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THE MORTAR AS SYMBOL AND SYMPTOM OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN STRUGGLE

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In the past few weeks, the Palestinians have used mortars in the Gaza Strip and have even launched several attacks on towns inside Israel. In a psychological sense, the introduction of mortars into the fighting by the Palestinians recalls the use of the "Davidka" mortar by Israeli forces during the War of Independence. That primitive weapon is thought to have had a major impact on the morale of Palestinians and precipitated their flight from the battlefield at critical moments. It remains to be seen whether a Palestinian mortar will, like the Davidka, be put on display in a central square of the capital of the future state. Meanwhile, the Palestinians make do with dummy-mortars carried in demonstrations in the streets of Gaza.

In practical terms, the mortar bombing of Israeli settlements, especially the town of Sderot inside the "Green Line," precipitated a serious escalation of fighting and the entry of Israeli forces into Area A in the Gaza Strip. That, in turn, led the Bush Administration to intervene directly, for the first time, and to demand the immediate withdrawal of Israeli forces from Area A. This chain of events constituted some kind of achievement for the Palestinian Authority (PA), which hopes to provoke internationalization of the conflict in order to limit Israel's margin of maneuver and even to impose a permanent status agreement that

satisfies traditional Palestinian demands. Israel quickly drew the lessons from this incident and thereafter confined itself to small, pinpoint operations that focus on sensitive Palestinian targets but do not arouse the wrath of the United States. Yasir Arafat, by contrast, found that his policy of "conscious non-control" of violence – of which the use of mortars is one manifestation – is increasingly problematic, both domestically and in terms of its international ramifications.

Conscious non-control of violence means that the PA does not prevent any Palestinian element, even opposition forces like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, from using violence and terror against Israeli targets in the West Bank and Gaza or inside Israel itself. In fact, the PA's own security forces initiate a significant proportion of this violence. To Israeli, American and other international actors who demand that the PA restrain the violence in order to permit the resumption of political dialogue, the Palestinians give a variety of responses:

- a) that Palestinian violence is the spontaneous reaction of a people living under violent occupation and that it cannot stop as long as the occupation itself continues;
- b) that Palestinian security forces are compelled to intervene in order to defend their people against Israeli aggression;
- c) that the range of Israeli actions on the

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ground makes it difficult for Arafat to lower the level of violence;

- d) that Israel, by demanding a halt to violence as a condition for resumption of negotiations, is trying to create a split between the Palestinian leadership and the people.

These arguments, along with the growing number of groups participating in the violence, have contributed to uncertainty concerning the degree to which Arafat and the PA actually control events on the ground. The Israeli intelligence community is itself reportedly divided on this question, and Arafat has exploited this uncertainty to evade pressure by the international system to rein in the violence.

In fact, the massive Israeli response to the shelling of Sderot made clear to the Americans and others the Israeli view that the Palestinians had crossed a "red line." Consequently, the American demand from Israel to withdraw from Area A was accompanied by heavy pressure on Arafat to halt the mortar fire. Given the basic Palestinian interest in deeper American involvement in Israeli-Palestinian relations, Arafat was compelled to show some sign of compliance. As in the past, he tried to square the circle by giving the U.S. some tangible evidence of positive steps while avoiding a test of his ability to impose a cease-fire on Palestinian elements intent on continuing the battle. The result was a directive by the "Supreme Palestinian Military Council" to halt the firing of mortars. The ambivalence of the appeal was expressed by the PA secretary-general for presidential affairs, who explained that the Council had called for a halt to mortar fire from residential areas because that provided Israel with a pretext to destroy civilian dwellings; the implication was that continuing fire from unpopulated areas was still permissible.

The Council also announced the dissolution of the "Popular Resistance Committees," a component of Fatah apparently responsible for some of the mortar attacks in recent weeks. In any case, Arafat took care not to release any

statement in his own name. Even so, he was apparently unable to avoid a counter-challenge. The "Resistance Committees" declared that they would not dissolve themselves, and the Council's directive was condemned by various groups within Fatah and by other organizations. Secondly, the firing continued, and this posed an obstacle to the achievement of Arafat's current political objective – a meeting with President Bush.

In summary, even if the recent incidents of mortar fire complicated matters for Arafat, they amount to little more than a tactical problem. That problem does not alter his basic belief that in the current stage of the conflict, violence is the only meaningful tool to bring about some significant change in the situation and revive the negotiations at the point where they broke off in the last days of the previous Israeli Government. In his view, ongoing violence may well exhaust the Israeli public and force the Israeli government either to respond to Palestinian demands (in which case, he is probably misreading the public mood in Israel) or to take some disproportionate action that would produce the hoped-for international intervention.

What might change this view of the strategic utility of violence? One possibility is the erosion of the Palestinian public's willingness or ability to endure the costs, perhaps to the point where the PA's administrative and security systems begin to collapse. That prospect does not appear imminent, although there is already criticism in some circles of Arafat's "non-strategy," i.e., his apparent willingness to continue leading a pointless struggle that is destroying the infrastructure of the Palestinian economy and civilian society. Another potential catalyst would be Arafat's conviction that the policy of "conscious non-control" was giving the Islamist opposition the power to threaten his own rule, at which point he would try to repress it by force. The question then would be whether he had left it too late.