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## IS A THIRD INTIFADA INEVITABLE?

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The recent upsurge in violent incidents has been accompanied by predictions by Israeli politicians and security officials that another round of violence is certain to erupt, either before or immediately after the Israeli disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank, and that it may well be even more severe than those that preceded it. According to this deterministic school of thought, a third intifada is inevitable and nothing can be done to prevent it. However, a closer examination of the common interests of the dominant streams on both sides of the conflict suggests that another bloody clash is not foreordained.

After all, both the Palestinian *tahdia* (informal agreement to maintain calm) and the Israeli disengagement – the two initiatives that currently dominate the agenda – were undertaken unilaterally by the respective parties without any conditionality or demand for reciprocity from the other side. Nevertheless, they both serve the interests of both sides, and that can serve as the basis for future understandings, particularly if further measures are agreed bilaterally.

The potential to avoid a resurgence of large-scale violence is grounded in the fact that both sides are undergoing transformations and agenda shifts that could reinforce the current calm. On the Palestinian side, the most significant of these

changes affect Hamas, which is in the process of consolidating new leadership following the elimination by Israel of most of its veteran leaders, including Sheikh Ahmad Yassin. This process is unfolding at a time when the movement has gained widespread popularity and has engaged in a process of politicization in order to capitalize on the credit it gained from its years of struggle against Israel. That manifests itself in more pragmatic rhetoric on the part of its spokesmen, in participation in municipal elections and the intention to contest the Legislative Council elections, and in the willingness to join the PLO. Furthermore, although Hamas has thus far rebuffed the invitation by Abu Mazen to join the Palestinian Authority, even that position may change after the parliamentary elections.

Perhaps even more significant is the fact that Hamas, which led the terror campaign during the Oslo years and was a central force in the second intifada, has generally acted to preserve the informal truce; the few mortars and rockets it has launched into southern Israel since the agreement on *tahdia* were apparently intended to establish what Hamas spokesmen have described as a “balance of terror,” perhaps inspired by Hizbullah’s rhetoric and action since the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000,

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which they claim is necessary in light of alleged Israeli violations.

These changes pose a serious dilemma for Hamas, because they force it to maneuver between a worldview that rejects the possibility of any dialogue with Israel and a reality that might require recognition of Israel's right to exist alongside a Palestinian state.

Of course, there are other developments that could contribute to greater political instability. Fatah, which for years constituted the central pillar of Palestinian politics, is also experiencing a leadership and generational change. Yasir Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) is widely perceived as a transitional figure, and many among the younger generation already want to replace the veteran leadership still dominated by "outsiders" who came to the West Bank and Gaza with Arafat. Some of these Fatah dissidents are backing up that demand with threats to disrupt strategic developments by violating the *tahdia*, notwithstanding public support for it. In fact, most recent terrorist acts have actually been the carried out by marginal Fatah elements as a way of asserting their individual or collective demands, or else of splinter groups financed by Iran or Hizbullah. True, elements of Islamic Jihad are also operating on the fringes of Palestinian politics in an effort to erode that movement's commitment to the *tahdia*. But even Islamic Jihad, whose political weight among Palestinians is minimal, recognizes that it will eventually have to accept the parameters dictated by the mainstream forces in Palestinian politics or else risk being repressed; one of those parameters may turn out to be a Palestinian-Israeli dialogue carried out by political – not military – means.

As far as Israel is concerned, it, too, is undergoing major changes, of which the most significant is a growing acceptance of the need to define its final borders and gain international recognition of Israeli sovereignty over parts of the Land of Israel, even if the cost is territorial

concessions and retrenchment back to something approaching the pre-1967 lines, either unilaterally or through agreement with the Palestinians.

The sensitivity attached to these agenda shifts on both sides, against the backdrop of the fundamental issues that underlie the protracted conflict, clearly creates opportunities that marginal elements might exploit to interfere with the disengagement and, even more, to complicate the possibilities of dialogue afterward. And the ability of the Palestinian leadership to prevent terrorist attacks on Israel after the disengagement (perhaps with the cooperation of Hamas, especially if it joins the Palestinian Authority after the elections) will have a critical impact on the ability of the two sides to coordinate future bilateral moves. If the Palestinian leadership respects the expressed preference of Gaza residents for a period of tranquility and security after the deprivation and suffering of the past few years, it is entirely possible that at least Israel's southern border will remain quiet, even if the other dimensions of the conflict remain unresolved.

Ongoing communication between the leaderships and security establishments, with the aim of coordinating and managing the conflict, will facilitate the non-violent implementation of disengagement despite efforts by marginal elements to derail it. No less importantly, it will reduce the chances of renewed confrontation in the sensitive period immediately afterward.

In any case, predictions that another round of large-scale violence is inevitable do not realistically reflect either the strategic balance between Israel and the Palestinians or the interests of the two sides as perceived by their respective mainstreams. Nor would a third intifada produce better outcomes for either side than could be achieved by political means.

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