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ISRAELI OPTIONS AFTER "DEFENSIVE SHIELD"

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Two recent suicide bombings in Netanya and Rishon Letzion have highlighted the problematic legacy of Operation "Defensive Shield." Most Israelis believe that the Operation succeeded even beyond initial expectations. And it clearly struck a major blow at the terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank. Moreover, the Palestinian Authority emerged from the Operation without any real gains and is now going through one of its most difficult periods, exposed to heavy Arab and international pressure to undertake significant reforms and halt terrorism.

Military Options

Nevertheless, these two bombings emphasize what was clear even during the Operation: no operational accomplishments, however impressive, can entirely eliminate terrorism. The recent bombings, along with the fact that the security forces have prevented a series of other planned attacks, mean that Israel needs to prepare for further operations. Two main alternatives are under consideration.

The first is massive action in the Gaza Strip. Gaza was not targeted during Defensive Shield, and a large part of the terrorist apparatus is concentrated there. In fact, a major operation was about to be launched after the Rishon Letzion bombing, but it was postponed at the last minute due to American pressure and concern about large-scale casualties and political damage. Nevertheless, such an operation in Gaza remains

a live option, and the security establishment is signaling that it may still happen if there is another big terrorist attack, especially if the perpetrators come from Gaza.

The second option is an ongoing series of smaller-scale actions inside PA-controlled territory in both the West Bank and Gaza. Their purpose would be to continue striking at the terrorist infrastructure by using the intelligence collected during Defensive Shield. Such actions are now possible due to the greater political latitude the Israeli Government has meanwhile secured. But though Israeli forces now concentrate on limited missions, they can resort to much larger operations if there is an upsurge in the number and lethality of terrorist attacks.

Political Options

At the same time, the Israeli political system has begun to grapple with the political dimension of the crisis with the Palestinians. This development stems from two sources:

- the decline in the number of terrorist incidents following "Defensive Shield." This has stimulated thinking about political initiatives that could preempt a deterioration in the situation, while exploiting the PA's current weakness. Another stimulus has been greater international and Arab concern with a "political horizon." One expression of this concern is the Saudi initiative, some

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elements of which have elicited a positive reaction from party leaders in Israel.

- the intensified leadership contest in the two main parties, under the shadow of general elections to be held no later than in November 2003. This has obliged the contenders to put forward a political platform that will appeal both to their own parties and to the general public.

The leadership contest is particularly vibrant in the Likud, where Benjamin Netanyahu is mounting a strong challenge to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The latest venue for this contest was a meeting of the Likud Central Committee, convened at Netanyahu's initiative, in which Netanyahu offered a resolution that would preclude any political settlement based on a Palestinian state. The resolution was meant to tie Sharon's hands, since he had previously expressed his willingness to accept a state under certain rigid conditions. It was also supposed to complicate Sharon's effort to push the idea of a regional conference. Sharon, himself, was not particularly enthusiastic about such a conference, but he saw it as a way to respond to the Saudi plan and other international initiatives and to create the impression of some political momentum.

Netanyahu gained a technical victory in the Central Committee because it approved his resolution almost unanimously. In effect, however, Sharon emerged stronger from the confrontation because he was seen by most of the public as a genuine statesman who refused to compromise on his policies and insisted on retaining diplomatic maneuvering room. Polls published after the Central Committee meeting revealed that the resolution does not even reflect the position of many Likud voters, who are ready, in practice, to accept a Palestinian state. And immediately after the meeting, Sharon declared that the resolution would not stop him from continuing to be guided only by considerations of national interest.

A few days later, Labor's Central Committee met to consider several political initiatives raised by Party leaders in advance of a decision at the beginning of July. These proposals are part of Labor's leadership contest but they also stem from the need to offer the public some alternatives to the Likud position and to map out a clear posture before the next elections. The first proposal was put forward by Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, whose program included "security disengagement" and a permanent status agreement based on the Clinton guidelines of December 2000 and the Saudi initiative. The second idea, advocated by Haim Ramon, was unilateral disengagement, including the evacuation of a significant number of settlements, based on the assumption that there would be no valid Palestinian negotiating partner in the foreseeable future. Finally, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres proposed a comprehensive interim agreement with a Palestinian state in part of the territories. This would be negotiated with Yasir Arafat's entourage – though not with Arafat himself – and the moderate Arab states and the international community.

These three Labor proposals are conceptually distinct from the Likud's approach in that they all accept the principle of a Palestinian state and the need for major Israeli concessions, including the dismantling of settlements. At the same time, none of them seems feasible at this point. On the one hand, there is no agreed framework for negotiations with the Palestinians, especially if Arafat remains their leader. Besides, the gap between Israeli and Palestinian positions is huge and it is doubtful that it can be bridged in the current circumstances. On the other hand, it is difficult to point to any national consensus on a specific line of separation or disengagement. But the most critical reason is that ongoing violence will further reduce the chances either of resuming serious negotiations or of implementing any unilateral separation plan.