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ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN VIOLENCE AND THE PROSPECTS FOR REGIONAL WAR

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The ongoing confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians has raised concern about the possibility that the violence could degenerate into a regional war. Leading figures in the security establishment – senior officials in the Intelligence Branch, some generals, the Chief-of-Staff, even the Prime Minister – have explicitly warned that the probability of a regional conflict has risen in recent weeks. Their scenarios do not refer to a conscious decision by Arab states to organize a war coalition against Israel. Instead, they allude to a chain of events that could, if not interrupted, result in a broader Arab-Israeli war.

Since the mid-1980s, Israeli assessments have judged the probability of a full-scale war to be low. This evaluation is explained by the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, the weakening of Iraq in two Gulf wars, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the inability of Arabs to forge a united coalition against Israel. In these circumstances, the Arab states, and especially Syria – the key to any war against Israel – have judged that the overall balance of forces tilts too strongly in Israel's favor to hold out any promise of military success.

The scenario of deterioration into war rests on the following chain of events:

- a significant escalation in the level of

Israeli-Palestinian violence;

- a decision by Hizbullah to take advantage of Israel's preoccupation with the crisis in the West Bank and Gaza to carry out attacks and inflict too many casualties for Israel to ignore;
- painful Israeli retaliation against Hizbullah, Lebanon, and Syria;
- a large-scale Syrian response to Israeli actions;
- a decision by Iraq, and perhaps Iran, to join the fighting against Israel, either through missile attacks or the dispatch of forces to the Syrian front;
- the inability of Egypt and Jordan to stand idly by and refrain from joining the anti-Israel coalition.

The scenario is essentially a domino theory, but there are serious flaws in it. For it to play out as described, that is, as the worst case, all the potential firebreaks in the process have to fail. It is not enough that one or two of them fail, which is likely to happen. Instead, the entire brake system must malfunction. Thus, it is necessary to assume that the leaders of Hizbullah and Syria will decide to run the risk of launching high-casualty attacks despite Israel's warnings of

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severe retaliation; that Israel will actually respond, not just against Hizbullah in Lebanon, but also against significant Syrian targets, even though it expects that that would lead to war; and that Syria would be able and willing to respond by launching a war, notwithstanding its basic assessment that the balance of forces is clearly in Israel's favor. For the scenario to materialize, it is also necessary to assume that the United States and Egypt will not exercise their moderating influence to prevent the outbreak of war. Thus, this sort of deterioration, while not inconceivable, is highly improbable.

The worst case will happen only if all the protagonists depart from their established patterns of behavior or ignore constraints on their capabilities. Iran, today, has no capability to contribute to a war effort against Israel except by firing long-range rockets from Lebanon. Iraq would like to regain a leading role in the Arab world, and taking the lead in a campaign against Israel would promote that aim. But much of Iraq's military power was destroyed in the Second Gulf War and has not yet been rebuilt. Iraq has managed to undermine the international sanctions regime, but it must bear in mind that the United States is eagerly looking for an opportunity to reinstate the regime. Participation in a war against Israel that serves no vital and immediate Iraqi interest would provide just such an opportunity. And both Egypt and Jordan have made it clear that they oppose a war with Israel. In these circumstances, Syria cannot rely on the promise of significant Arab/Iranian assistance if it decides to launch a war.

Although the probability of a full-scale war remains low, there are risks of lower-order escalation. These stem from some miscalculation by one of the parties, or from an incident involving particularly large numbers of Israeli or Palestinian casualties. Most critically, there is the risk that an attack on a holy site would reverberate far beyond the immediate Israeli-Palestinian arena.

The main danger is found on the Israeli-Lebanese border, particularly – though

not exclusively – in the context of ongoing violence in the West Bank and Gaza. Hizbullah may judge that an Israel distracted and weakened by the confrontation with the Palestinians would be unable to react strongly against it. The restrained Israeli response to Hizbullah attacks in recent months may even nourish this judgment. As a result, Hizbullah could try again to do what it has already done – launch an attack in the Har Dov area. It could also try to do what it has not yet done – launch long-range rockets, even against heavily populated areas deep inside Israel. The purpose would be to demonstrate Hizbullah's contribution to the struggle for Jerusalem and to serve the Syrian and Iranian aim of further disrupting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Such attacks would force Israel to decide on the most appropriate response in a situation with a serious potential for escalation.

That is because the crisis with the Palestinians raises risks of political linkage. Arab rage and hatred against Israel and identification with the Palestinians are much higher than they were six months ago. These factors can lead to serious internal unrest in Jordan and Egypt, resulting in irresistible pressure to break ties with Israel. Any intensification of Israeli-Palestinian violence – regardless of who is responsible – might, in the worst case, result in the complete destruction of whatever remains of the network of relations between Israel and the Arab world. Egypt and Jordan might withdraw their remaining diplomats in Israel and expel Israeli diplomats from their capitals. They might also suspend all commercial and agricultural links. Other Arab states could well end their residual ties with Israel.

Still, even this sort of political deterioration probably has a floor. Egypt and Jordan will almost certainly avoid egregious violations of the peace agreements and will maintain some channel of communication with Israel, since that enables them to try to influence Israeli actions. More significantly, they will avoid the kinds of substantive military measures that could result in an Arab-Israeli war.