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THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: THE NEXT ROUND

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In a farewell newspaper interview last week, outgoing IDF Chief of Staff Lt-Gen Moshe Yaalon predicted that the Israeli disengagement from Gaza, if not accompanied by some ongoing political initiative, will be followed by another violent stage in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yaalon calls this next stage “the second war of terror.”

While such predictions of another round of violence are increasingly widespread, it remains unclear why such a distinction should be made between this next stage and the *intifada* that erupted in the fall of 2000. After all, since the outbreak of the *intifada*, violence has not ceased to be the main axis around which Israeli-Palestinian relations revolve. Any peaceful interludes since then have been brief and marked by expectations of an imminent resumption of Palestinian terrorist attacks and Israeli military counter-measures. The *hudna* (ceasefire) agreed on by Palestinian organizations in June 2003 (during Abu Mazen’s tenure as Prime Minister) lasted only a few weeks. And the *tahidia* (relaxation) negotiated between Hamas and Fatah in March 2005 (following Abu Mazen’s election as Chairman of the Palestinian Authority) produced only a relative decline in terrorist activity; Hamas activists continued to fire rockets from the Gaza Strip into the western

Negev, perhaps to signal their determination to ensure that Israel withdraws under fire, and PA security forces refrained from any serious action to disarm Hamas.

Moreover, no authoritative Palestinian element has ever officially declared the end of the *intifada*. The PA and Hamas are neither willing nor able to disconnect ongoing violence from the developments that led to Israel’s decision to disengage from Gaza lest that reinforce the Israeli position that the disengagement is an end in itself and not necessarily a prelude to additional withdrawals in the West Bank. True, the PA does claim that it is trying to contain the violence in order to reinforce its image as a viable political partner. But that does not translate into a declaration that the *intifada* is over. Such a declaration will not be forthcoming until there are political-territorial gains of the sort that give the PA enough public support to underpin determined measures to suppress an opposition bent on building its own public standing through the use of more violence.

Of course, the disengagement may well affect the two central characteristics of the Palestinian struggle. The first is the geographic focus of the violence, which may shift from Gaza to the West Bank in the hope that the Gaza model will eventually be applied there, as well. The second

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is the priority Hamas attaches to the military and civilian dimensions of its activity, which may shift in favor of the latter, at least in Gaza.

When the first *intifada* erupted in 1987, Hamas was uncompromising in its reliance on violence. It did not even consider the possibility of restraining itself, because in those early years of its crystallization, the movement saw no chance of advancing its standing in the Palestinian political system through the kinds of civilian activities pursued by the Muslim Brethren before then. In the second *intifada*, by contrast, the Hamas leadership was confident enough to exploit its capacity to limit terrorist attacks as a tool to put pressure on the Fatah-controlled PA. Like the PA itself, Hamas learned to promote its aims both by launching attacks and by suspending them, depending on prevailing circumstances at any given time. Controlling the timing of attacks became an important dual-use mechanism for Hamas in the domestic Palestinian competition, just as it served Fatah as a means of improving both its domestic and international standing.

The Israeli disengagement will produce a clear and fundamental distinction between the circumstances prevailing in Gaza and those in the West Bank. At least in the initial period after the disengagement, Hamas is therefore likely to restrain its terrorist actions in and from Gaza. For one thing, the credit it will have amassed for precipitating or accelerating Israel's withdrawal will be a useful asset in solidifying its political hegemony there. For another, anything that provokes massive Israel retaliation or even a reoccupation of the area will be a political liability given the fatigue of the general population and its desire for some semblance of normalcy.

As a result, Hamas will almost certainly focus its terrorist activity ("military operations") on the West Bank in an effort to accelerate a similar Israel withdrawal there. And if it does, there is

little that the PA can do to restrain it. Not only has the PA failed to unify its various security agencies or institutionalize cooperation among them; it is in constant fear of being held responsible for any bloodshed stemming from an attempt to disarm Hamas. The Fatah leadership will therefore continue to repair the damage the *intifada* has done to the PA's international standing and claim that it is doing what it can in areas still ultimately under Israeli control, and Hamas will continue to strengthen its domestic standing by combining violence in the West Bank with municipal good works in Gaza.

This does not mean that the age of violence in Gaza will be over after the disengagement. Post-disengagement political paralysis will serve as a strong incentive to renewed violence. Moreover, Hamas' terrorist infrastructure will remain a potent means of deterring any attempt to limit its capabilities or influence because of the fear that any effort even by reformed PA security forces to weaken Hamas (with the aim of eliciting international pressure on Israel to withdraw further from the West Bank) will be met by more terrorist attacks. Hamas' terrorist potential in Gaza will also be reactivated in response to any initiative to deny it a formally guaranteed position in the Palestinian political system.

Indeed, Hamas leaders have already responded to Abu Mazen's decision to postpone the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council by threatening to revoke the *tahidia* agreement and to resume the violence even before the disengagement begins. That threat was immediately dramatized by an escalation of rocket fire into the western Negev. The "next round" of violence therefore appears to be an inevitable phase of the current *intifada*, and it will almost certainly not be the last round.

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