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SHARON AND ARAFAT: THE MOMENT OF TRUTH?

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Over the weekend of December 1-2, Palestinian bombers and gunmen carried out a series of attacks at five different locations, killing at least 26 Israelis and wounding hundreds of others. The attacks prompted Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to cut short his trip to United States. Immediately upon his return, the Israeli Cabinet convened to designate the Palestinian Authority a terrorist-supporting entity and to approve military actions against it. At the same time, Israeli forces launched a series of air strikes on PA facilities and installations that exceeded in scope and intensity any Israeli response to previous waves of Palestinian terrorism. Although military spokesmen indicated that these operations would last as long as was necessary to achieve their objectives, the objectives themselves were not defined in precise terms. But by equating the PA with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and drawing an analogy between Israel's actions and the American war against terrorism, Sharon appeared to communicate a determination to confront Yasir Arafat with the same stark choice offered the Taliban: give up the terrorists or give up power.

If this is indeed the essence of Sharon's decision, it constitutes a significant shift in Israeli policy since the outbreak of violence in September 2000. Before the latest attacks, Israeli counter-terrorism policy involved a mix

of preventive measures (especially closures), preemptive or punitive killings of terrorist commanders and organizers, and strikes on PA targets intended to coerce Arafat into acting more forcefully against the terrorist infrastructure in areas under his control. But however forceful these latter actions may have been, they fell far short of a campaign to undermine the continuing viability of the PA.

Israeli restraint in this regard stemmed from two main sources. The first was Israel's own policy calculus, namely, the belief that the PA ought to be preserved as a belligerent partner because any conceivable alternative to it, either a different leadership or no leadership at all, would be worse. In other words, Israeli governments believed that however much Arafat may have been part of the problem, he was also potentially part of the solution, whether that meant negotiating an Israeli-Palestinian agreement or simply exercising some discipline and control over a variety of Palestinian organizations and individuals. The second source of restraint was external: the conviction of important international actors, especially the United States, that Israeli action to undermine Arafat would make it impossible to restore any measure of stability or retrieve whatever might remain of the peace process while severely complicating their relations with the rest of the Arab world.

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The first restraint had already seriously eroded before the attacks of December 1-2 because Israeli confidence in Arafat's ability or willingness to negotiate peace or even to sustain any of the ceasefires to which he had committed himself had been shaken in his own acts of commission and omission. That, in fact, was the main reason for Ehud Barak's electoral defeat in February 2001. But even Sharon, though much more skeptical about the prospects of any kind of cooperation with Arafat, initially acted as though his more modest aim – a measure of stability on the ground – could best be pursued with an intact PA. However, the steady drumbeat of terrorist attacks – there have been more Israeli casualties under Sharon than there were under Barak – eliminated much of the rationale for refraining from jeopardizing Arafat's authority. For Sharon, and for an ever-growing number of other Israelis, the protracted debate about whether Arafat didn't act to rein in terrorism because he wouldn't or because he couldn't became increasingly irrelevant: either way, the argument that he was still preferable to any conceivable alternative became progressively less compelling.

The weakening of the second restraint was more surprising and more important. The Bush Administration was initially less engaged in Israeli-Palestinian affairs than its predecessor and far less enamored with Arafat. Nevertheless, the political exigencies of the anti-terrorist coalition obliged it in recent weeks to become more actively involved. Both President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell sent signals of sympathy for Palestinian aspirations, and the latter appointed a special envoy, retired Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni, to help implement previous plans (Mitchell and Tenet) to stabilize the situation and eventually permit a resumption of negotiations. These statements and actions raised concerns in Israel that Sharon would actually have to moderate his demands with respect to PA action against violence. But Zinni had hardly landed in Israel before a new wave of Palestinian violence broke out,

presumably in response to Israel's assassination of Muhammad abu Hanoud, a Hamas leader suspected of organizing previous suicide bombings. And the bus bombings during Sharon's presence in the United States, combined with Israeli documentation of Arafat's systematic inactivity in suppressing terrorism, had the effect of convincing senior American officials that any new verbal commitments Arafat might make were not credible and that Israel could not be asked to continue restraining itself – especially since the United States was still involved in its own military campaign against terrorism in Afghanistan.

As a result, Sharon returned to Israel much less confined by the domestic and foreign policy considerations that had prevented him in the past from acting more aggressively against Arafat. Not that these constraints completely disappeared. His Labor Party partners in the Unity Government argued that the PA be given one more chance before Israel undertook any action that might destroy it. And while the United States Government refrained from issuing the usual calls on both sides to exercise restraint, endorsed Israel's right to defend itself, and avoided any criticism of Israeli actions, it did make clear its disapproval of any conscious Israeli effort to topple the PA or harm Arafat personally.

After two days of intense air operations, neither Sharon's statements nor the nature of Israeli military activity fully revealed what his ultimate aim was. But by laying the blame for terrorism squarely at Arafat's doorstep and directly attacking the symbols and substance of his authority, Sharon did make it clear that unless Arafat faced the risk of a real war against Palestinian terrorism, he would face the risk of a real war with Israel. Whether or not he survived either of those wars was now of less concern to the Government of Israel than at any time since the signing of the Oslo Agreement in 1993.