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THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CEASEFIRE

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On 13 June 2001, an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire brokered by CIA Director George Tenet came into effect. But while the Palestinians have taken some steps to calm the situation, it is premature to conclude that this ceasefire will be any more successful than were previous efforts to end the violence.

The current ceasefire is the outcome of a process that began when the Mitchell Committee presented its report at the end of April. That Report proposed a series of actions to end the crisis and revive the political process: an immediate and unconditional cessation of violence, a number of confidence-building measures, and the resumption of negotiations.

Both sides announced their acceptance of the Report but expressed reservations that implied their inability to deliver what was expected of them. The Palestinians showed no real intention to stop the violence, and Israel tried to evade a total freeze on settlement activity. In other words, both sides tried to score diplomatic points by accepting the Report but neither believed that it would really be implemented. Moreover, Israel demanded a "cooling-off" period of two months between the cessation of violence and the initiation of confidence-building measures, in order to test Palestinian compliance, while the Palestinians rejected anything more than a brief, symbolic pause between stages.

At the end of May, Israel tried to build on the momentum generated by its acceptance of the Mitchell Committee Report by declaring unilateral ceasefire, according to which it would initiate no military actions but would only respond to Palestinian attacks against Israeli targets. But the Palestinian reaction was altogether negative and the level of violence actually intensified. It reached a new peak on June 1, when a Hamas suicide-bomber blew himself up amid a group of youths at the entrance to a Tel Aviv nightclub, immediately killing 19 and wounding dozens of others. At that point, the Israeli Government decided on large-scale military action against the Palestinian Authority.

In fact, the June 1 bombing was a turning point that eventually led to the acceptance of the Tene Plan. Concerned that the bombing would precipitate a spiral of uncontrolled escalation, the United States and the European Union exerted massive pressure to avoid that outcome. The German Foreign Minister, Joschke Fischer, who happened to be in Israel at the time, played a central role in pressing Yasir Arafat to declare a ceasefire. But Arafat's declaration had a very limited impact on the ground and was apparently intended only to forestall Israeli military action. In fact, Israel stayed its hand and awaited the outcome of further US and EU intervention.

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The operational plan worked out by Tenet required both sides to cease fire immediately but assumed that some time would be needed, especially on the Palestinian side, before a decision could take effect. It therefore stipulated a transition period of 48 hours, only after which Israel would gradually restore normal conditions on the ground by opening blocked roads, lifting town and area closures and redeploying forces to the positions they held before the outbreak of the violence. The Palestinians were obliged to prevent all terrorist actions and arrest suspected terrorists. Tenet's plan also called for renewed Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation and a "cooling-off" period of six weeks.

There are several reasons to think that the ceasefire may actually work:

- For the first time, Arafat has actually given clear-cut directives to cease fire, even if some ambiguity remains concerning his real intentions;
- It transpires that Arafat does control the security organs and Fatah militias, although control is not absolute and some pockets of resistance exist;
- Arafat also has considerable influence over Hamas and Islamic Jihad and seems to have worked out some understanding with them that attacks inside Israel, at the present stage, do not serve Palestinian interests;
- The US and the EU have shown a willingness to exert real pressure and to invest resources in order to secure and monitor a relaxation of tension;
- Both belligerents show signs of fatigue. The Palestinians are frustrated at their inability to secure a political reward for the price they have paid. The Sharon Government is frustrated at its inability to deliver on its promise of personal security for Israelis.

At the same time, there are numerous impediments to a durable ceasefire:

- The Palestinians still have an interest in sustaining a certain level of violence in order to demonstrate to their own public that the *intifada* continues and to exert continuing pressure on Israel. This is reflected in various interpretations they give to the ceasefire, including the assertion that it applies only in areas under complete Palestinian control;
- Arafat is probably unwilling and unable to sustain a ceasefire over time if he cannot point to some political payoff;
- The Unity Government in Israel functions well as long as the violence continues, but when debate over policy begins, its internal contradictions will come to the surface and it will almost certainly be unable to agree on a course of action, especially one acceptable to the Palestinians;
- On both sides, there are elements not under complete government control. This is particularly true on the Palestinian side, where rebellious elements in Fatah, not to speak of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, are likely to reject the ceasefire sooner or later. The Israeli Government, for its part, cannot entirely control vigilante actions by settlers or others, and there has already been one case of a Palestinian killed by a Jewish underground group;
- Given the nature of the confrontation, it will be difficult to enforce a ceasefire without some effective, third party monitoring force. But such a force will be difficult to create because the US is not yet ready to invest the needed resources and Israel rejects the EU on the grounds that it is not an impartial actor.

In sum, it appears that there is some prospect of reduced violence for a limited period of time. But the path from a temporary respite to real detente and a return to negotiations is strewn with formidable obstacles, and there is therefore every likelihood that violence will again erupt at some point in the not-too-distant future.