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Reflections on Palestinian Strategy

Dr. Jerome M. Segal

Senior Research Scholar

Center for International and Security Studies

University of Maryland

The most powerful argument that has been offered in favor of continuing the current Intifada is not the example of Hezbollah in Lebanon – the situation in Palestine is far too different to warrant such “reasoning by analogy.” Rather, the most powerful argument, is that if Sharon succeeds militarily, then he succeeds politically and strategically. It is argued: If Sharon can bring an end to the violence, then he will remain in power in Israel. If he remains in power, then there will be continued expansion of settlements and continued refusal to end the occupation, share Jerusalem and reach an accord on Palestinian refugees. Alternatively, if the Sharon government is ultimately replaced by a government willing to resume negotiations starting from where the Taba talks broke off, then there is reasonable likelihood that a complete peace agreement, covering all issues, can be reached.

What is most striking about this argument is that it places the Intifada within a political context. Implicitly it recognizes the limits of force. Even if the Intifada were to cause Israel to withdraw from significant parts of the territories and dismantle isolated settlements, Israel would retain large areas of the West Bank, it

would continue to hold Jerusalem, and would continue to resist an accord on refugees. To deal with these issues, there must be negotiations and a political settlement. And for this to occur, there must be a new Israeli government.

There are two quite different situations in which Palestinian violence has, in the past, contributed to the collapse of an Israeli government. The first was when Israel was governed by a right-wing government which was not willing to seriously negotiate, and when that government was opposed by left-wing parties which were serious about negotiations. This was the situation when Prime Minister Shamir was in power during the first Intifada which ultimately led to the election of Prime Minister Rabin. The second situation was when the left was in power, and despite efforts at negotiation, was unable to provide Israelis with personal security. Under these conditions Israelis turn to the right. Thus, Peres was defeated by Netanyahu, and Barak by Sharon.

The present situation however, conforms to neither pattern. At present Israel has a unity government, and most Israelis, whether on the left or the right believe that Palestinians are not truly interested in ending the conflict, and thus conclude comprehensive negotiated agreement is out of reach. Hence the differences between left and right on permanent status issues becomes irrelevant. Under present conditions, escalating violence does not turn the average Israeli away from Sharon and towards an opposition party. Rather, escalating violence confirms, in the minds of Israelis, that it is impossible to negotiate an end to the conflict. And while Sharon may not be successful in ending the violence, he is viewed as the most powerful Israeli figure. Rather than being replaced because of violence, escalating violence causes Israelis to rally to their leader, believing that the only response to violence is more violence.

Israeli commentators regularly talk about “the mask having slipped from the Palestinian face.” Indeed, Barak now takes credit for this “exposure.” This has two versions. On the first version, it is claimed, the mask has slipped from the face of

the Palestinian leadership. It has revealed an Arafat who is not prepared or ready to make peace. On the second version, it is said that the mask has slipped from the face of the Palestinian people. Either way, it is believed that the Barak government made very substantial compromises, that the Palestinians flatly rejected them, and instead chose the current warfare. Even among the Israeli peace movement, there is widespread uncertainty as to why an agreement was not reached. And as one moves across the political spectrum, increasingly the view that the Palestinian do not want peace, but only the destruction of Israel, becomes the dominant view.

The coalition government, bringing Peres and Sharon together, was possible because they came to agree on one conclusion: that it is impossible to reach a final comprehensive peace with the Palestinians at this time. Those such as Yossi Beilin, who reject this view stayed out of the coalition.

A military strategy such as the current Intifada, cannot succeed unless Israelis can again be brought to believe in the seriousness of Palestinian claims that they do accept the two-state solution, that they are willing to live in genuine and lasting peace with Israel, provided there is a Palestinian state in virtually all of the West Bank and Gaza, with its capital in Jerusalem and with some recognition of the rights of refugees.

One might conclude from this that what is required is a two-pronged strategy, one that involves armed struggle, constantly reminding the Israelis that there is a price to be paid for continued occupation, and one that puts forward a peace initiative, reminding Israel that its deepest needs for peace and security can be attained if it is willing to end the occupation.

But what does a two-pronged strategy mean? Does it mean that violence and peace diplomacy have to occur at exactly the same time? Certainly, it cannot mean that, for incidents of violence cause peace efforts to lose their credibility. And they undermine the political standing of the peace makers on the other side. For a

diplomatic strategy to succeed, there must be some degree of calm, some taste of the future of peace. Might it not suffice for a two pronged strategy that negotiations and violence alternate, that at some point violence stops, just so that a peace initiative might be taken seriously? Going further, might it not suffice that there is an awareness that if diplomacy fails then there will be a return to violence? And if this is sufficient, (and I think it is) then the current Intifada has already succeeded. It has made its point. Israelis now know that negotiations cannot go on indefinitely. If they do not succeed then they will be replaced by violence.

The claim that an end to violence means that Sharon will stay in power indefinitely is false. The Labor-Likud unity is based on the assumption that it is impossible, at this time, to resolve the final status issues, no matter who is Prime Minister. If a Palestinian peace initiative can dispel this belief, the unity will collapse. Indeed, if Peres believed that there was an agreement that he and Arafat could sign, it is likely that he would seek to bring down the government. Moreover, if there is a powerful peace initiative, with a Palestinian proposal that can be accepted by the Israeli left, then the Bush administration will soon find itself in the same position that George Bush Sr. found himself when Prime Minister Shamir was in power: hoping for a new Israeli government.

Even if a Palestinian peace initiative fails to bring peace, it will establish the context within which any escalation of violence will be perceived, both by the international community and by the Israeli public. If it is believed that a credible peace offer by the Palestinians is on the table and that the Sharon government has turned its back on it, then Sharon will be blamed for the violence that occurs. On the other hand, if there is no Palestinian peace initiative, then there will be widespread sympathy for the Israelis. The general perception will be that they have tried peace, and now have no alternative.

The Peace Initiative

The most powerful diplomatic step that the Palestinian leadership could take is to present to the world a detailed peace agreement that it is prepared to sign. It should do this publicly, going over the heads of the Israeli government, directly to the Israeli people. It should say, “This does not give us full justice, but it is what we are prepared to settle for. Are you willing to pay this price for peace?”

Today, most Israelis do not know what Palestinians really want in order to end the conflict? Some say, “The Palestinians only want our destruction.” Others say, “I don’t really know what they want.”

The distrust is now so profound that proposals that express only the ideas of academics will have little benefit. Indeed, even a repeat of the Yossi Beilen-Abu Mazen exercise will not produce the desired effect unless President Arafat was to unequivocally say that he would support such an agreement.

Let me conclude by offering a sample of what such a proposal would look like. I offer it as a starting point, but it expresses my sense of an agreement that would be accepted by many Israelis, and would clearly establish to Israelis and to the international community, that the Palestinian side is prepared to end the conflict provided that a balanced agreement is achieved.

A General Framework for Peace Between Israel and the State of Palestine

1. A contiguous Palestinian State will come into being within 90 days of this framework taking affect. With the implementation of this framework, Israel and the State of Palestine will be at peace, and will enter into a formal peace treaty establishing the end of the conflict.

2. An international body will be established to monitor implementation of this agreement.

3. Palestinian sovereignty will encompass 98% of the West Bank and all of Gaza. It shall also include all of the Palestinian residential and commercial areas in East Jerusalem. Undeveloped areas within East Jerusalem shall be Palestinian territory.

4. Once the State of Palestine is established, it will take full responsibility for maintaining order within its territory and for ensuring that there are no attacks on Israel or Israeli citizens.

5. The State of Palestine will maintain only a small armed forces and limited weaponry. It will not enter into military alliances with any states that have not similarly entered peace treaties with Israel.

6. The State of Palestine will control its own immigration policy, and its own international borders, including borders with Jordan and Egypt and on the Mediterranean. It will permit the stationing of international observers at those borders to verify compliance with agreed upon restrictions in the import of advanced weaponry.

7. Palestine will agree to Israel annexing 2% of the West Bank to include Israeli settlements. In exchange, in equal amounts, and of equal quality, Israel will agree to Palestinian annexation of Israel territory, the exact location of which will be negotiated.

8. Israel will remove from territories of Palestinian sovereignty all Israeli citizens, unless exceptions are expressly agreed to by Palestine. Settlement areas to be vacated will be turned over to the Palestinian government intact and in good condition.

9. Within the Old City of Jerusalem, Palestine will have sovereignty over the Christian and Muslim quarters of the city and over those areas of the Armenian quarter within which Palestinians reside. Israeli will have sovereignty over the Jewish quarter of the Old City and those areas of the Armenian quarter in which Jews reside.

10. The Wailing Wall shall be under Israeli sovereignty, as shall the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives.

11. The State of Palestine will exercise full control over the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. No Israeli police or security personnel will be permitted on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. The Palestinian authorities will have absolute power to limit access to the Al-Aksa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Within this framework, the two sides agree that ultimate sovereignty belongs to God. It is further agreed that no excavations or archeological endeavors will be undertaken at or within the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif without the consent of both states. It is further agreed that no person will be denied, on grounds of religious belief or national identity, access to peacefully and non-disruptively visit the plateau area. The State of Palestine will ensure that no disturbances on the Haram will interfere with the ability of Jewish worshipers at the Wailing Wall.

12. With respect to Palestinian refugees, the two sides agree that the refugees shall be offered a wide range of options including resettlement within Israel as well as in other states. They will also be provided with resettlement assistance and with compensation for property not returned to them. Once it is ascertained how many refugees have opted to resettle within Israel, the two sides will negotiate a mechanism for implementation, with it being agreed that the pace of resettlement within Israel will in no way undermine the existing demographic balance between Jews and non-Jews within Israel. To accommodate these concerns the Palestinian side is willing to agree that no more than 25,000 refugees would be resettled within

Israel per year. This limitation will not apply to refugees settling in areas of Israel (2%) that will be transferred to Palestinian sovereignty – that being a Palestinian decision alone.

13. Both sides will recognize the other's capital. The Palestinian capital, Al-quds will be established in the area of East Jerusalem, and Israel's capital, Yerushalayim, in West Jerusalem.

Readers will no doubt disagree with specific parts of this plan. I put this forward not as a perfect proposal, and certainly not as something that only makes sense in this specific formulation. Rather, it should be seen as a reference point. Here is something that spells out a price for peace that many Israelis would be willing to pay – provided they believed that true and lasting peace would result. If these specifics do not capture the answer to the question “What will the Palestinians accept to end the conflict?” then modify it so that it does. The key is to be able to say something definitive, authoritative and realistic to the Israeli people, and to the people of the world.

