but not reject some Palestinian control over East Jerusalem and the Dome of the Rock. I believe Israel must make serious adjustments in its 1967 boundaries and make solid security arrangements on the West Bank. I see no future for the outlying settlements and aberrations like Hebron. I see no future or purpose in the Israeli settlements in Gaza. I do not believe that separation can work, if this goes beyond security to mean that Israel, the Palestinians, and Jordan cannot establish close economic relations and cooperation.

I have spent most of my life as a security planner. I know all too well that you must survive the present in order to be able to deal with the future. At the same time, after 40 years of visiting Israel, I also know that this society always has a problem in looking beyond short-term existential threats and is -- like all other nations in the world -- better at waging war than creating a peace.

If Israel and the Palestinians really do have any alternative to returning to the place where they began and knowing for the first time, then Israel must define this alternative and work towards it as soon as possible. If they do not, then Israel must realize that the current lack of a Palestinian peace partner is in some ways its own mirror image and the consequences of Israel's actions. Israel itself will only be fully credible when it is fully and openly committed to such a peace.

I am no prophet, and I hope that you will forgive my arrogance in presuming to touch upon such sensitive issues. Let me close, however, with one final point. The way ahead is neither pleasant nor easy. Yet, I still believe that both Israel and the Palestinians will find that a bad peace is better than a bad war.

Thank you.