



TEL AVIV NOTES

AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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OPERATION "DEFENSIVE SHIELD": AN INTERIM ASSESSMENT

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Operation "Defensive Shield" is the first large-scale attempt by Israel to destroy the infrastructure of Palestinian terrorism throughout the West Bank. Previous military incursions were narrowly focused and targeted restricted areas. The decision to launch this operation was taken following the suicide-bombing of the Passover Seder at the Park Hotel in Netanya, and it reflected the belief of the government and the Israeli public that Palestinian terrorism had reached intolerable levels and that Israel had to take drastic action to contain it. It also expressed the Israeli conclusion that there is no chance of inducing Arafat to take real steps to stop terrorism and, that to promote that end, Israel can rely only on itself.

Those who planned the campaign had no illusions that a single military operation, however comprehensive, could completely eliminate Palestinian terrorism. But they did expect to strike a serious blow against the infrastructure that sustains terrorism. That consists of the organizational frameworks and the individuals involved in terrorist acts and in the material support structures: command centers, weapons stores, explosives laboratories and weapon factories. A heavy blow against this infrastructure could significantly reduce the operational capacity of the terrorist organizations and the scope of terrorist attacks until the

infrastructure had been rebuilt. The method adopted was the temporary reoccupation of population centers in the West Bank where the infrastructure is located.

Operationally, this translated into encirclement of a city and the slow, cautious entry of infantry forces, supported by tanks -- wherever the width of approach routes allowed movement by tanks -- and by attack helicopters. This caution was intended to minimize casualties among Israeli forces and Palestinian civilian non-combatants. Wherever possible, the IDF also relied on firepower to reduce the risk to its troops. For each city, the IDF normally allocated one infantry brigade with support forces, though in particularly difficult cases it used two brigades.

In view of previous Israeli incursions, Palestinians had prepared for the possibility that IDF forces would re-enter Palestinian cities. Still, they were apparently surprised by the scope of the operation. Their preparations generally took the form of obstacles across transit routes and pre-located demolition charges that could be detonated on advancing forces. During the course of the operation, hundreds of such charges were used.

All in all, Israel's operational methods were quite effective. Ramallah, Tulkarm, Bethlehem, and Nablus were overrun fairly quickly with few casualties. Only in the Jenin refugee camp did



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the IDF encounter stiff resistance, and there it suffered relatively heavy casualties – about 20 killed.

In previous IDF incursions into Palestinian cities and refugee camps, most terrorists were able to flee the area of operations and later return after Israeli troops had withdrawn. That phenomenon minimized the resistance to the Israeli incursion but also thwarted the objective of the operation, because Israel was unable to capture those on its wanted list. This time, that phenomenon appears to be much less widespread. That may be partly due to the effective encirclement of areas of operation before the actual entry of forces, but the main reason is probably the broad scope and duration of the operation, which left fewer safe havens for terrorists to flee to. One such example involved the successful liquidation of a group of Hamas terrorists responsible for recent suicide attacks, including the massacre in the Park Hotel. They had fled from Nablus to the surrounding countryside, where they were located and killed in a firefight.

Thus far, “Defensive Shield” has accomplished most of its aims. Much of the terrorist infrastructure has been destroyed. And while precise figures are not yet known, it appears that hundreds of Palestinian gunmen have been killed and many others wounded. Thousands of suspects have been arrested, including hundreds known to have been involved in terrorist acts. Thousands of weapons have been seized. Most are rifles and handguns, but large quantities of weaponry banned by the Oslo Accords have also been discovered, including anti-tank rocket launchers, mortars and rockets. Dozens of explosives laboratories and weapons factories have been uncovered and destroyed. Headquarters have been located and documents and computers have been confiscated. Prisoner interrogations and captured documents have provided valuable information about terrorist organizations and their connection with the Palestinian Authority. Military pressure on the

terrorist infrastructure also led to a steep decline in terrorist attacks while the operation went on, as Palestinians focused on protecting themselves. The cost to the IDF has been about 30 killed.

The operation also had a political objective – to put pressure on Arafat by isolating him in his offices in Ramallah. The IDF took over the PA compound there and refrained only from entering the rooms in which Arafat and his aides were present. Evidence taken from the PA offices there reveals that a large proportion of terrorist attacks, including suicide-bombings (by the Tanzim – the armed wing of Arafat’s party, Fatah) took place with Arafat’s knowledge, direction and even financing.

If the IDF had more time available, it could probably accomplish even more. But regional and international criticism, American pressure and the impending visit of Secretary of State Colin Powell forced it to terminate parts of the operation earlier than planned. The need to accelerate the end of the operation may even have caused a rise in IDF casualties in the final days. It is also doubtful whether the isolation of Arafat accomplished anything apart from greater popular support for him among Palestinians and in the rest of the Arab world.

Assuming that intensified American diplomatic efforts will bring about some sort of ceasefire, it is likely that after Israel withdraws, the Palestinians will try to propagate a narrative of Palestinian success and Israeli failure. In that context, they will glorify the “heroic battle” in places where there was Palestinian resistance, and terrorist elements will try to carry out attacks as quickly as possible in order to prove that the operation failed. But the destruction of the terrorist infrastructure will make it difficult to renew attacks on a large scale. And Israel will probably adopt a policy of offensive action wherever it detects a rebuilding of the infrastructure. Persistent offensive pressure can help contain terrorism at lower levels than those prevailing before the start of “Defensive Shield.”