

## THE SECOND PALESTINIAN UPRISING: CAUSE FOR OPTIMISM?

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**T**he recent Middle Eastern violence has produced much pain for Palestinians and some Israelis, but it is also creating new opportunities for an equitable peace. Although it may take years before a lasting treaty is finally reached, fall 2000 is likely to be remembered as a turning point in Israeli-Palestinian relations. The second Palestinian uprising has put an end to the notion, common in Israel during the 1990s, that the contours of the emerging Palestinian state could be shaped at will by Israeli domestic politics.

The first uprising or intifada began in December 1987 and lasted, in various forms, until 1993. That rebellion forced Israel to realize that its vision of a "Greater Israel," increasingly popular since the late 1970s, was likely to be unattainable. As political scientist Ian Lustick has documented in great detail, Jewish social movements such as Gush Emunim, supported by successive Israeli governments and state bureaucracies, persuaded many Israelis during the 1980s that military rule over Palestine was a viable, long-term strategy. By demonstrating the depth of Palestinian resistance, the first intifada

raised the costs of occupation, paved the way for Israel's recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and pushed Israel into the 1993 Oslo Declaration of Principles.

Yet while the first intifada served as a vital reality check on Israeli territorial ambitions, the subsequent seven years witnessed continued Israeli attempts to dictate the contours of the emerging Palestinian entity. Israel did make some important concessions, including piecemeal military withdrawals from select areas, but it continued to insist on managing the West Bank and Gaza's political transition with a heavy hand. Its goal was the creation of a final product that would not challenge Israeli hegemony and would not provoke too severe a domestic political crisis. Although most Israelis had come to realize they could not indefinitely exert *direct* rule over all of Palestine, many still thought they could maintain *indirect* control while avoiding overly painful concessions. Israelis believed they could continue to rule over East Jerusalem, preserve Jewish settlements, annex key portions of the West Bank, and control Palestine's borders, water supply, economy, internal

transportation arteries and immigration policies. As a result, Israel continued to expand its settlements throughout the 1990s and continued to float peace deals that left the settlers in place, sliced the West Bank into three enclaves, and denied the right of Palestinian refugee return. Although many Israelis and U.S. observers believed these proposals were fair and far-reaching, most Palestinians viewed them as unjust and unworkable. Most important, Israel's terms did not provide basic elements for viable statehood such as territorial contiguity, free internal movement of goods and people, access to the Palestinian urban heartland and control over natural resources.

The second uprising, however, has begun to change both the U.S. and the Israeli attitudes toward peace. If it continues, this second intifada may force Israelis to realize yet again that there are limits to their power. Although Palestinians are no match for Israel on the battlefield, they can certainly make the territories ungovernable, and this will eventually oblige Israel to change its position. It took six years for the first uprising to result in the 1993 Oslo accords; it may take even longer for the second uprising to result in a more equitable and stable outcome.

### **ISRAEL'S DOMESTIC POLITICAL SCENE**

Israel's insistence on continued control during the 1990s was due in part to the political legacy of the '70s and '80s. Beginning over a quarter of a century ago, the Greater Israel movement became increasingly prominent in Israeli political life, striking strategic alliances with religious groups, ethnic Sephardics and fractions of the Jewish working class.

There was no *necessary* connection between Greater Israel ideology and these politically marginalized groups. Still, the right-wing alliance, first brokered in the 1970s by Likud party leader Menachem Begin, became political home to Jewish sectors sidelined by Israel's ruling elites during the country's first 30 years. In many ways, the right-wing alliance was grounded in Sephardic, religious and working-class resentment of the secular Ashkenazi political elite, which had long controlled Israel – and the entire Zionist movement – through a dense network of Labor-affiliated parties, organizations and agencies.

Ashkenazi dominance drew on its leading role in establishing the state and displacing Palestinians in the first half of the twentieth century through colonization, diplomacy and eventually war. These acts were viewed by Jewish Israelis as heroic and pioneering, earning the Labor party's predecessors tremendous political capital as Israel's founding organization. In seeking to establish its own political power 30 years later, Gush Emunim, together with its Zionist-religious and Sephardic supporters, sought political status by launching their own colonization drive in the newly conquered West Bank and Gaza. As Israeli sociologist Gershon Shafir has eloquently argued, the road to political power within Israel in the 1980s ran through Palestinian land.

Although the Greater Israel movement eventually lost momentum following the first Palestinian intifada, it still packs a considerable punch in Israeli domestic politics. With 400,000 Jewish settlers now living in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, and tens of thousands committed supporters in Israel proper, the right-wing alliance can mobilize a powerful constitu-

ency in opposition to colony dismantling and other Israeli concessions. More broadly, Greater Israel mobilization, coupled with the traditional tenets of Labor Zionism, has created a reservoir of anti-Palestinian sentiment that is not likely to dissipate soon. Both the Labor and Likud parties draw on this reservoir in formulating policies and attracting voters, complicating any attempts at achieving real peace. Israel's domestic political configuration is such that leaders verge on political suicide if they make rapid and far-reaching concessions.

If Israel is ever to dismantle settlements, withdraw from East Jerusalem and relinquish its grip over Palestine, it must first undergo a traumatic internal upheaval in which the Greater Israel movement's lingering power is finally laid to rest. Although conditions for such a conflict are still far from ripe, the second Palestinian uprising has substantially raised the costs of the status quo. Whatever the immediate outcome, the violence has ended the Israeli discourse of the 1990s, which assumed that Palestinian political ambitions could be successfully controlled through token withdrawals and small privileges for Palestinian elites.

### **INITIAL ISRAELI REACTIONS TO THE UPRISING**

In the first weeks of the uprising, most Jewish Israelis closed ranks behind the government and the military, adopting a wartime mentality emphasizing the need for national solidarity. During the first half of November 2000, however, longstanding left-right cleavages began to reappear, demonstrating that the wave of national unity would be short-lived. Although all groups within the Zionist consensus support

policies unacceptable to most Palestinians, that consensus includes a vigorous – if limited – policy debate. A successful Palestinian political strategy will recognize and build upon these cleavages in the months and years to come.

Anti-Palestinian sentiment rose sharply within Israel during October 2000, with media commentators, opinion leaders and government officials suggesting that Palestinians had once again proved their essential unworthiness as “partners for peace.” After a few years of reduced hostility, Israeli dislike for Palestinians is again on the rise, and many sectors were re-persuaded of Palestinian intentions to “throw the Jews into the sea.” Anti-Arab emotions have always been prevalent in Israel in one form or another, but the specter of an armed and effective Palestinian militia firing upon Jews near the Israeli heartland has added fuel to the flames.

These sentiments, however, will not necessarily translate into harsher long-term policies on the ground. Instead, they may coincide with increased recognition of the need for Israeli compromise. Thus, while most Jewish Israelis will continue to harbor anti-Palestinian feelings, the uprising may simultaneously and paradoxically promote greater Jewish pragmatism in response to persistent Palestinian resistance.

This contradicts conflict-resolution theory, which suggests that peace can only materialize when warring groups come to accept and trust one another. Yet decolonization invariably occurs amid great hostility, chauvinism and suspicion. Thus, while Israeli Jewish public opinion may be anti-Palestinian, Israel will dismantle settlements and withdraw from the occupied territories when the costs of continued occupation become unacceptable. The

British hated Indians, the French despised Algerians, Americans loathed Vietnamese, and Israelis are deeply antagonistic towards Muslim Lebanese. Still, each of these powers withdrew its military and made important concessions once resistance raised the costs of occupation.

### **THE ISRAELI DEBATE OVER ITS MILITARY RESPONSE**

An important debate is underway within Israel regarding the nature of its military response to Palestinian resistance. On the one hand, pressure is mounting on Prime Minister Ehud Barak to “unleash” the army by ordering it to launch more painful assaults. Although Palestinians and much of the world feel Israeli measures have already been harsh, powerful groups within Israel feel the army has displayed too much restraint.

Some senior officers argue the army is being humiliated and that its deterrent capacity is being damaged by continued “moderation.” On the political right, settlers and their

political supporters are calling on the army to adopt extreme measures. Until now, however, Barak and his ministers have refrained from adopting some of the most far-reaching contingency plans.

What might those plans be? At the extreme, Israel could send armor, artillery and infantry into the enclaves under Palestinian control – the so-called A zones – seeking to eliminate Palestinian rear bases and to confiscate Palestinian weapons.

Such a move would be politically risky, however, as it would end the peace process entirely, cause significant casualties, and then leave Israel in control of rebellious armed areas with no clear exit plan or political strategy. The international costs of such a move would be high, and domestic public opinion would be split. An invasion of the A zones would strain left-right relations within Israel considerably, much as did Israel’s invasion of Lebanon during 1982-84, when Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon sought to smash Yasser Arafat’s PLO.

Other less drastic measures have been used or are being considered, including assassination of key Fatah leaders, commando raids on Fatah offices and installations and increased use of helicopter rocket attacks. Barak and the Israeli government understand, however, that such efforts will

do little to end the uprising and are likely only to increase Palestinian mobilization and resistance. Still, Israeli public opinion and domestic politics demand that Israeli leaders “do something” to

cause Palestinians pain. Israelis have never faced a real guerrilla threat from the West Bank, and the experience has substantially disturbed their sense of security. Thus, we are likely to witness further Israeli escalation along these lines. Whereas a full-scale re-occupation of the A zones is unlikely, other forms of violence are likely to increase.

Regardless of the form or intensity of Israeli escalation, it is increasingly clear to many Israeli pundits that there is no

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military solution to this second Palestinian uprising. The same groups that argued during the first intifada that there was no way to militarily eradicate a popular insurrection are beginning to make similar arguments today. Proponents of this position in the past have included important military figures such as Daniel Shomron, then the military's chief of staff, and Amram Mitzna, once commander of Israeli West Bank forces. Today, these two have been joined by the likes of Ami Ayalon, until recently the head of Israel's domestic intelligence agency, the General Security Services (Shin Bet or Shabak). Although the contours of a workable political solution are still heavily disputed within Israel, many Jews situated to the political left of the settlers and their supporters do believe that political negotiations of some sort should continue. Hence, about 60 percent of the Jewish Israeli public recently expressed support for continued discussions with Palestinian leaders.

### **INTERNAL DEBATE OVER "ABSURD" JEWISH COLONIES**

For those familiar with recent Israeli history, the vital importance of Jewish settlements as political and emotional icons is clear. Only one colony has ever been voluntarily evacuated before – Yamit in Sinai in 1977 – and its dismantling provoked a major internal political crisis, propelling Greater Israel activists into mainstream politics. As Israeli political scientist Ehud Sprinzak has written, fallout from the Yamit experience has been a powerful rallying cry for Israel's radical political right. As a result, mainstream Israeli politicians tend to shy away from publicly discussing the notion of dismantling Jewish settlements, realizing it could end

their political careers. Still, many Jewish Israelis are pragmatic enough to realize that at least some of the colonies must be evacuated, even within the limited parameters of the Oslo process. Barak allegedly proposed dismantling a few settlements at Camp David II, consolidating the Jewish settler presence into three main settlement "blocs." Although this would do little to ensure Palestinian territorial contiguity and satisfy Palestine's basic needs, the proposal does represent a form of progress within the Israeli context.

Beginning in November 2000, Israeli commentators began making reference to the "difficulties" involved in defending the more "absurd" and "remote" Jewish settlements, including those in Hebron, Gush Katif and Elon Moreh. The settlers reacted with great anger, arguing that their own struggle was the struggle of all Jews, wherever they might live. A limited settlement evacuation in the near future does not seem entirely unlikely, however, largely in response to the army's difficulty in preventing attacks on the most isolated Jewish colonies. If effective Palestinian military strikes on settlers, settlements and settler vehicles continue, the trend towards "settlement consolidation" and partial evacuation may gather steam, if only for purely military reasons. Once one or two settlements have been evacuated, the taboo against decolonization may be undermined, paving the way for further evacuations. Although the radical right will mobilize powerfully against evacuation, a determined government would be able to face them down.

### **"LEBANONIZATION": A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD**

The extent to which Israeli commentators now speak of the West Bank and

Gaza as “foreign” and “hostile” lands is remarkable. The Israeli discourse of the 1980s, which spoke of “law-and-order” and police “control” in Palestine, has shifted to the language of war and counterinsurgency. Commando units are deploying throughout the West Bank to conduct nighttime ambushes of the sort hitherto witnessed only along Israel’s international borders or in Lebanon. Palestine, in other words, is increasingly being constructed in Israeli discourse as an object of war, rather than as an object of police-style control.

This development is surely worrying for Palestinians in the short term, but it may hold some future promise. There is little doubt that in the immediate future the new discourse will produce Israeli military escalation. Once constructed as an object of Israeli counterinsurgency in 1968, Lebanon was pounded by Israeli artillery, airplanes and commandos, leading to great loss of civilian life and material destruction. Some 10,000 Lebanese and Palestinian civilians died in the 1982 war alone, and thousands more were slain before and after. The country is only now beginning to recover from a civil conflict partially triggered by the Israeli-Palestinian struggle.

At the same time, however, Lebanon was never smoothly integrated into the Israeli zone of political and military control. Israel’s occupation of Lebanon was never routinized to the extent witnessed in the West Bank and Gaza, and Lebanon was never perceived by Jewish Israelis as a “natural” extension of the Israeli state. Although Greater Israel proponents argued at times for colonization in Lebanon up to the Litani River, they never did so in a politically serious fashion. As a result, Israeli forces could eventually withdraw

from Lebanon in the year 2000 without triggering a crippling internal political crisis. Lebanon’s “foreign” and “warlike” designation caused it great suffering but also enabled it to escape colonization and full-scale subordination.

Palestine, on the other hand, was subjected to processes of far-reaching incorporation and “creeping annexation” during the 1970s and 1980s, complicating any eventual Israeli withdrawal. Jewish colonization was an important part of this process, but it was not the only factor. Jewish youth groups organized “field trips” through Palestine; the West Bank and Gaza were included as parts of “Israel” on most maps; and Palestine was given Jewish Biblical names, Judea and Samaria, to symbolize its status as part and parcel of the Greater Israel entity. Many experts, including Israeli analyst Meron Benvenisti, believed that the occupied lands had been internalized for good by the Israeli body politic, and that the struggle for a Palestinian state would necessarily give way to struggles for civil rights *within* Israel.

One of the most significant outcomes of the first Palestinian uprising was its ability to blunt this process of ideological and physical incorporation. After the first intifada, many Jewish Israelis discovered that the “Green Line” separating Israel proper from the West Bank and Gaza was a meaningful, if contested, boundary. This new uprising, which involves a limited but potent armed insurgency, has hastened the “externalization” and “de-familiarization” of Palestine for Jewish Israelis. The more Palestine is viewed by Israelis as a foreign land where “war” rather than “policing” is appropriate, the greater are Palestine’s long-term prospects for escaping Israeli rule.

## A PALESTINIAN GUERRILLA INSURGENCY?

Immediately after Israel's occupation of Palestine in 1967, cadres from Fatah, the leading Palestinian guerrilla faction, sought to transform the West Bank and Gaza Strip into zones of armed rebellion. Attempts were made to create military cells within the occupied lands, while others tried to cross into the West Bank through the Jordan valley. By 1971 these efforts had largely been crushed by a combination of Israeli repression, Jordanian action and lack of interest by landed Palestinian elites. Although armed Palestinian groups would eventually sink deep roots in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, the guerrillas were never able to develop a significant presence in Palestine proper. Guerrilla action took place only at a great distance from the homeland.

As a result of the Oslo accord, however, Palestinians have – for the first time since 1948 – been able to develop substantial indigenous armed formations operating on their own home terri-

tory. The myriad official security forces tied to the Palestinian Authority have been supplemented by unofficial groups and militias armed with assault rifles and makeshift explosives. Israeli military pundits have even alleged that Yasser Arafat directly controls a small number of shoulder-launched rockets that might threaten Israeli air superiority. Although the extent of overall coordination, training and discipline within the Palestinian units is

unclear, there is little doubt that Palestinians can today, for the first time since 1948, present a limited military challenge to Israeli control over their land.

Palestinian forces are clearly no match for the heavily armed Israelis, but guerrillas have always been outgunned. Offsetting their material weakness is their rootedness in a highly supportive civilian population and their control over major Palestinian population centers. As a result of the Oslo accords, armed Palestinians are the internationally recognized authorities in most key Palestinian towns, which are – at least for the time being – off-limits to Israeli troops. Although these “A zones” are highly vulnerable to Israeli helicopter gunships and economic strangulation, they are also safe havens of a sort for the insurgents. Fighters can emerge from the zones, launch attacks on Israeli settlers or

soldiers, and then escape back into the “A” areas. For the first time since the Israeli occupation began in 1967, there are both *de-facto* and *de-jure* “no go” zones for Israeli forces in Pales-

tine, placing them at a considerable tactical disadvantage.

Students of guerrilla movements stress the importance of popular support, funding, international alliances and safe havens amidst sympathizers. Although Palestinians have had some of these resources at various points since 1948, they have never had all four of them together. Willy-nilly, the Oslo process has generated the conditions for a reasonably successful, if small-

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scale, Palestinian insurgency.

This limited Palestinian “military option” is, in a way, former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin’s legacy and beyond-the-grave revenge on the heirs to his arch-rival, Menachem Begin. Begin and other right-wing leaders intentionally dashed prospects for peace by speeding up the Jewish colonization effort during the late 1970s and early 1980s, dramatically expanding upon the modest colonization program initiated by the Labor movement after 1967. As a result, an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied lands has become enormously complex. Although Rabin never attempted to directly reverse Begin’s handiwork, he did create his own counterlegacy in the form of armed Palestinian enclaves amidst the Jewish settlements. Due to the 1993 Oslo understandings, the newly created Palestine Authority was able to build a small, lightly armed force of potential insurgents based

among their own people and immediately adjacent to the hated Jewish colonies. If international and Israeli domestic opinion continues to prevent a full-scale invasion of these enclaves, the Israeli army will find itself faced with a persistent, low-tech but effective challenge. In the end, a determined Palestinian insurgency will be ended only by extreme force or a lasting peace deal acceptable to most Palestinians. The former will only prolong the agony, while the latter requires an internal Israeli political showdown.

Although hard-line Likud leader Ariel Sharon is likely to win the next Israeli election, he will face a similar set of challenges and constraints. Short of full scale ethnic cleansing, Sharon will find no military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Real peace may still be a decade or more off, but the second Palestinian uprising has propelled the process forward by highlighting the limits of Israeli power.