

## Disengagement and Israeli Deterrence

Yair Evron

One of the main arguments raised against the unilateral disengagement from Gaza and northern Samaria focuses on its possible impact on the success of Israeli deterrence vis-à-vis the Palestinians. The more extreme version of this argument contends that any withdrawal from the territories critically weakens Israeli deterrence. A more moderate version holds that a withdrawal that is not accompanied by considerable Palestinian concessions is liable to weaken Israel's deterrence. This approach corresponds to a general trend in Israeli popular strategic thinking about the meaning and role of deterrence in overall Israeli behavior vis-à-vis the Arab world in general and the Palestinians in particular. According to this school of thought, Israeli survival relies first and foremost on deterrence, and deterrence is determined by demonstrations of resolve, for example, by a refusal to make any concessions and especially not during an armed conflict. Consequently, the disengagement would critically weaken Israeli deterrence.

This line of reasoning, however, is simplistically faulty, whereas deterrence is in fact a highly complex process. It involves in the first place threats or the actual use of force (as signals for further use of force),<sup>1</sup> but its success depends on strategic, political, and psychological elements.

Before analyzing the Israeli–Palestinian deterrence equation and the possible effects of the disengagement from Gaza, a very brief elaboration of the deterrence equation between Israel and the Arab states will help inform this analysis.

- ***The overall Israel–Arab states deterrence process:*** Generally speaking, in deterrence relationships between states, deterrence success or failure depends on the interaction between three balances: the balance of military power; the balance of political interests; and the balance of resolve. In fact, however, most of the deterrence situations between Israel and Arab states have been determined by the relationship between the balance of military power and the balance of interests. Resolve was less relevant. Thus, Arab states initiated war in 1948, in 1969 (the War of Attrition), and 1973 when they calculated that their vital political interests demanded the initiation of hostilities.<sup>2</sup> In 1969–70 Egypt waged a "stationary" war because its political grievance was unbearable, but it designed a type of war

that fit its self-perceived military inferiority. In 1973, Egypt and Syria launched an offensive war (though with limited objectives), again because of the unbearable political situation, but tried to tailor the plan and execution of the war to their self-perceived overall military inferiority. Before 1967 and since the 1979 Israel–Egypt peace treaty, Arab states were deterred from initiating conventional wars because they rationally assessed the military balance as unfavorable and the political situation as tolerable.

- ***Deterrence in sub-war contexts:*** At the same time, Israel has frequently had to respond forcefully to limited armed challenges in order to impose stable local deterrence in sub-war situations. In these situations, the objective of Israeli force was to compel Arab governments to stop their limited military activity or to control independent organizations that conducted operations against Israel. In the 1950s Israel acted primarily against Jordan and Egypt; in the 1960s primarily against Syria (and briefly again against Jordan); and in later periods against Lebanon. While the use of limited force was at times necessary, the success of deterrence depended on additional factors as well. Moreover, sometimes the use of disproportionate force led to escalation.

An analysis of Israeli retaliatory activity suggests several important dimensions of sub-war deterrence. The first is the unavoidable need for the use of force, though strictly oriented to deterrence purposes. Second, when there is not a critical conflict of political interests between Israel and a specific Arab state and the latter is militarily weak vis-à-vis Israel, the Arab government will try to restrain armed organizations from activity against Israel (e.g., Israel vs. Jordan). Third, success of deterrence increases as the regime becomes domestically stronger. When the same conditions apply but the Arab regime is critically weak in domestic power (as in the case of Lebanon), armed retaliation is not likely to establish stable deterrence. When the Arab regime is strong and its prestige adversely affected (e.g., Egypt in the mid 1950s), Israeli retaliation ultimately leads to major escalation. Thus, the relevant factors in sub-war contexts are: the balance of military power; the balance of interests; the stability and power of the relevant regimes; and their ability to control their domestic environment.

## **Deterrence and Recent Examples of Disengagement**

Historical experience suggests that even when disengagement occurs under military pressure and consequently is perceived as a lack of resolve, deterrence is not weakened. In the mid 1980s, Israel withdrew from most of Lebanon. This was preceded and accompanied by prophecies of doom: Israeli deterrence against Arab states would be critically weakened, resulting in major escalation by Arab states. Nothing happened. What did develop was the guerrilla war against the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon, though not for lack of demonstrable Israeli resolve. Rather, the very presence of Israel in Lebanon provoked the reaction of local organizations backed by large parts of the population.

When Israeli forces withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000, there were again predictions of catastrophic outcomes based on the said argument: withdrawal would demonstrate the lack of Israeli resolve and therefore Hizbollah would escalate its activity. In fact, however, the Lebanese front has essentially remained calm since then. Moreover, current promising developments in Lebanon, though resulting from other causes, were probably made possible by – or at least were contingent on – the previous Israeli withdrawal and the stability along the Israeli border.

From a different vantage, the withdrawal from Lebanon has been widely perceived as a trigger for the outbreak of the intifada, hence presumably giving credence to the argument that Israeli retreats correlate with weakened Israeli deterrence. According to this argument, the Palestinians "learned" from the Israeli experience in Lebanon that if they resorted to violence, Israel would succumb and accept the Palestinian conditions. There are still major disagreements about how the intifada began, but in any event, in its initial phase it was largely unarmed. It became "militarized" (thus presumably mirroring Hizbollah tactics) only in the second phase, and there is a very strong Israeli school of thought (and needless to say many Palestinians adhere to it as well), that attributes this transformation to the massive Israeli military reactions to the first phase.<sup>3</sup> All this puts in doubt the direct connection between the outbreak of the intifada and the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. Beyond that, a population at large does not start a major armed struggle just because in another context the enemy made concessions in the face of hostilities. The intifada was fueled in the first place by deep feelings of grievances and the perception – wrong as it was from an objective point of view in light of the Barak and Clinton proposals – that the political process was blocked. This does not mean that emulation

of Hizbollah strategy was absent from Arafat's calculations and behavior once the intifada evolved. But it does mean that it was not the main trigger for the intifada.

### **Deterrence of the Palestinian Intifada**

There is an argument that it is impossible to apply deterrence to a conflict with terrorism or guerrilla warfare, namely, states cannot deter non-state actors. This debatable argument may be valid when the non-state actors are small terrorist organizations. But whatever the general merits of this argument, it certainly cannot be applied to the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians. In this conflict the two sides are political communities, whose leaderships operate under political constraints and require wider measures of societal legitimacy for their policies. Furthermore, while the particular conditions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not entirely representative of other Israeli-Arab sub-war scenarios, the dimensions of sub-war deterrence could form a useful framework for the analysis of Israeli deterrence vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

The position of many in the PLO leadership from the beginning of the intifada was that its militarization was a major mistake, but their position was pushed aside by Arafat.<sup>4</sup> With his departure, Palestinian policy has changed. Indeed, the fact that Hamas has recently become far more tentative about widespread armed activity demonstrated its awareness that the majority of the Palestinian population backs the view of the current Palestinian leadership.

The new policy was the result of several factors: first, the high costs that the Palestinian community suffered at the hands of Israeli security forces; second, the appreciation that the mobilization of international – and primarily American – support is critical for the Palestinians and ultimately could be the main instrument in convincing Israel to come to terms with the Palestinians. In addition, the realization has grown among many in the Palestinian leadership that they need the goodwill of part of the Israeli body polity, which is contingent on a cessation of violence. Finally, the coincidence of the Israeli disengagement plan with the changes within the Palestinian community and leadership has also contributed to the Palestinian attempt to endorse a new approach. The Palestinian leadership attributes to the end of the armed intifada what it sees as a positive change in the Bush administration's position, voiced during Abu Mazen's visit to Washington in late May 2005.<sup>5</sup> Thus, military pressure combined with political developments and assessments have led to the new

Palestinian strategy. The termination of armed Palestinian activity, be it even temporary, is a result of successful Israeli deterrence, but this success was in fact predicated on the combination of military and political factors.

When Hamas publicly claims that it was the intifada that secured the Israeli disengagement, it is not clear whether it really believes this claim or it is trying to enhance its political position in the Palestinian community. The majority of Palestinians share the view that the intifada did force Israel to disengage from Gaza. At the same time, the majority of Palestinians feel that a continuation of the intifada hurts Palestinian interests. Thus, only 29 percent of Palestinians listed support for continued violence inside the Green Line and a similar percentage backed the continuation of violence emanating from the Gaza Strip after disengagement, while 68 percent opposed it. Significantly 84 percent voiced their support for return to negotiations on a peaceful settlement.<sup>6</sup>

There are several possible explanations for the simultaneous divergent approaches on the added value of the violence. The dualism might demonstrate a cognitive dissonance. Or, the Palestinians may believe the intifada contributed to the Israeli decision to disengage, but at the same time realize that armed struggle exacts costs that are too high and therefore demands an alternative policy to achieve national aspirations. Finally, the Palestinians have to justify to themselves the high costs and suffering they endured for a long time. But the net result of this analysis is very far from the claim that because the majority of the Palestinians perceive the Israeli withdrawal as a victory for the armed struggle they believe that it should be a recipe for future behavior. If we translate this observation to the deterrence analytical framework, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza (and consequently the assumed lack of resolve on Israel's part) does not weaken Israeli deterrence.

### **The Israeli Decision to Disengage**

Was it Palestinian violence that led to the decision to disengage? It is useful to separate between the public's view and the decision-makers' approach, and the situation is complex on both levels. The majority of Israelis are tired of the continued conflict and would welcome moves towards its resolution based on compromise. This was its position even before the intifada, particularly in regard to the Gaza Strip. However, precisely when terrorism was more intensive, the Israeli public tended to coalesce and back stronger security measures against the Palestinians. Only when

Palestinian violence declined were Israelis more ready to accept a scenario of disengagement. Furthermore, there is widespread assessment that support for the disengagement would decline if a campaign of terrorism started yet again.

To the decision-makers, wider political considerations were uppermost. The decision to disengage was most probably rooted in an appreciation by Sharon and his advisers that some political move was necessary, especially as Israel was losing the overall political initiative. There was concern about possible future American diplomatic initiatives in the absence of an Israeli move. Apparently the demographic factor also played an important role, and Sharon rightly assessed that the plan would receive considerable public support within Israel.

The lessons of the first intifada (1987-1991) are likewise relevant here. That widespread largely non-violent civil campaign demonstrated to the Israeli public the unity and viability of the Palestinian national community. It impressed on the public the need to change leadership and led to the election of Rabin, who in turn decided on the Oslo process. The combination of the will and unity of the Palestinians, therefore, though without the use of terrorism, is what lay at the basis of the Israeli recognition of Palestinian nationalism and the need to partition the country. The overall conclusion is that when the Palestinians demonstrate strong resistance but without terrorism, especially suicide bombings against civilians within the Green Line, the Israeli public is more prepared to accept political compromises. Its readiness for that even increases in a period of calm after the end of violence. This is not to say that violence is absent as a contributing factor to the overall composite of influences. But it is important to understand that violence alone has not dictated the Israeli moves towards the Palestinians. Indeed, when targeted by violence, the Israeli public tends to give precedence to military reactions over diplomatic compromises or concessions of any sort.

### **Deterrence as a Dialogue between Opponents**

Rather than a flat idea of force and uncompromising steadfastness, Israeli deterrence vis-à-vis the Palestinians depends in the first place on the costs of violence to the Palestinians combined with both sides' assessments of their respective national interests. Significantly, each side's assessment of its own vital interests depends to an extent on the perceptions it has of the vitality of the other side's parallel interests. When Israel defines its most vital national interests, this in turn can affect the

definition of the Palestinian vital interests and vice versa. Each side is ready to suffer high costs in order to defend its most vital national interests. Thus, the success of deterrence is affected by each side's self-definition of its own vital interests, but this definition is partly influenced by the assessment of what are the opposite side's definitions of its own vital interests. Deterrence is not a simple either/or situation, but a constant process in which both sides continue assessing the balance of respective interests and the strategies designed to affect the perceptions of the other side regarding these interests.

There are main Israeli national interests that are deemed beyond calculations of deterrence. One such interest on which there is a very wide consensus is that the state should be "Jewish and democratic." Continued occupation of the territories stands in total contrast to this central Israeli interest. Consequently, disengagement from the territories serves Israel's vital interests. This consensual objective encapsulates an additional vital interest: opposition to a large influx of Palestinians into Israel according to the "right of return" agenda. This interest is also likely to play a role in the balance of interests that affects deterrence success. It is reasonable to assume that at least part of the Palestinian leadership and the political echelons recognize this Israeli position, and consequently would tend to formulate the Palestinian national interests accordingly. However, there is a considerable uncertainty whether this indeed would be the ultimate position taken eventually by the Palestinians.

The majority of Israelis also tend to accept the formula according to which a two-state solution is inevitable, and are ready therefore to accept the establishment of a Palestinian state, even if it lacks the urgency of the "Jewish and democratic" objective. As a two-state solution suits the Palestinians' formulation of their own national interests, the Israeli perception could encourage those within the Palestinian body polity who are ready to accept political compromises.

The main components within the Israeli–Palestinian deterrence equation are: the balance of interests, namely, what would be the outcomes of the future political process; the inputs of extra regional powers (and primarily the United States) to the political process; the inputs of other regional powers to the political process; security measures that Israel could apply in order to lessen future Palestinian violent activity; and the domestic strength of the Israeli and Palestinian governments. Successful Israeli deterrence is therefore not predicated on Palestinian assumptions about

assumed Israeli lack of resolve in the past, but rather on political considerations, coupled with the application of Israeli force when it is required.

Needless to say, there are considerable uncertainties involved in future developments. First, it is not clear at all that there would be any meeting point between the formulation of respective Israeli and Palestinian national interests. If this happens, there might be a possibility for some kind of intermediate agreements that could delay a major crisis between the sides. What is important to point out is that the Palestinian side is much more aware of Israeli positions and attitudes than it was during the intifada.

Second, splinter Palestinian armed organizations might try to break the current (or future) lull in violence. At present it appears that the main body of Fatah and the leadership of Hamas are ready for a long ceasefire. This would probably be maintained during the next year or so (provided Israel executes the disengagement) with possible intermediate crises. Beyond that, and depending on social and economic conditions in the territories, this backing might weaken and then splinter groups may assess that they would gain social support for a renewal of attacks on Israel. Opposition groups might also try to renew the armed intifada in order to destabilize the political control of the PA. Thus, to return to the parameters formulated at the outset of the discussion, the weaker the Palestinian institutions and their authority and the more fragmented the Palestinian community, the less successful Israeli deterrence stands to be.

## **Conclusion**

The simplistic assumption that the Gaza disengagement plan would by itself lead to a weakening of Israeli deterrence against future Palestinian violence is unsound. The lessons of the intifada suggest that deterrence is possible, but is predicated on a combination of political and military interests and processes. Similarly, the future deterrence equation between Israel and the Palestinians depends on a mix of political factors and on the application of force if political accommodation fails and armed insurgency is renewed.

---

<sup>1</sup> The use of force can be designed for coercion as well, but the subject lies beyond the scope of this discussion.

<sup>2</sup> In 1956, 1967, and 1982 it was Israel that initiated hostilities. Needless to say in 1967 Israel acted in the face of an enormous challenge to its security.

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the journalistic detailed account of the evolution of the intifada in Raviv Drucker and Ofer Shelah, *Boomerang: Failed Leadership in the Second Intifada* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Yezid Sayigh, "The Palestinian Strategic Impasse," *Survival* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2002-3): 7-21.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Ghassan Khatib, "Some Positive Movement," *Bitterlemons*, June 27, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Public Opinion Poll #15, PSR, March 2005.