

# Time for both sides to meet halfway

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

As the U.S. builds its global anti-terrorist coalition, all eyes will be on Israeli leaders. The Israeli-Palestinian dispute is the core of America's Middle Eastern problem, and the single most important issue in U.S.-Arab relations. If Israel moves to invade Palestinian zones or seize more land, American efforts to build a broad Middle Eastern coalition will collapse. If Israel adopts a more restrained policy or even relaxes its grip on Palestine, however, America's efforts will be strengthened. The U.S. has reportedly urged Israel to cool its temper, but the Israeli leadership faces pressures from those eager to settle accounts with the Palestinians.

In the long run, America's relations with the Arab and Muslim world will not improve until Israel takes Palestinian needs into consideration. Israel has legitimate security interests, but it must recognize that its Palestinian neighbours have the same. Israel has no desire to be occupied or terrorized by Arab militias, but Palestinians are equally desperate to free themselves of Israeli occupation. There will be no peace until both sides feel safe.

## FULL TEXT

Daily Briefing: Israel

As the U.S. builds its global anti-terrorist coalition, all eyes will be on Israeli leaders. The Israeli-Palestinian dispute is the core of America's Middle Eastern problem, and the single most important issue in U.S.-Arab relations. If Israel moves to invade Palestinian zones or seize more land, American efforts to build a broad Middle Eastern coalition will collapse. If Israel adopts a more restrained policy or even relaxes its grip on Palestine, however, America's efforts will be strengthened. The U.S. has reportedly urged Israel to cool its temper, but the Israeli leadership faces pressures from those eager to settle accounts with the Palestinians.

Today's situation is a replay of the run-up to the Gulf War. Then, as now, American policy-makers desperately sought the support of Arab governments, hoping to ostracize the Iraqi government and avoid a "clash of civilizations" between the West and the Arab world. The U.S. was successful, mobilizing a powerful and unlikely coalition including traditional U.S. allies, such as Saudi Arabia, and traditional opponents, such as Syria. America asked Israel to refrain from aggressive moves in the West Bank and Gaza, and to hold its fire against Iraq.

Today, the Israeli government is run by Ariel Sharon, who is committed to not returning most of the occupied West Bank and Gaza to Palestinians, and is unwilling to consider evacuating Jewish colonies in those areas. Although Sharon has said he is willing to negotiate with Palestinians, he says they must first fulfill certain conditions. As a result, Palestinian-Israeli negotiators have languished at home while gunmen on both sides shoot it out.

There are signs Sharon is responding to U.S. pressure. Although he initially ordered the Israeli army to invade Palestinian zones, Israel has since adopted a more restrained stance, boding well for American coalition-building

efforts.

In the long run, America's relations with the Arab and Muslim world will not improve until Israel takes Palestinian needs into consideration. Israel has legitimate security interests, but it must recognize that its Palestinian neighbours have the same. Israel has no desire to be occupied or terrorized by Arab militias, but Palestinians are equally desperate to free themselves of Israeli occupation. There will be no peace until both sides feel safe.

In the short run, Israel can reduce Middle Eastern tensions by upholding the ceasefire, relaxing its blockade on Palestinian enclaves and resuming negotiations with Yasser Arafat's representatives. Sharon might also consider stopping his anti-Palestinian rhetoric. In recent days, he has called Arafat "Israel's Osama Bin Laden," a phrase likely to complicate peace-building efforts.

Arafat, for his part, has desperately signalled his loyalty to America's anti-terrorist coalition, fearful Palestinians will be blamed for the New York attack. Although the Palestinian leadership was deeply disappointed by the Bush administration's policies, it knows American involvement is irreplaceable. Mutual Palestinian-Israeli distrust is vast and ever-deepening, and can only be overcome by genuinely even-handed American intervention.

Arafat has ordered his troops to cease fire against Israel, although it seems unlikely he can control all Palestinian militias and factions. Sharon, who enjoys firmer control over his armed forces, must meet Arafat halfway by seeking mutually acceptable short-term solutions. Given Israel's overwhelming firepower, it can afford to act in a balanced manner.

James Ron, a former Israeli soldier, holds the Canada Research Chair in Conflict and Human Rights at McGill University.

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