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Editor: Mark A. Heller

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THE RESUMPTION OF ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN NEGOTIATIONS: BACKGROUND AND IMPLICATIONS

Uri Horowitz

Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

After three months of Israeli-Palestinian violence, the parties have gone back to the negotiating table. The current round of talks essentially proceeds from Israel's willingness to go beyond its position at Camp David in July, that is, from its willingness to move closer to meeting Palestinian demands. This development appears to confirm the dictum that domestic politics dictate Israeli foreign policy, a point that the Palestinian side seems to have understood and injected into its own decision-making process.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak's political distress and the threat to his tenure in office apparently convinced him that only a comprehensive agreement with the Palestinians – one that could be portrayed as an historical breakthrough -- would enable him to emerge victorious from the current election campaign. To accelerate the achievement of such an agreement, the Prime Minister was prepared to retreat from two public declarations: that negotiations would be resumed only after a significant drop in the level of violence (something which has not happened), and that the positions presented at Camp David constituted the limits of Israeli flexibility. International and regional pressures alone do not explain why Israel has retreated from these positions.

From the Palestinian perspective, the decision to return to the negotiating table is more complex. First of all, the last three months of violence have produced day-to-day hardships of unprecedented severity, far beyond those experienced in the previous *intifada*. For example, casualties, according to Palestinian sources, have reached 350 killed and over 10,000 wounded, far more than the total in a typical year of the original *intifada*. And the economic damage has been huge; estimates range from \$500 million (according to the United Nations Secretary General's special representative in the West Bank and Gaza) to \$1.5 billion (according to Palestinian economic sources), in an economy with a total GNP of \$5 billion. The local press has given extensive coverage to the growing material distress of Palestinians, including the inability of the PA and other employers to pay salaries. Moreover, there was no indication that Israel would be deterred from persisting in policies that produced these results.

Secondly, developments in the Arab-Islamic and international arenas have not subjected Israel to intolerable pressure. The Palestinians were particularly disappointed by their inability to secure the posting of an international monitoring or observer force. Moreover, the international media were beginning to pay less attention to

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events in the territories (which further reduced the pressure on Israel), and the governmental transition in the United States threatened to neutralize for some time active American involvement in promoting an agreement. Even the Arab states needed to be continually reminded of the need to honor their pledges of economic assistance.

Thirdly, there were growing signs of differences in the Palestinian political system over the emerging character of the *intifada*. On one side, all opposition elements and, more significantly, militants in *Fatah* (the largest movement in the territories and the one whose members are responsible for most of the violence) demanded a continuation and even escalation of the uprising. Some of them objected to the resumption of negotiations in the belief that the *intifada* had greatly strengthened the Palestinian position. They believed that, by continuing the violence and inflicting more casualties, they could replicate Hizbullah's success in south Lebanon and drive Israel out of the territories. On the other side, leading elements in the political "establishment" and the Palestinian Authority argued that this *intifada* (unlike the previous one) had not succeeded in mobilizing the Palestinian masses. Instead, it had turned into a largely military confrontation when the focus shifted to exchanges of fire with Israeli forces and the detonation of explosive charges aimed at Israeli civilians in the territories. These elements argued that it was easier for Israel to deal with a military *intifada*, both operationally and at the level of public relations. Thus, they stressed the need to focus on concrete political objectives and to pursue these in negotiations while the atmosphere created by the *intifada* was still favorable.

From the Palestinian perspective, three months of violence had not led to a decisive breakthrough. At one point, Yasir Arafat seemed to have little choice but to persist in an inconclusive confrontation and to hope for some positive developments in the Arab and international arenas or for some major Israeli mistake (such as an event with large numbers of casualties) that would lead to massive international pressure. But domestic developments in Israel revived the course of action advocated by the Palestinian "establishment." Arafat opted for that choice, though he apparently also decided that ongoing violence would continue to serve Palestinian interests. While endorsing new negotiations, he therefore ignored international appeals and refrained from acting to reduce the violence. The ability of the Palestinians to revive negotiations while continuing the violence is interpreted by them as an indication that Israel is acting under pressure, and this constitutes a major accomplishment for them.

If the current talks in Washington fail, there will be a waiting period while the political situation in Israel is clarified and the transition in Washington is completed. During that waiting period, it is reasonable to assume that violence in the territories will continue, though its intensity will fluctuate, and this implies the ongoing risk of severe deterioration due to some unanticipated event, even if the parties themselves have no interest in escalating the level of combat. Meanwhile, the Palestinians will probably try to revive the notion of sending an international force to the territories while maintaining the option of a unilateral declaration of statehood.