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OPERATION "DEFENSIVE WALL": A CHANGE IN ISRAELI STRATEGY?

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At the end of March, the Israeli government launched "Defensive Wall," the largest military operation since the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising in September 2000.

Previous incursions into Palestinian-controlled territory aimed at coercing the Palestinian Authority into suppressing terrorism. This time, the scale and scope of operations, including the mobilization of 20,000 reservists, appear to reflect a decision by the Israeli government to destroy through its own actions what it calls "the infrastructure of terrorism."

The reason for the change lies in the escalating nature of the threat and the demonstrated failure of attempts to deal with it through other means. Neither political negotiations until January 2001 nor a series of mediation efforts to reach a cease-fire after that nor limited military measures throughout the entire period succeeded in reversing or even containing the rising lethality of terrorist attacks. Since the beginning of March, Israel was exposed to a wave of suicide bombings, many by bombers from organizations at least nominally subordinate to Yasir Arafat, which killed over 130 and wounded hundreds of others. Except during periods of all-out war, this was the highest single-month casualty count since Israel's creation in 1948, and it produced a widespread state of fear, demoralization and despair reflected in personal behavior intended to preempt dangers to individual security as well as growing concern about the implications of that

behavior for Israel's long-term social and economic viability. All previous government actions to address this challenge, whether of a political character that provoked the defection of right-wing parties from the coalition (Sharon's agreement to drop his demand for seven days of quiet before endorsing political talks, acceptance of proposals by American mediator Anthony Zinni) or of a military character had been ineffective. This perceived impotence did not just undermine Sharon's own political standing; it threatened to push Israel into a downward spiral of declining self-confidence that invited further terrorist attacks and further insecurity.

In this respect, the bombing of the Park Hotel in Netanya on the eve of Passover constituted a major psychological watershed. The attack immediately killed more than 20 people (the death toll later rose to 26) and wounded more than 100 others, making it the deadliest single terrorist attack in Israeli history. It came on the heels of a government decision to withdraw forces previously sent into Palestinian cities. And it prompted Sharon to declare that Israel was in a "state of war" and the government to launch an open-ended operation that included the complete isolation of Arafat.

In the context of what Sharon now calls a "state of war," the campaign began with the takeover of Ramallah and the siege of Arafat's headquarters, and within a week, Israeli forces had moved into all the other major towns in the West Bank

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except for Hebron and Jericho. Hundreds of terrorist suspects had been captured, interrogated, and either detained or released. Large stores of weapons and explosives had been seized, and captured documents revealed the extent of the infrastructure and the intimate connection between Arafat and the terrorist operations of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades.

Government spokesmen insisted that Israel did not intend to reoccupy Palestinian cities permanently but provided no timetable for the operation. In part, this is because the government has been unwilling or unable to articulate the strategic rationale of the campaign, i.e., the manner in which it would so transform the Israeli-Palestinian relationship that the threat of terrorism could be contained. As a result, analysts and observers have speculated that it might go on for several more weeks, at least.

Whether or not this actually happens depends more on the regional and international political environment than on local developments. For despite scattered pockets of Palestinian resistance, Israeli casualties have not been high enough to overcome the sense of public anger that created the demand and sustains the support for the operation. And even in the unlikely event that Arafat does what he did not do before, that is, endorse a cease-fire not conditional on Israeli political concessions, his credibility among Israeli decisionmakers and public opinion is too low to elicit a unilateral Israeli decision to halt the operation and return to the status quo ante "Defensive Wall." Moreover, a decline in terrorist attacks – which happened after the few first days of the operation -- will probably be interpreted to mean that the operation is at least succeeding in keeping potential terrorists away from Israeli targets. Conversely, continuing attacks will probably indicate that the operation needs to be expanded and intensified.

Thus, the decisive factor will be the broader political-diplomatic environment. "Defensive Wall" predictably provoked a wave of Arab and Islamic condemnation of what was depicted in Arab and Islamic media as unprovoked and ruthless Israeli aggression. Angry public

demonstrations have rocked many cities in the Arab world. Some figures, like Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and Libyan leader Mu'ammar Qaddafi, have called for active support for the Palestinians, including a barely credible threat to activate the Arab oil weapons. Others, like Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, felt obliged to register a strong political protest, including freezing of all ties with Israel except diplomatic relations essential to the promotion of Palestinian interests (King Abdullah of Jordan may well follow suit). Almost as predictably, European governments have also condemned Israeli actions, both on humanitarian grounds and because they neutralize Yasir Arafat, whom most Europeans still insist is an essential and potentially positive element in the search for a political resolution of the conflict.

But the most critical factor from Israel's perspective, the US Government, has publicly argued that "Defensive Wall" is legitimate self-defense against an ongoing terrorist threat. American leaders, including President Bush, continue to stress that Arafat and the PA should not be eliminated, to articulate long-term visions that express sympathy for Palestinian aspirations, and to endorse United Nations Security Council resolutions calling for an eventual Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian-controlled territories. But in the wake of recurrent Palestinian terrorist attacks and the failure of Arafat to provide General Zinni with what they believe is the degree of cooperation required of him, the Americans appear to have concluded that forceful Israeli action is not only justified by the nature of the terrorist threat, but might even create more promising conditions for effective American mediation in the future. Unless and until this assessment changes, "Defensive Wall" is likely to continue as long as Israel itself is unable to identify a more promising alternative.