

Vengeance is counterproductive

James, Ron . The Gazette ; Montreal, Que. [Montreal, Que]24 May 2001: B3.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Israeli air strikes on Palestinian towns were the latest in a series of efforts to crush Palestinian rebels. Israel's working assumption seems to be that more pain will produce Palestinian compliance, but the attacks are likely to deepen support for the hard-liners, not to weaken Palestinian resolve.

In Kosovo, to take a more recent example, a decade of passive resistance to Serbian rule ended abruptly in March 1998 following three brutal Serbian police raids. Eighty-three ethnic Albanians were slain in the volatile Drenica region, provoking widespread anger. Tens of thousands attended the subsequent funerals, and anti-Serb violence escalated soon after.

Short of destroying the Palestinian autonomous zones altogether, there is little Israel can do to compel Palestinian submission. And while a full-fledged bombardment of Palestinian enclaves might work for a few weeks, Israel would still face 2 million rebellious Palestinians when the dust settled.

FULL TEXT

Israeli air strikes on Palestinian towns were the latest in a series of efforts to crush Palestinian rebels. Israel's working assumption seems to be that more pain will produce Palestinian compliance, but the attacks are likely to deepen support for the hard-liners, not to weaken Palestinian resolve.

Israeli anger is understandable, especially when civilians are targeted by suicide bombers. Rather than lash out with even greater force, however, Israel was right Tuesday to announce a truce, albeit shaky. The historical record does not recommend military escalation.

Vengeance is counterproductive because government repression invariably exacerbates popular anger. This is especially true when a rebellious population already views the authorities as illegitimate, as Palestinians do Israel. Indeed, government violence is by far the most common cause of popular insurgency and radicalism, even more so than acute poverty.

In Northern Ireland, for example, support for political violence grew in the 1970s following increased British repression. Popular backing for the Provisional IRA was fueled by heavy-handed riot-control efforts, which created new and powerful grievances.

In a widely cited 1989 study, sociologist Robert White found that "IRA violence increased significantly in months following incidents in which the security forces shot down civilians," or in which the British "engaged in organized repression" such as internment.

Importantly, White's interviews with Irish hard-liners revealed that British repression raised their political commitment and legitimized anti-government violence. As the British threat appeared increasingly acute, the radicals felt compelled to engage in even greater levels of resistance.

In Iran, government repression in the late 1970s spread popular resentment against the shah's regime across the country, strengthening his Islamist opponents. Mass funerals for slain demonstrators were important conduits of anger, as people killed in one region were buried in another.

An authoritative 1996 study by political scientist Karen Rasler found that government repression "decreased Iranian protests in the short term," but helped bring even more protesters into the streets four to six weeks later, often in new areas of the country. The more the shah's forces cracked down, the more they fueled popular grievances.

In Kosovo, to take a more recent example, a decade of passive resistance to Serbian rule ended abruptly in March 1998 following three brutal Serbian police raids. Eighty-three ethnic Albanians were slain in the volatile Drenica region, provoking widespread anger. Tens of thousands attended the subsequent funerals, and anti-Serb violence escalated soon after.

A Human Rights Watch analysis found that the 1998 raids were a "watershed in the Kosovo conflict," as "thousands of outraged Albanians" previously engaged in non-violent protests joined the Kosovo Liberation Army. The rebel group quickly went on the offensive, seizing 40 per cent of Kosovo's territory.

Serbia responded with further attacks, provoking more rebellion and international disgust. In the spring 1999, then Serbian ruler Slobodan Milosevic tried to resolve matters through ethnic cleansing, but that plan also backfired when it mobilized world opinion against him.

Although most governments instinctively respond violently to rebellion, some are learning the value of political negotiations. When Albanian radicals recently launched an insurgency in Macedonia, for example, the government's first reaction was to negotiate. Although the army later did crack down, politicians are still working hard to forge a political compromise with moderate Albanians, a strategy that seems to be working.

The historical record suggests that short of total annihilation, governments are rarely able to enforce their will on mobilized and rebellious populations. And when government forces press radicals to the wall, the militants tend to fight back even harder, believing enhanced repression proves the urgency of their cause.

Short of destroying the Palestinian autonomous zones altogether, there is little Israel can do to compel Palestinian submission. And while a full-fledged bombardment of Palestinian enclaves might work for a few weeks, Israel would still face 2 million rebellious Palestinians when the dust settled.

If there is no military solution, political compromise is the only way out. Sooner or later, Israel will have to return to the negotiating table and confront Palestinian demands head on.

- James Ron, an Israeli citizen, is assistant professor of

sociology and political science at Johns Hopkins University.

Illustration

Photo: MENAHEM KAHANA, AFP / Israeli tanks wait at southern entrance to Jerusalem before entering the West Bank. ;

DETAILS

Publication title:	The Gazette; Montreal, Que.
Pages:	B3
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2001
Publication date:	May 24, 2001
column:	JAMES RON
Section:	Editorial / Op-Ed
Publisher:	Infomart, a division of Postmedia Network Inc.
Place of publication:	Montreal, Que.
Country of publication:	Canada, Montreal, Que.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--Canada
ISSN:	03841294
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	COLUMN
ProQuest document ID:	433714074
Document URL:	http://login.ezproxy.lib.umn.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/433714074?accountid=14586
Copyright:	Copyright Southam Publications Inc. May 24, 2001
Last updated:	2017-11-15
Database:	Global Newsstream

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