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TEL AVIV NOTES

AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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# WHO NEEDS A CEASEFIRE?

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Many observers were rather stunned on March 17 when the Palestinians, instead of begging for a ceasefire, began setting conditions for one. There would be no negotiations on a ceasefire, Yasir Arafat's top lieutenants told US special envoy Anthony Zinni, unless the IDF first withdrew from all Palestinian-controlled areas. There would also be no political meetings between the sides until such a withdrawal had been completed. The Palestinians agreed only to field-level meetings to coordinate Israel's pullback. In addition, they demanded that Israel not react to further acts of terror in the interim period between Israel's pullback and the final implementation of the ceasefire.

The Palestinian reaction was not what Ariel Sharon or the defense community had expected. For over three weeks, the IDF had reacted ruthlessly to an unprecedented wave of Palestinian attacks that left over 30 Israelis dead just in the first week of March. Israeli troops invaded Palestinian cities and refugee camps throughout the West Bank and Gaza, including areas so dangerous that even Palestinian security forces had previously refrained from entering. House-to-house searches were conducted for terror suspects, arms caches, and weapon and bomb factories. Tanks rumbled through the main streets of Ramallah, Jenin, Tul Karem, Bethlehem and dozens of other cities, villages and towns, destroying PA offices and other Palestinian institutions, including those directly associated with Arafat, his security apparatus and offices of state. Buildings within Arafat's own compound in Ramallah were destroyed, as were his personal offices in Gaza. By mid-March, the Palestinian death toll for the previous month stood at almost 300, with thousands more wounded.

On March 4, Sharon declared before the Knesset that Israel's strategy had changed and that it would now use all the strength at its disposal to "hit the Palestinians hard until they ask for a ceasefire." On the same day, he told political reporters that Israel "needed to increase the Palestinian casualty count in order to get them to beg for a ceasefire." In the context of Vice President Dick Cheney's tour of the region to cultivate Arab support for a possible attack on Iraq, Sharon's bellicose tone, coupled with the massive incursions of Israeli forces into Palestinian-controlled territories, convinced the Bush Administration of the need to dispatch General Zinni in another attempt to stop the violence.

Sharon's strategy, however, seems to have backfired. Instead of welcoming a ceasefire, the Palestinians, in their first meeting with Zinni on March 16, made even talks about a ceasefire

conditional on Israeli withdrawal from all Palestinian territories and an Israeli commitment not to launch reprisal raids against future Palestinian attacks. They refused to hold anything but low-level talks, and Jibril Rajoub, the head of West Bank Preventive Security, not only refrained from condemning the two terror attacks that took place in Kfar Saba and Jerusalem on March 17; he actually praised them. He also said that he had absolutely no intention of going after the perpetrators, whom he called national heroes.

There are several reasons for the Palestinian attitude toward a ceasefire. One is that Arafat does not exercise complete authority over those operating against Israel. The Tanzim, comprised mainly of local veterans of the first *intifada*, are nominally subordinate to him but view those who came with him from Tunis as corrupt. They, not the PA, are in control of the street, and they have taken the lead in military operations against Israel, including suicide attacks inside Israel proper. They have also become more vocal in terms of how Palestinian diplomacy should be handled, to the point of recently threatening Palestinian negotiators Abu Ala'a and Abu Mazen not to meet Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres unless their conditions were satisfied. Neither Arafat nor his chief lieutenants can dissociate themselves from the revolutionary fervor of the Tanzim, because the latest round of Israeli reprisals has galvanized the usually disparate and divided Palestinian militias into one force with one goal directed against one enemy – Israel.

Secondly, Palestinians are beginning to see cracks in Israeli society and self-confidence and perceive this as a reason to persist. Palestinian bombs have destroyed two reputedly invincible Merkava tanks, killing six crewmembers, and Palestinian gunmen, in several well-executed attacks, killed 21 soldiers in less than ten days. Despite all Israeli precautions and the massive resources devoted to security, Palestinian attacks have continued unabated; the two attacks on March 9 -- one at the Moment Café in Jerusalem, another in Netanya -- that left 11 dead and dozens wounded, came less than 24 hours after Sharon had announced that he was giving up on what until then had been a cornerstone of his policy: seven days of absolute quiet before negotiations could begin.

From the Palestinian standpoint, the longer the fighting continues, the weaker Israel becomes. Officers in the army are openly refusing to serve in the territories and are asking others to join them. Divisions within the Israeli polity are becoming deeper, with the Prime Minister, Defense Minister and Foreign Minister all openly arguing why the other is wrong. And while the massive Israeli reprisals inflict damage, the damage done to Israel's image internationally is great and growing greater each day.

Finally, with the upcoming Arab Summit on March 27, the best way to keep the Palestinian issue on the pan-Arab and world agenda is to keep images of Israeli tanks destroying Palestinian homes on the world's television screens, even while talks continue.

From the Palestinian perspective, there is little more that Israel can do to hurt them without violating the American-imposed prohibition on harming Arafat personally or destroying the PA. On the other hand, Palestinians apparently feel that the ongoing terrorism continues to deepen Israel's divisions and self-doubt.

As a result, they have little incentive to comply with Sharon's demand for an unconditional ceasefire or even with Zinni's request for one. The Palestinians believe that they are finally on a winning streak and have trapped Israel in a self-defeating dynamic: the more force it throws at them, the weaker it becomes. At this point, there is therefore little reason to expect that the Palestinians will view a ceasefire as something that truly serves their interests.

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