

Fighting will only encourage martyrs

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Israeli forces are re-occupying the West Bank towns they evacuated during the last decade. In a few days, they may seize all or part of the Gaza Strip and, once again, Israeli soldiers will patrol crowded refugee camps and urban centers, using automatic rifles, tanks and helicopters to repress three million people seeking independence.

Israeli military engineers will create new detention centres with miles of barbed wire. Thousands of Palestinian prisoners will stand for hours, scared, angry and exhausted, while guards use verbal abuse, truncheons and rifle butts to establish control. Prisoners will be prevented from moving, going to the bathroom, or speaking. One by one, they will face an interrogator from the General Security Services, Israel's clandestine intelligence service. He will ask them about Palestinian suicide bombers who have made Jewish Israelis dread leaving their homes. When the detainees remain silent, their interrogator will use force that will, in some instances, amount to torture.

Outside the detention camps, the prisoners' families, trapped in their homes under curfew, will experience rage and despair, as stocks of food and medicine dwindle.

Israeli forces will find useful counter-terrorist information, but in the process they will create hundreds or thousands of new recruits for Islamic Jihad, Hamas and the al-Aqsa martyr brigades. Young Palestinians are responding to their humiliation and pain with an awful, destructive rage. They are witnessing Israel's destruction of Palestine's economic, cultural and social fabric, and are responding with the only weapon they think will work: the suicide bomb. Today's invasion, like all other Israeli punitive acts, will disrupt the bombers temporarily, and then deepen Palestinian anger and broaden the radicals' base.

As always, Israel is going for the quick fix. If terrorists are building bombs in Ramallah, why not invade? Destroy a few homes, terrify an entire city: If that's what it takes to stop the suicide bombers, Israelis say, then it's worth the cost.

When the dust settles, however, Israel's basic problem will remain: Three million Palestinians are determined to end Israeli occupation, and are demanding what is their due: a life of dignity and security in a state they can call their own.

Last week in Beirut, a city that Ariel Sharon destroyed in 1982 in an earlier effort to eradicate Palestinian nationalism, Arab leaders extended their hand to Israelis over the head of Sharon's government. They offered full peace and normalized relations, affirming an offer made by the Palestinian leadership in 1988.

To make this happen, the Israeli government would have to do something it refuses to contemplate — evacuate all or most of the lands it occupied in 1967, and offer a just solution of some kind to millions of Palestinian refugees. This would include the dismantling of dozens of Jewish colonies, and the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers from the West Bank and Gaza.

The modalities of such a deal were worked out in detail in early 2001 at Taba, a beach resort in the Sinai desert. Israeli and Palestinian negotiators held frank discussions on what it would take to make a real peace work. Unlike earlier talks at Camp David, Israeli representatives took Palestinian core concerns seriously.

At Taba, Israeli negotiators offered Palestinians contiguous territory in the West Bank, control over their own borders, and a limited return of refugees to Israel proper. Other crucial offers, including the removal of many settlements and Palestinian sovereignty over parts of East Jerusalem, were vital to the plan. Israeli negotiators had finally offered Palestinians a workable solution, and Palestinian negotiators responded positively.

The Taba talks were aborted when Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and U.S. president Bill Clinton were succeeded by Ariel Sharon and George W. Bush. Neither of the new leaders cares much for core Palestinian concerns.

Even had Barak won his election, he would have had an enormously difficult time convincing Jewish voters to support the Taba deal. For years, Israeli leaders have told their people the settlements could remain, and Israeli control over much of Palestine would continue. Yasser Arafat would have experienced similar opposition, as powerful domestic critics would have accused him of abandoning the refugees' right of return. Still, the Taba deal might have worked.

After the recent wave of suicide bombings, it seems unlikely that Israeli voters will be willing to re-consider the deal anytime soon. Yet in refusing to critically examine their own positions, Israelis all but guarantee the growth of the Palestinian kamikaze movement.

Palestinians are fed up with their oppression, and the most radical militants among them are determined to make this brutally simple point: If Israel denies Palestinians the rights they deserve, then Israelis will have no security.

Given the imbalance of power on the ground, Palestinians are likely to suffer far more abuse than the Israelis. However, Palestinians no longer seem to care. Yesterday's invasion may bring Israel a few days, weeks or even months of relative quiet, but this cannot last.

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