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Is Israel on the Verge of a Third Intifada?

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The Palestinian protests and the clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces of recent weeks, prompted by the incarceration of prisoners released in the Gilad Shalit deal and the situation of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails have led to speculation whether Israel is on the verge of a third intifada. However, this question should be raised not only because of recent events, but also due to the basic state of relations between Israel and the Palestinians and the crisis of government in the Palestinian Authority.

The political process is in a deep freeze, and it is hard to envision a political horizon that enables a permanent settlement leading to the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state. It is unreasonable to think that the Palestinians in the West Bank will agree to continue to live under Israeli occupation with no time limit. It is more reasonable to assume that there will be a Palestinian uprising every certain number of years, and just as there was a first intifada and a second intifada, there will be a third intifada, and so on.

The Palestinian government in the West Bank, based on the Fatah movement and headed by President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, suffers from a severe crisis. The government has a serious problem with legitimacy, stemming not only from the failure to hold elections on time but also from the loss of its political agenda. Since the start of the Oslo process, it has been driven by the idea of establishing a Palestinian state through political negotiations with Israel. The lack of prospects for an effective political process leaves Fatah and the PLO without an agenda and in a position of weakness vis-à-vis its bitter political rivals from Hamas, who offer a different model, based on non-recognition of Israel and achievement of Palestinian sovereignty through violent resistance. Hamas can claim that its model justifies itself, particularly given its success in opening the Gaza Strip and gaining political legitimacy since the *Mavi Marmara* incident, the Shalit deal, and Operation Pillar of Defense. The upheavals of the Arab spring and the rise to power of Islamic regimes strengthen Hamas's position vis-à-vis its Fatah rivals. Abbas attempted to keep his head above water by asking the UN General Assembly to recognize a Palestinian state. However, this now appears to have been a rather pathetic step when it is clear to the Palestinian public that recognition brought no real change and the situation is only getting worse.

The Palestinian Authority is also suffering from an economic crisis because of a decline in financial aid. The improvement in its economic situation since the second intifada ended has ceased. Israel's decision to punish the PA for its appeal to the UN for statehood recognition by delaying transfer of the tax monies that Israel collected for it has exacerbated the crisis. The salaries of public servants, who constitute a large percentage of the work force, have not been paid on time, and this too undermines the political support for the PA government and the loyalty of its personnel. It is hard to expect Palestinian security forces to fulfill their duties and maintain security cooperation with Israel when it is not clear what the purpose is on a national level (there is no political horizon) or on a personal level (they are not receiving their salaries).

Against this backdrop, the concern that a specific incident – such as the traffic accident in the first intifada or Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount in the second intifada – will lead to an uncontrollable escalation and a large scale Palestinian uprising comes as no surprise. It is also clear that the type of incident that would lead to such a development cannot be foreseen.

Nevertheless, even if we presume that the continued deadlock will ultimately provoke a Palestinian outburst and we recognize the difficulty in predicting the psychology of the masses, at this point it does not appear that the current events will bring about large scale escalation that in retrospect will be called the third intifada. There are several reasons for this.

The first reason is the nature of the Palestinian leadership and its policies. Abbas is committed to a policy of non-violence and adherence to the political process, and President Obama's upcoming visit lends additional urgency to this policy. Abbas is also aware of the danger of riding the tiger called the angry masses. He understood this early in the second intifada, and made every effort to move Arafat to stop it. For this reason, unequivocal orders have been given in recent weeks to the Palestinian security apparatuses to prevent any escalation. There has also been an effort to control the demonstrations fully through the involvement of Fatah activists in organizing and controlling them. It is even possible that their involvement is the result of an understanding on the part of the Palestinian leadership that a certain (not too high) level of demonstrations serves their interests because it demonstrates the danger of the continued political impasse to the US administration and to the other political actors.

While the question then is whether the Palestinian Authority could lose control, developments thus far indicate that the PA remains in strong control over the protests. First, the scope of the demonstrations is relatively small, the number of participants is not more than in the hundreds, and there is no trend toward escalation. It appears that the main reason is that the idea of returning to the chaos of the intifada does not appeal to the Palestinian public. It is only in recent years that the Palestinians in the West Bank have

returned to a certain level of normalcy, and they are not eager to return to the crisis years of the previous decade. A long enough time will have to pass for the memories to dim and the number of young people – the engine of any uprising – who have not experienced it themselves grows. Second, in spite of the economic crisis in the PA, the security forces have maintained their integrity and their loyalty.

Even if this analysis suggests that escalation into a third intifada is apparently not imminent, three important additional conclusions emerge. The main conclusion is that it is essential to seize the opportunity of President Obama's visit and the formation of the new government in Israel in order to restart the negotiations. It must be clear that this is a genuine political process that aims to produce tangible results, since both the Palestinian public and the Israeli public have had their fill of promises and disappointments and shun a process whose entire purpose is the process itself. The Palestinians will also likely refuse to enter into a process for the sake of the process.

The second conclusion is that the peace process must be flexible and adaptive: all eggs cannot be placed in one basket of a permanent settlement, which was the case when Prime Minister Barak went to Camp David. Failure in such a case means a complete lack of progress, which could have serious repercussions. Additional channels for progress must be developed, such as partial agreement measures and even coordinated independent measures by the two sides that will support negotiations on a permanent settlement and prevent it from reaching a crisis. At the same time, it is also important to build support in the region for the process, with an emphasis on the central role of Egypt and Jordan.

The third conclusion is that the existence of a Palestinian partner for the political process and for a stable security situation is not an independent variable that is not contingent on Israel. The partner must be built. In recent years, Israel has adopted a policy of weakening its Palestinian partner, even in public statements by figures such as the former Foreign Minister Lieberman. It is difficult for Israel to complain now about the crisis with the Palestinian Authority and about the consequences for Israel of the weakening of the Palestinian leadership when Israel itself has contributed to it.

