

Desperate Logic of Arms

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BALTIMORE Whatever one may think about the current tragic events, it seems to many Palestinians at this juncture that violence is more likely to achieve political objectives than negotiations alone.

Consider the ever expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The disposition of settlements is vital because it will shape the viability of the Palestinian state that most Israelis now accept as part of any deal.

Some 400,000 Jews live on territory that Israel captured in 1967. They receive generous state subsidies for security, construction and infrastructure. Palestinians watch as Israel widens settlement boundaries and builds bypass roads through Palestinian areas.

To protect the settlers and their roads, Israel has sliced the West Bank and Gaza into a patchwork of smaller units that can be sealed at will. This reality, Palestinians say, denies them the territorial contiguity and freedom of movement needed for a viable state. In the last seven years, Israel has accelerated settlement construction, bringing an additional 50,000 Jews to the West Bank and Gaza.

Limited violence might make the territories ungovernable and raise the price of maintaining settlements. This might increase support in Israel for removal of settlements.

Measured military responses are unlikely to crush Palestinian resistance. Perhaps far more drastic measures would work, but concern for international and Israeli public opinion is likely to rule them out - at least as long as Palestinians refrain from attacks in Israel and atrocities like last month's lynching of soldiers in Ramallah.

During the first intifada, which began in 1987, Palestinians largely kept the battle within the occupied territories and limited their arsenal to stones and molotov cocktails. That strategy, coupled with readiness to die or go hungry, ratcheted up the political costs of occupation and helped bring about the 1993 Oslo accord.

Choosing violence is tragic, as it always harms innocents. It is also politically risky since it can spiral out of control, fuel extremism and alienate the publics whose support is needed for a political deal. Yet many Palestinians, frustrated with a peace process that has allowed their land to be chopped into ever shrinking islands among Jewish settlements, see a new, guerrilla enhanced intifada as more promising than negotiations alone.

The writer, an assistant professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University specializing in the Middle

East, contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.