Managing the Conflict with the Palestinians: Israel's Strategic Options

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*I*n March 2002, suicide bombings and other forms of Palestinian terrorism resulted in the largest number of casualties incurred by Israel since the violence began in September 2000, with more than one hundred dead and hundreds wounded. In turn, these attacks, and in particular the horrific assault on the Park Hotel in Netanya on the first night of Passover, led the Israeli government to order the IDF in early April to launch the largest and most sustained incursion into the West Bank since the Oslo accords were signed in September 1993. The stated objective of operation "Defensive Shield" was to destroy the terrorist infrastructure in the territories: the organizational backbone, weapons and munitions stores, and the workshops where such *materiel* was prepared.

The operation was quite successful. While the arms that were discovered and confiscated are likely to be replaced sooner rather than later, Defensive Shield did result in the killing or arrest of key lieutenants behind the Palestinian violence, including many identified as having "blood on their hands." Particularly noteworthy in this context was the arrest on April 15 of Marwan Barghouti, leader of the Fatah/ Tanzim.

However, these gains came at a heavy price: in Israeli casualties sustained during the operation; in direct and indirect economic costs, including those associated with the call-up of almost 30,000 reservists; and in the negative international reactions, particularly in Europe, where a move by the EU to impose economic sanctions against Israel was

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only narrowly defeated. Israel's incursion was also perceived as threatening by key Arab leaders in whose stability Israel had a clear strategic interest: Jordan's King Abdullah and Egypt's President Mubarak. Finally, the operation was shown to provide no more than partial and temporary relief. Even as it progressed, the Palestinians managed to conduct two more suicide bombings: one in Haifa the other in Jerusalem.

A second objective of "Defensive Shield" – at least as conceived by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon – was to exert focused pressure on Chairman Arafat. However, it was not clear whether Arafat's isolation in Ramallah was intended to force him to leave the scene in favor of second-echelon Palestinian leaders, or merely to compel him to hand over to Israel terrorists who were hiding in his compound. In any case, the Israeli government failed to isolate Arafat: the fate of the Palestinian leader whom it had labeled earlier as "irrelevant" now became an international preoccupation.

The dramatic developments in March and April also led to a significant increase in US attempts to manage the conflict. In early March, the Bush administration sent General Anthony Zinni back to the region, in a new effort to explore whether previous U.S. plans to end the violence – the Tenet Plan and the Mitchell Report – now stood a better chance of being implemented. Concurrently, the administration orchestrated the passing of UN Security Council

Resolution 1397, "affirming a vision of a region where two States, Israel and Palestine, live side by side within secure and recognized borders." Then, on March 18-19, Vice President Richard Cheney, during a visit to Jerusalem, became the highest-level U.S. official to become involved in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking since the Bush administration came into office.

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Yet neither Cheney's visit nor his promise to return to the region if Arafat agreed to implement a cease fire were sufficient to bring about a cessation of hostilities. On the contrary, violence escalated further, leading to Israel's incursion into the West Bank. In turn, this propelled the Bush administration to send Secretary of State Colin Powell to the region, in an effort to stem Palestinian violence and to persuade Prime Minister Sharon to withdraw Israel's forces. Earlier, while expressing deep sympathy for Israel's difficulties in facing the terrorist attacks, President Bush made clear his preference that the Israeli forces deployed in

Palestinian cities be pulled back immediately – resulting in considerable tension between the White House and the Israeli Prime Minister.

Reactions in the Arab world and among other Islamic states to the escalating Palestinian-Israeli violence were varied. In the streets of Amman, Cairo, and other Arab and Islamic capitals, operation "Defensive Shield" led to large demonstrations, denouncing Israel and its primary backer – the United States. Saddam Hussein, never so eager to diminish the likelihood of Arab support for a US attack on Iraq, exploited the general sympathy for the Palestinians by offering to increase Iraq's financial assistance to the families of Palestinian terrorists, from US$10,000 to US$25,000 per family. Iran's conservative leaders joined the fray by encouraging Hizballah to shell Israeli civilian settlements, and to attack IDF strongholds along its northern border. Since the attacks could not be carried out without Syria's permission, they seemed to indicate that Damascus was willing to play brinkmanship, despite the associated risks of escalation.

Yet the risk that Palestinian-Israeli violence and the tension along the Israeli-Lebanese border might escalate into a regional confrontation induced the Arab League, led by Egypt and Jordan, to adopt a somewhat watered-down version of an initiative proposed earlier by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz. In a nutshell, the initiative offered to establish "normal" relations with Israel in exchange for its

complete withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders.

Thus, by Spring 2002, the parameters of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its regional and international environment have changed, presenting Israel with a number of strategic choices. In assessing these choices, an array of considerations must be taken into account. These include the willingness of the Israeli and Palestinian societies to sustain the present level of horrors; the constraints imposed by the US on the parties' freedom of action; the extent and manner in which Washington might be prepared to sustain its new efforts to stem the violence; and, the role that important regional powers – primarily Egypt and Jordan, but now also Saudi Arabia – might play in affecting these choices.

Essentially, Israel can choose among four sets of strategies. The first is to re-conquer the West Bank and Gaza, to crush the Palestinian Authority and to deport its leader, Yasir Arafat. In contrast to operation "Defensive Shield," this alternative implies a strategic decision to reverse the course of the Oslo process by reasserting control of the West Bank and Gaza. An even more extreme version of this choice calls for encouraging – if not compelling – Palestinians to emigrate, thus affecting the demography of the area from the Mediterranean to the Jordanian-Iraqi border.

The second set of strategies incorporates various forms of unilateral disengagement from the Palestinians. These range from limited schemes that call for the establishment of "separation zones" between the large population centers of the West Bank and the cities along Israel's coastal plain, to much more radicals plans calling for its unilateral withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines.

The third set of strategies calls for the resumption of bilateral diplomatic efforts to end the conflict. These are

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based on the hope that Israel's perseverance would lead the Palestinians to stop the violence and to amend their negotiating positions in a way that would make it possible to manage the conflict, if not resolve it, through diplomacy. The set ranges from Prime Minister Sharon's preference for a long-term interim agreement to a resumption of permanent status negotiations.

Finally, a fourth set – reflected in the spirit of the Saudi Initiative and the mid-April initiative to convene a regional peace conference – calls upon Israel to enter into talks with key Arab states, in an effort to examine whether a "regional" solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict might be found. It would require the important Arab states to become Israel's primary interlocutor, in effect assuming a role which until now was Arafat's exclusive domain.

Crushing the PA

The first option available to Israel is to adopt strictly offensive strategies, designed to destroy the PA and to reassert control over Palestinian-populated areas, and possibly to encourage or compel a massive departure of Palestinians from the West Bank. It is important to emphasize that this set of offensive strategies differs markedly from Operation "Defensive Shield." While the latter was designed to destroy the terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank, it was not intended to result in Israel's permanent conquest of the territories or to bring about the total demise of the PA.

The offensive cluster of strategies is based on three assumptions: first, that the Palestinians are opposed to peaceful co-existence with Israel either because they are ideologically and religiously determined to destroy the Jewish state, or because they are embedded in a culture of violence that makes peaceful long-term coexistence impossible. Second, that the PA – with Arafat at its helm – is the prime culprit in this clash, making its defeat an absolute imperative. And finally, that ultimately the most acute threat confronting Israel is demographic: the fact that the Palestinians already comprise a majority among all inhabitants under the age of 14

residing between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean.

In turn, the growing concern about demography stems from three sources of pessimism about the chances of peaceful coexistence with Arabs: First, the year and a half of increasingly brutal violence perpetrated by Palestinians against Israeli civilians has persuaded many Israelis that, if given a chance, an Arab majority would eventually result in the physical extermination of Israel's Jewish population. Second, expressions of solidarity by Arab Israelis for the Palestinians during the first weeks of the violence in September-October 2000 reawakened Israeli fears of a potential 'fifth column' of Arab citizens who identified with the Palestinian national movement and regarded the Jewish state as illegitimate. Finally, the propensity of Arab members of Knesset to express sympathy for Palestinian violence, even when such violence was exercised against innocent civilians, has reinforced the suspicion that Arab-Israelis identify with the Palestinian cause more strongly than with the State of Israel.

At a minimum, any offensive strategy would require the Israeli government to lift the one constraint that it continues to impose upon the IDF: namely, that it avoid a total collapse of the PA. Dropping this constraint would allow a permanent invasion of all territories handed over to the Palestinians in the framework of the Oslo process; the arrest of the PA's leaders and their subsequent expulsion from the country;

continuous house-to-house searches in an effort to confiscate all weapons, ammunition and explosives that the Palestinians possess; and finally, the implementation of various measures designed to encourage the departure of Palestinians, mainly from the West Bank but possibly from Gaza as well.

While internally consistent in their logic, these strategies currently face four main problems: First, they are

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opposed by many among the top ranks of Israel's defense community who doubt Israel's ability to manage the chaos that would follow the PA's downfall. Many among these ranks argue that the Palestinians are unlikely to accept Israel's reoccupation of the territories, and that such reoccupation would lead to continued Palestinian resistance on a much more violent and wider scale than that experienced prior to Oslo.

Second, the offensive strategies continue to lack support among the center and left of Israel's political landscape. Consequently, their adoption would quickly lead the Labor party to leave the government

and to actively oppose its new policy. Given his experience in the early 1980s, this scenario would be considered by Prime Minister Sharon as an absolute nightmare; if there is one lesson that he should have learned from the Lebanon debacle, it is that a policy associated with high levels of casualties cannot be sustained if backed by only half of the country.

The third problem confronting this option is that its adoption would violate the only constraint that the Bush administration continues to impose upon the Sharon government: namely, that it avoid measures that are bound to result in a complete decomposition of the PA. An Israeli decision to reverse the Oslo process by re-conquering the West Bank and Gaza would draw sharp responses from Washington, making President Bush's reactions to operation "Defensive Shield" seem mild by comparison. More broadly, Israel's critically important ties with the United States are likely to suffer, as these relations have always rested on America's sympathy for Israel as a state that shares its values of decency and social justice.

Finally, the possible destruction of the PA terrifies Jordan, whose leadership is convinced that the post-PA chaos in the territories would result in the flight of Palestinians across the river. Such emigration from the West Bank to the East Bank would tilt the demographic balance in Jordan decidedly against the Trans-Jordanians, thus threatening the stability of the regime.

While the problems entailed in destroying the PA and re-conquering the territories are difficult enough, these dwarf in comparison with the possibility that such an offensive would be accompanied by a focused attempt to "correct" the demographic balance by compelling Palestinians to emigrate. Internationally, such a move would be depicted as "ethnic cleansing," similar to Serbia's mass deportation of Muslims from Kosovo. It would provide critical ammunition to the Palestinians' call for internationalizing the conflict. Israel would be regarded by the international community as a pariah state, and its standing in international financial markets would plummet. All in all, the strategy could subject Israel to a variety of measures similar to those that led to the collapse of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, or to the end of the Milosevic era in the Balkans.

Unilateral Separation

The yearning for separation from the Palestinians stems from two assumptions which are shared by the proponents of destroying the PA and encouraging the emigration of Palestinians: the belief that Israel lacks a viable partner which whom a negotiated resolution of the conflict can be concluded, and the conviction that the greatest danger facing Israel is demographic.

By contrast, however, proponents of unilateral separation believe that the costs entailed in an offensive strategy such as outlined above would be prohibitive. Many of these proponents also reject the option of expelling Palestinians on purely moral grounds. Instead, they propose to address the demographic danger facing Israel by moving in the opposite direction: the regrouping of Israelis behind lines that require the inclusion of a minimum number of Palestinians. Thus, while many advocates of a strategic offensive propose to sustain Israel's character

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as a Jewish state by expelling as many Palestinians as possible, the proponents of strategic defense call for securing Israel's Jewish majority by moving *lines* instead of *people*.

While sharing these general dispositions, advocates of unilateral disengagement nevertheless differ with regard to the depth of Israel's proposed repositioning: From a limited attempt to establish "separation zones" that would comprise buffers for Israel's population centers but would leave Israeli settlements located beyond these zones intact, to radical plans calling for unilateral withdrawal to Israel's pre-1967 lines.

In between these approaches is the separation plan advocated by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak. It suggests that Israel withdraw from roughly 80 percent of the West Bank and retain the remaining 20 percent for eventual permanent-status negotiations. Thus, while the Barak plan shares with other separation plans the judgement that Israel currently lacks a partner for a negotiated resolution of its conflict, it is based on the hope that such a partner might eventually emerge, making an agreement with the Palestinians possible.

Upon a closer look, however, the set of defensive strategies seems to suffer from two basic problems: first, the more internally consistent the plan, the less likely it is to be adopted by Israel's present government. Hence, the implementation of any sensible separation plan would require a massive change in Israeli public attitudes, primarily regarding the future of the Israeli settlements. Yet the likelihood of such an attitude change is constrained by the limited extent to which the Lebanon experience – from which much of the political impetus for separation currently stems – is seen as analogous to Israel's predicament *vis-à-vis* the West Bank and Gaza.

From a security standpoint, limited separation plans that leave Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza intact do not address the main problems that motivate the quest for separation. This is clearly the case with respect to the proposed creation of limited "separation

zones." First, while these limited measures might provide some barrier to the infiltration of car bombs into Israeli population centers along the Mediterranean coast, they could be bypassed by suicide bombers and other determined terrorists who would continue to enter Israel through areas where such "separation zones" would not be created. It is noteworthy that most deadly attacks suffered by Israel in early 2002 were caused either by a lone suicide bomber or gunman. The ability of such individuals to penetrate Israel's main cities is likely to be affected only marginally by the proposed separation zones.

Second, the Palestinians' motivation to conduct terrorist attacks is unlikely to be influenced by the proposed zones. Securing the settlements would require the continued maintenance of roadblocks and other measures that make the daily life of Palestinians in the territories unbearable. The total number of casualties sustained by Israel is even less likely to be affected by the partial separation plans, since the settlements would need to be protected by various forms of perimeter defense and the access routes to these settlements would have to be patrolled. Indeed, the problems entailed in such defenses are likely to grow, since Palestinians are bound to redirect their energies toward attacking the settlements and the routes leading to them.

Hence, from a security standpoint, only plans that allow a real separation of the two populations – namely, those

that require a massive evacuation of settlements – would actually make sense. Yet it is highly unlikely that any of these plans would be adopted by Israel's present government. Would the Israeli public induce a change in leadership to allow the adoption of such a plan? How likely is Israel to experience such a change in public attitudes?

> **Negotiations with the Palestinians can be based on three approaches: a long-term interim agreement, a short-term interim agreement, or a resumption of final status talks.**

To induce such an opinion change, advocates of this strategy would need to persuade the public that Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon is a valid analogy to the situation it faces with respect to the West Bank and Gaza. But the validity of this analogy suffers two serious problems. First, in the case of Lebanon, Israel's withdrawal enjoyed an international legal framework: UN Security Council Resolution 425. This framework provided legitimacy to Israel's post-withdrawal deterrence policy. Once Israel was declared by the UN Security Council to be in full compliance with Resolution 425, it could legitimately announce that if

attacked it would exercise its right of self-defense by retaliating against those responsible – Lebanon's Syrian patrons. Yet no such international legal framework exists in the case of Israel's relations with the Palestinians. Therefore, in the latter case not only would such a withdrawal have to be conducted without any commitments from the Palestinians, it would also have to be implemented outside any international legal framework.

Second, since Lebanon had no claims on Israel proper, it could be argued with some conviction that by withdrawing from South Lebanon to the international border, Israel could close the "Lebanon file." In fact, this hope seems to have largely materialized: since Israel's withdrawal in May 2000, even Hizballah was largely compelled to limit its continued resistance to a very narrow area where Israel's legitimacy could be partially challenged: the Shaba'a Farms-Har Dov district, where Israel continues to occupy land based on a legally valid but politically dubious argument that it conquered that territory in 1967 from Syria, not Lebanon.

By contrast, the Palestinians' claim is not limited to the territory occupied by Israel since the 1967 war. They continue to insist on the Palestinian refugees' "Right of Return" and argue that the exercise of this right must be based on the "Right of Choice" – meaning that in principle Palestinian refugees should be permitted to resettle anywhere in Israel proper. As long as this position is not abandoned, it implies a demand on Israel's pre-1967 boundaries.

Why is this significant? Because in this case, mobilizing Israeli public support for unilateral separation would require that the public be persuaded to support a near-complete withdrawal from the West Bank – requiring the abandonment of tens of settlements – not only without any commitment from the Palestinians to refrain from attacking Israel after such withdrawal but also without any hope of achieving "closure," because the Palestinians would continue to harbor claims on Israel proper.

Back to Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations?

The third set of strategies calls for an immediate or eventual return to negotiations with the Palestinians. These include three possible approaches: First, Prime Minister Sharon's preference for an extended or long-term interim agreement. Second, an attempt to conclude a short-term interim agreement that would provide an effective bridge to renewed permanent status negotiations. And finally, an immediate resumption of permanent status talks.

This third set of strategies rejects the assumption upon which the offensive and defensive strategies are based: namely, that Israel lacks a partner for a negotiated resolution of the conflict. Instead, it assumes that the PA is a potential partner for such negotiations and that through a combination of resilience and offensive counter-terrorism operations, Israel could change the PA's calculus and persuade it to engage in serious negotiations with the Israeli government.

In addition, while sharing the concerns of advocates of the first two sets of strategies regarding the seriousness of the demographic threat, proponents of diplomacy also argue that this threat can be addressed by managing the conflict, if not by finding a negotiated resolution to it, and that a much more serious strategic threat facing Israel is the spread of weapons of mass

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destruction. Accordingly, proponents of the third set emphasize the need for an immediate de-escalation of hostilities, with a view to creating an environment more conducive to the Bush administration's plans to attack Iraq.

Yet serious problems are associated with each of the approaches advocated in the framework of the third set of strategies. From the Palestinians' standpoint, Prime Minister Sharon's call for a long-term interim agreement is unacceptable for a number of reasons. First, after a year and a half of intense violence and thousands of Palestinian casualties, the PA

leadership would not be able to explain why it abandoned the struggle in favor of an interim agreement that falls far short of realizing the Palestinians' national aspirations. Second, the Palestinians have grown wary of interim agreements: past experience, in their view, has shown that interim accords yield 'nothing but partial agreements, stipulating the implementation of previous unimplemented interim agreements.' Third, they are bound to distrust any Israeli commitment to continue the process beyond the agreed interim agreement; their assumption is that Israel will do everything possible to freeze the process once the interim phase is implemented.

Finally, PA leaders insist that any interim agreement that does not entail a massive Israeli withdrawal – including the removal of tens of settlements – will not change the daily life of Palestinians residing in the West Bank, particularly the extent to which they are subjected to the humiliation resulting from Israel's control of the roads connecting their population centers.

Yet just as a long-term interim agreement is a non-starter to Palestinians, the quick resumption of permanent-status negotiations is entirely unrealistic from Israel's perspective. First, it is difficult to imagine that Prime Minister Sharon could enter into such talks without losing support within his own party, the Likud. Even if he did gain support for such a move among some of his party's cabinet ministers, he would

likely witness massive defections among Likud Members of Knesset (not to mention among the members of the party's Central Committee, where former Prime Minister Netanyahu would likely present such negotiations as treason).

Second, the public mood in Israel is currently not conducive to renewed negotiations: a recent Jaffee Center poll described in Asher Arian's article in this issue of *Strategic Assessment* notes a sharp turn to the right. This is apparent in the diminished support for the Oslo process (35 percent, down from 58 percent last year); in reduced support for the establishment of a Palestinian state (49 percent, down from 57 percent last year); in diminished support for transferring to the Palestinians control over the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem (40 percent, down from 51 percent last year); and in the public's willingness to abandon settlements outside of large settlement blocks in the framework of a permanent status settlement (49 percent, down from 55 percent last year). Such hardening is also apparent in the respondents' own testimonies: 41 percent of them stated that the violence had made them less willing to make concessions (by contrast, only 10 percent said that the events made them more willing to make such concessions).

Finally, there is no evidence that the Palestinians are likely to approach the suggested negotiations with any greater flexibility than they have shown during previous diplomatic efforts to end the conflict. Here, the main question is whether the strategic disaster experienced by the Palestinians during the past year and a half of violence would lead Arafat to reconsider his positions, particularly regarding the refugees' Right of Return. While there is evidence that some among the second echelon of PA leaders – notably Sari Nusseiba – are willing to reexamine these positions, to date there is no evidence that Arafat is about to join this effort.

> **The regional approach calls upon Israel to enter into talks with key Arab states, to explore the possibility of a "regional" solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.**

If a long-term interim agreement is a non-starter from the Palestinian standpoint and a quick resumption of permanent status talks are an impossibility for the Israeli side, what might be a reasonable case scenario for replacing violence by bilateral talks? Under existing circumstances, a minimally successful negotiations process must have the following attributes: First, it must be embedded in a clear road map, leading from an immediate and effective cessation of hostilities, through partial interim agreements that would seek to stabilize the cease-fire and insure its sustainability, through the conclusion of an Israeli-Palestinian Peace Treaty, to the eventual signing of an agreement to end the conflict – the latter addressing the historical and religious dimensions of the two peoples' dispute. Thus, while implementation would be phased, the process itself would not be open-ended; the general contours of all phases would be agreed upon before implementation was to begin.

Second, the cornerstone of the process would be the suggested peace treaty. The treaty should bring about an end to Israel's rule over the Palestinians and address all political, territorial, and security dimensions of the conflict. While leaving open two issues for a later End of Conflict Agreement – the Temple Mount\Haram a-Sharif and the Right of Return – it would contain an iron-clad commitment to resolve these issues by diplomacy, not force.

Finally, the process would stipulate mechanisms for increasing the probability that the commitment to non-violence be kept. These would range from monitoring by US observers of the two parties' compliance with the agreements reached, to an end to all forms of incitement in the media and school textbooks, thus eradicating all manifestations of a "culture of violence" that seems to have plagued the conflict for too long.

While the logic of such a diplomatic approach may seem impeccable, by mid-April hopes for any kind of renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations seemed farfetched. Simply put, a year and a half of intense violence – and

particularly the wave of suicide bombings in early 2002 leading to Israel's operation "Defensive Shield" – had created a gap in trust between the PA leaders and the Israeli government that seemed too wide to bridge, at least in the foreseeable future.

The Prospects for a Regional Approach

A fourth and final strategy – reflected in the spirit of the Saudi Initiative and the mid-April proposal to convene a regional peace conference – calls upon Israel to enter into talks with key Arab states, in an effort to examine whether a "regional" solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict might be found. In a nutshell, this approach requires that these Arab states become Israel's primary interlocutor, usurping what was until now Arafat's exclusive domain. While this does not exclude the possibility that the PLO leader would continue to negotiate on the Palestinians' behalf, he would no longer be their sole representative.

The regional approach seems to be based on a number of judgements: First, that if left to their own devices, the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships could well embroil the region in catastrophic escalation. Indeed, Arab leaders, notwithstanding their sympathy for the Palestinians, have increasingly come to regard Arafat as something of a loose cannon: insensitive to their concerns, and willing to embroil the entire region in violence, regardless of the consequences.

Second, the Bush administration has identified the lack of support of moderate Arab governments as an important cause for the failure of previous efforts to end the Palestinian-Israeli dispute. Moreover, the administration has made its displeasure public, reprimanding the governments of Saudi Arabia and Egypt for their long-standing preference for standing on the sidelines. As a result, these two governments have been increasingly propelled into a more active role.

Finally, the saga of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations has made it clear that important dimensions of the two peoples' dispute cannot be solved except in a regional context. This is certainly true regarding Jerusalem – many in the Middle East view the Haram a-Sharif/Temple Mount as an Arab/Islamic issue, not a Palestinian one. This is also the case with the Palestinian refugees – a just solution to their plight cannot be found without the participation of Arab states. Thus, it makes perfect sense for Arab states to assume responsibility for the efforts to address these issues.

In mid-April, the idea of convening a regional peace conference seemed to have won the enthusiasm of Israel's Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon. If true, this should be seen as an important *volte-face*; traditionally, Likud leaders have opposed such meetings ardently, arguing that the Arab leaders would simply 'gang up' against Israel.

At the time of writing, it remained far from clear whether the idea of convening a Middle East peace conference would take off. Clearly, such a meeting can comprise a strategic option for Israel only if key Arab leaders would be willing to play a truly constructive role during the conference as well as in its aftermath, when the difficult challenge of implementing its results would have to faced. Thus, these leaders would have to abandon their reflexive tendency to support every Palestinian demand and to adopt a less obstructionist role, if the "regional approach" is to prove a real option for Israeli policy.