

## Assessing the Israeli-Palestinian Balance of Power

Mark A. Heller

### *In This Edition*

#### **Assessing the Israeli-Palestinian Balance of Power**

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#### **Unilateral Declaration of a Palestinian State: Three Scenarios**

Uri Horowitz

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Shlomo Brom

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Ephraim Kam

### **Introduction**

The Camp David II Summit adjourned without a framework agreement on permanent status and left no firm indication of the future course of Israeli-Palestinian relations. That the parties engaged, for the first time, on highly sensitive issues such as Jerusalem, borders and refugees and diverged from what had been previously perceived as “red lines” suggested that continued diplomatic efforts held out the promise of future convergence. At the same time, the waning political capital of President Bill Clinton and Israeli and Palestinian domestic opposition to suspected or anticipated concessions meant that overcoming the remaining obstacles would be an arduous task. Moreover, the parties were operating under the shadow of a Palestinian commitment to a unilateral declaration of statehood on or after September 13, if a

permanent status agreement was not negotiated by then. As a result, there was also a possibility that the parties, whether by choice or loss of control over events, might find their dialogue supplemented, or even replaced, by violence.

Whether the aftermath of Camp David leads to agreement or confrontation, it is clear that the assets of both sides will be brought to bear. In order to assess the ways in which these assets might affect the outcome of Israeli-Palestinian interactions, political and military, it is necessary to examine the overall balance of power between the two sides.

### **Israeli and Palestinian Assets**

Most material indicators weigh the balance very heavily in Israel's favor. The Palestinian Authority directly controls several fragments of territory totaling only about 1450 sq. km. in

(cont'd on p. 3)



## Assessing the Israeli-Palestinian Balance of Power (cont'd)

To overcome the disputes, both sides are interested in exploiting the remainder of President Clinton's term in the White House by engaging his commitment to and involvement in the process, in order to reach agreement on the principles of a permanent agreement. **The issues which remain disputed** are the most sensitive, touching on the national aspirations of both sides. On the other hand, the results of the summit indicate that additional barriers have fallen, gaps have been narrowed, and both peoples – Israeli and Palestinian – will have to assimilate the necessity for compromise and to absorb the concrete concessions to which their leaders have already agreed.

The four articles in this issue present different angles of the expected developments which will result from the understandings achieved at Camp David and from the agreements which are likely to be signed in the future. The article by **Mark Heller** examines the various assets each side possesses and the extent to which they can be actualized during the course of negotiations, when they are renewed. **Uri Horowitz** presents three scenarios, which might play out if a Palestinian state is unilaterally declared.

The other two articles address the security context of the establishment of a Palestinian state. **Shlomo Brom** examines the threats, which might be posed to Israel by a Palestinian state, and what the response to such threats would be. **Ephraim Kam** presents the fundamentals of the Palestinian security philosophy and their implications.

Gaza and the West Bank (in Area B – another 1400 sq. km. in the West Bank – responsibility for security is shared with Israel). By contrast, Israel extends over 20,700 sq. km., and the bulk of Area C in the West Bank (about 3400 sq. km.) is under exclusive Israeli security control. The PA has civilian responsibility for a population of about 2.9 million; Israel's population is double that. The PA has a total GDP of about \$4 billion (much of it stemming from foreign contributions or earnings of workers in Israel and transfer of duties and taxes on goods and services purchased via Israel) and a GDP per capita of about \$1,380; Israel's GDP is close to \$100 billion and its per capita GDP is almost \$17,000. The PA has a police/para-military force of about 34,000 men, armed mostly with personal weapons. Israel's standing forces number over 186,000 (in addition to a para-military Border Police force of some 7,600), equipped with a broad range of advanced land, sea and air weapons. Israel also controls the air space over the West Bank and Gaza, the maritime space of Gaza, and the entry and exit points for people and goods entering or leaving the PA or moving between its constituent parts. The PA is also dependent on Israel for a wide variety of financial services and utilities, including electricity and telecommunications.

These facts not only give Israel an obvious advantage in the event of any military confrontation. They also

confer an important diplomatic advantage, in the sense that Israel controls most of the stakes in the dispute and therefore has a less urgent need to change the status quo. Since the peace process essentially involves Palestinian demands on Israel (with respect to territory, refugees and other issues), a stalemate implies continuing Palestinian inability to achieve their objectives, hence, a clearer Palestinian incentive to change the status quo, if not by coercion, then through agreement.

Finally, Israel has something of a political advantage in the international arena. The Arab and Muslim states provide unequivocal declarative backing for the Palestinian cause, and there is considerable international sympathy elsewhere for Palestinian demands. But the strong support that the Palestinians previously received from the former Soviet bloc, China and India has faded as those countries have normalized their relations with Israel. And under the Labor government, Israel has rehabilitated its political ties with most of the leading European powers. Most critically, Israel enjoys a special relationship with the strongest actor on the global scene, the United States. This relationship is based on close links at the governmental level and on intimate ties between the civil societies of the two countries, including, but not confined to, the American Jewish community, and it has produced major political, economic and strategic benefits for Israel.



However, Israeli preponderance in most categories of the balance of power cannot be directly translated into usable strength either in negotiations or in a military confrontation. For one thing, not all of Israel's military power can be applied in the kind of low-intensity conflict, e.g., urban warfare, most likely to prevail in the event of renewed violence. For another, the very imbalance of power produces domestic and international pressures on Israel to refrain from taking maximum advantage of its superiority. As the stronger party holding most of the stakes in the conflict, Israel is frequently expected to show political generosity or military self-restraint. Moreover, Israel is unable to isolate its bilateral relationship with the Palestinians from broader regional or global interests. In particular, it must be cautious about applying what is seen as excessive force, pursuing an excessively rigid negotiating policy, or allowing conditions in the West Bank and Gaza to deteriorate to the point where it might endanger relations with the broader Arab world, especially Egypt and Jordan. After all, the Palestinians hold the key to a central Israeli objective in the peace process — the legitimization and normalization of Israeli relations with the Arab world — and this is a major Palestinian asset that provides a counterweight to many of Israel's advantages in the overall balance of power. For these reasons, Israel was never able to exploit its superiority in order to impose a

political settlement consistent with whatever aims the government of the day may have had, and this underlying reality will certainly not change.

Finally, Israeli policy is not informed with the same sense of purpose and determination as is Palestinian policy. This is not simply a function of the different systems of government prevailing in Israel and the PA. It is also the result of different kinds of domestic divisions of opinion. Israeli governments are typically subject to domestic pressure from two contradictory directions: opposition to concessions and demands to show more flexibility for the sake of peace. The Palestinian leadership, by contrast, is constrained only by opposition to any compromise; there is no real "peace camp," either among the Palestinians or in the rest of the Arab world, pushing the leadership to be more forthcoming.

True, not all the Palestinian assets are constant or directly applicable to the pursuit of national goals either. International support for the Palestinian cause fluctuates with the perceived "reasonability" of Israeli and Palestinian positions; it has tended to decline following the election of a Labor-led government in Israel in 1999, and particularly following the Camp David summit, when Palestinian maximalism was seen outside the region as being largely, if not exclusively, responsible for the failure to reach an agreement. Moreover, apart from financial contributions,

international support, especially from the Arab and Islamic world, is largely confined to declaratory solidarity that cannot be exchanged into diplomatic and/or military currency. In fact, such solidarity, rather than helping to promote the achievement of Palestinian objectives through negotiations, can actually act as an additional constraint in the pursuit of creative solutions to such questions as Jerusalem or the refugees.

### **The Applicability of Political-Material Power**

In short, the applicability of Israeli and Palestinian assets to diplomatic and military confrontations very much depends on the political context in which those assets are mobilized. In the short term, most post-Camp David scenarios can essentially be reduced to a single possibility — the resumption of negotiations. The contextual variables are whether negotiations precede or follow a declaration of Palestinian statehood, and whether they are preceded, accompanied or followed by violence.

But nothing in the current or prospective balance of power foreshadows an agreement on terms more favorable to the Palestinians than those rejected at Camp David. For one thing, the Israeli government has been weakened, for reasons not exclusively connected to the peace process, and its capacity to make further concessions is probably exhausted. Indeed, there is little likelihood of domestic pressure



on the government to be more forthcoming, since even in the peace camp there is considerable disillusionment with the Palestinian position at Camp David. The same is true with respect to the American administration, which has publicly vented its frustration at Yasser Arafat's negotiating posture and would be loath to suggest greater Israeli flexibility, even if the American political calendar, i.e., impending elections and the end of President Clinton's tenure in office, did not make that impractical. Moreover, the threat/promise of a Palestinian declaration of statehood has lost much of its political potency. President Clinton has publicly warned against such a move and threatened that it would provoke a reappraisal of American-Palestinian relations. In that context, the prospect of European recognition would be less certain, and a declaration might even be economically counterproductive.

The PA currently benefits from American and European financial assistance because of its special status in the peace process (and stands to gain more from a permanent status agreement) but Palestine, as a state, would not meet many of the established criteria for such benefits — it is too rich. Given these considerations, the added political value of recognition by Arab and Islamic states (most of which already have accredited ambassadors to the State of Palestine) is marginal. In short, as a mere symbolic act, neither the

threat of a declaration of statehood nor an actual declaration is likely to improve the negotiating balance of power from the Palestinian perspective. In fact, a declaration might even have a detrimental effect to the extent that it deprives the Palestinians, as a stateless people, of a claim on the world's conscience.

Of course, there is a possibility that the negotiations might be accompanied by violence in order to change Israel's policy calculus, or that a declaration might be accompanied by active measures to "exercise

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sovereignty" in areas still under Israeli control. Despite their massive inferiority in the means of violence, the Palestinians were able to use the intifada to good political effect before the start of the peace process. But the major reason for that was the character of the confrontation, between an unarmed Palestinian civilian population under occupation and an Israeli military force representing a society unsure of its own purposes and

constrained to limit the intensity of its response.

In the current circumstances, a repeat of the intifada is unlikely, since most of the Palestinian population is under the jurisdiction and control of the PA. Instead, a confrontation would involve an identifiable Palestinian governmental structure and quasi-military force, on the one hand, and an Israeli military force representing a society basically persuaded that its government had gone as far as could be reasonably expected in pursuit of a peace agreement, on the other. In those circumstances, there would be fewer domestic constraints (and probably fewer international ones) in bringing Israeli military superiority or other mechanisms (e.g., closures) to bear. Indeed, the most likely domestic Israeli political outcome of a major flare-up would be the formation of a National Unity Government far less inclined than the current one to make political concessions.

Thus, there is little prospect that the application of violence by the PA could produce enhanced gains, either directly or indirectly through influence on the negotiating calculus of Israel. As long as the PA remains in effective control of the territories over which it has jurisdiction, its optimal approach would therefore be to avoid violence, resume negotiations, and postpone any irrevocable unilateral actions. But whether this approach would actually promote a political agreement, rather than just buy time, would depend on



the extent to which the Palestinian leadership also changed its negotiating policy. Despite Israel's advantage in the balance of power, there is little it can do directly to promote such a change. Instead, it would come about, if at all, as a result of a changed assessment by the leadership of domestic, regional and international factors. Of these, the most important is domestic.

Having reestablished his credibility at Camp David as a vigorous defender of the Palestinian cause, Yasser Arafat might find it easier in a new round of negotiations to defend certain concessions he was previously unwilling to make, especially if they were accompanied by claims that Israel, too, had moved beyond its

previous positions. Arafat's maneuverability might also be enhanced if other Arab governments, at America's urging, supported any concessions he made, or at least refrained from criticizing them (though Clinton's influence over Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the waning days of his presidency is not much greater than his ability to sway Israel). Finally, other international actors might influence the domestic Palestinian debate. By indicating that they supported the American bridging proposals and would not endorse actions aimed at more ambitious goals, they could strengthen those voices urging acceptance of an attractive, if flawed, agreement resulting in a Palestinian state with its capital in

Jerusalem and some combination of resettlement and compensation for the refugees rather than continuing adherence to a purist position that would produce no practical achievements at all.

In the absence of such changes, there is little likelihood of an agreement despite Israel's advantage in the balance of power. And if stalemate results in the outbreak of another round of large-scale violence, it is likely to set back progress toward an agreement and perhaps even jeopardize some of the gains that the Palestinians have already made. But even in that case, there is no chance that either side can force the other to surrender.

## Summary

- The overall Israeli-Palestinian balance of power is heavily weighted in Israel's favor.
- Nevertheless, Israel's advantages cannot all be directly translated into usable diplomatic and/or military strength, which is why it could not impose a settlement in the past and will not be able to do so in the future. The usable strength of both sides depends on the political context in which assets are mobilized.
- Most current post-Camp David scenarios involve the eventual resumption of negotiations, before or after a Palestinian declaration of statehood, and before, during or after the outbreak of violence.
- Nothing in the balance of power foreshadows an agreement significantly more favorable to the Palestinians than that rejected at Camp David.
- The prospects of an agreement, therefore, depend on a change in Palestinian negotiating policy.
- That depends on a change in the domestic Palestinian debate, which Israel, despite its power advantage, can do little to promote. Arab and international actors have greater potential influence on the Palestinian domestic debate.
- Absent such a change, the most probable development is a continuing stalemate, perhaps leading to large-scale, but politically inconclusive, violence.