

The Current Conflict between Israel and the Palestinians: The Options Available

Background

The events, clashes, and exchanges of fire witnessed over the past few weeks in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem have brought Israeli-Palestinian relations to a new juncture. For the majority of the Palestinian public and leadership, the deterioration came as a total surprise. However, for those at the extreme poles of Israel's political map, these events had been anticipated well in advance.

At one political pole, we find those who have always been convinced that there is no Palestinian "partner" to a final and enduring peace. To them, the current confrontation is a direct outcome of a premeditated policy, contrived by a Palestinian leadership that, in the absence of either the capacity or the willingness to sign an agreement, has chosen to escalate the conflict. According to this position, the violence is meant to inaugurate a drawn-out and uncompromising struggle against the State of Israel.

At the second political pole, others are persuaded that as long as the prevailing Israeli policy toward the Palestinians remains inflexible, that massive construction, including the founding of new settlements, continues in established settlements, and that harsh attitudes colour behavior toward the Palestinian people, the danger of violent conflict will persist. According to this position, if Israel does not offer the Palestinians a fair proposal that rests, inter alia, on agreed-upon compliance to UN Resolutions 242 and 338-as expressed in the frameworks of the peace treaties with Egypt, and with Jordan, which include Israeli withdrawals and exchange of territory-frustrated Palestinians are likely to push toward an explosion.

The scope of this report is not amenable to an in-depth analysis of the roots of the current conflict, or to answering the question of how we arrived at such a state. Instead, we will try to examine here the options available to both parties in light of the current eruption of violence.

Both parties now find themselves at a watershed that offers a choice among three main options: (a) steady escalation of the violence, a route that may ignite a regional conflict; (b) continued but controlled struggle; and (c) gradual de-escalation in tandem with resumption of the political process that can culminate in either a new interim agreement or a Final Status Agreement.

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The Military Option - Steady Escalation of Violence

The military option is based on a linear model according to which each party gradually upgrades its use of force in response to the moves made by the other party. Thus, rocks lead to rifles, rifles to Molotov cocktails, Molotov cocktails to machine guns, machine guns to shooting at settlements, shooting to battle helicopters, helicopters to attacks against settlers, attacks to tank barrages, tank barrages that might lead to terrorist attacks within Israel, and terrorism to a reconquest of Area A, including Palestinian cities. At its conclusion, this chain of events may usher in a deplorable situation resembling the war in Lebanon. This option may also impose the stationing of UN forces, against Israel's will, along the 1967 borders, without reaching any agreement. A worst-case scenario predicts the forced withdrawal of all settlers and IDF forces from the territories in a manner analogous to Israel's exit from Lebanon.

Escalation may also increase the settlers' participation in violent actions taken against Palestinians, and of the Palestinians against the settlers, as well as a vicious, drawn-out conflict waged by militias, equivalent to the pattern established in Algeria or Kosovo. Alternatively, the organised Palestinian "police" may enter the arena to face the IDF and the settlers. It is worth noting here that with very few exceptions, organised Palestinian forces have not, to date, actively participated in the violence; that is, their weapons have not yet been used against Israel. Escalation may, therefore, bring about a deterioration that could easily drift toward a wider war involving other Arab countries, with all that such a situation implies.

Nevertheless, we should note that advocates of a more vigorous military response to Palestinian provocations are convinced that Israeli restraint, or a controlled response that avoids painful injuries to Palestinians and their property, encourages the Palestinians to face the outcomes of continued violence without fear. Thus, only a strong response, they believe, will check the continuing deterioration.

The Middle Option - Controlled Struggle with Interim Agreements

Proponents of this option are convinced that the failure of Camp David is located in what appear, in present circumstances, to be irreconcilable gaps. They believe that only another round of violence and the eruption of a crisis will provoke the parties to reach a better understanding of the dangers inherent in continued hostilities, and of the necessity of reaching a compromise. Each party has wedged itself into a corner while attempting to wear the other party down and, at the same time, cautiously guarding against unrestrained escalation. This option represents, in effect, a middle ground that can be sustained for several months or more. Obviously, this situation can shift in the direction of the military option, whether in response to a decision made by one of the parties to intensify the conflict and induce a decisive conclusion, or as a result of an unwanted and unintentional loss of control. Alternatively, there is a possibility that if circumstances change, the two parties will attempt to realise their some portion of their goals by embracing the political option. In this case, if the level of violence declines as well, an agreement can be devised that while not permanent, at least represents a long-lived interim agreement.

If either of the two possibilities is realised, the assumption will be reinforced that no Permanent Status Agreement can be reached in the near future because Arafat and Barak are either incapable or unwilling to sign a document that will end the conflict under conditions acceptable to both parties. Following this line of reasoning, Arafat will not sign a document containing items that are considered among certain circles in Israel as minimal conditions pertaining to the security of Jerusalem, the settlements, and the right of return. Barak, on his part, will not sign an agreement that includes concessions even more far-reaching than those offered at Camp David. The obvious recourse remaining would be to return to the system of progressive stages, as fixed within the framework of written or verbal long-term interim agreements.

Supporters of this option believe that in the absence of a written agreement, unilateral steps have very limited chances of success. However, a real danger exists that such conduct may lead to renewed outbreaks of violence and the erection of hostility-fed barriers if not open war.

One scenario belonging to this category of options is that of unilateral separation, according to which the Palestinians declare the establishment of a state and Israel takes actions to detach itself from the newly declared entity. Grave dangers are inherent in such measures, primarily due to the fact that separation may be accompanied by the prolongation of the Palestinian uprising against the occupation, waged in the area controlled by the Palestinian Authority as well as in areas under Israeli control in the West Bank and Gaza.

The Political Option - A Final Status Agreement

Adherents to this option are convinced that a political settlement was and remains the nucleus of any solution to the historic conflict between the Zionist Movement and the National Movement of Palestinian National Movement, as well as to the regional conflict between Israel and the Arab states. Like previous wars, a future war will not resolve the issues at the heart of the conflict. If these issues remain open, Israel will forfeit possibilities for a secure existence in this complex and troublesome region.

Apparently, as negotiations toward the Final Status Agreement approached, the two parties moderated their positions. Like the Israelis, the Palestinians, who had travelled far from their traditional, fundamental positions-positions that Israel formerly could not accept-adjusted themselves to the needs of the other party, so much so that some Palestinians refer to these adjustments as a “painful compromise”. This confirms the basic assumption, held by supporters of the political option, that the Palestinian position on the eve of Camp David was based on their, the Palestinians’, readiness to reach a true and lasting peace agreement. Their acquiescence was guided by the following principles: establishment of an independent, sovereign, and demilitarised Palestinian state; recognition of Israel within 1967 borders, including modifications based on one-to-one exchanges of territory; Jerusalem to continue to be one, open city in which the capital of Israel will be declared in the western part of the city and in the Jewish neighbourhoods in the eastern part, while the capital of Palestine will be established in the eastern, Arab part of the city; with respect to the Old City and the holy sites in its vicinity, a special arrangement would be constructed that would guarantee, inter alia, that the *Hara’am A-Sherif* / the Temple Mount-now administered by the Palestinian Authority’s Ministry for Religious Affairs-would come under some form of Palestinian sovereignty; the Palestinian refugee problem would be resolved within the framework of a Palestinian state accompanied by measures such as rehabilitation, compensation, immigration, and a declarative though limited implementation of the right of return to Israeli territory, whose application would be substantially empty of any practical significance; as to the settlements, the majority will be annexed to Israel and come under full Israeli sovereignty, while others will be allowed to choose to remain under Palestinian sovereignty; finally, Israel will have the right to station troops in Palestinian territory for a fixed period of time without infringing Palestinian sovereignty.

From a different perspective, the strategic goals of all the Israeli governments that have participated in the political process with the Palestinians have never been made clear. In simple terms, Israel’s policy has always been “give them as little as possible”. Fundamental goals were never accurately defined, and negotiators were never informed in advance of any “red lines” beyond which they could not negotiate. In essence, with the scrapping of the dream of a “Greater Israel”, Israel’s goal should have become reaching an agreement that would protect the nation’s vital interests and initiate an Israeli-Palestinian peace that would radiate toward an Israeli-Arab peace.

For Israelis repudiating this option, these political overtures involve concessions so great that they may engender internal divisions sufficiently serious to incite fear of a civil war. Furthermore, they argue, such steps will not bring peace but the opposite, that is, they will demonstrate to Arafat and the Palestinians that violence and terror pay. They predict once Arafat fully exploits the political mechanisms, he will revert to terror and violence. At that point, they continue, Israel will be confronted with a Palestinian state within the heart of its territory. They likewise stress that Oslo was meant to conclude in the establishment of a Palestinian state only at the end of a mutual trust-building process after Israelis were convinced that such a state would be friendly toward Israel instead of serving as a forward base for enemy attacks.

On the other hand, proponents of the political option view the recent violent confrontations in Palestinian territory as an intense, bloody reminder, an implicit warning of what might occur if the two parties do not choose a political path to peace. The basic principles expressed of a Permanent Status Agreement between Israel and the Palestinians have not changed, and they continue to carry the seeds of a true and lasting peace that will bring an end to the conflict. Supporters of this option are convinced, therefore, that the Israeli government should enter into negotiations based on the American draft proposals. These actions should not, however, lead the Palestinian leadership and people to believe that Israel is attempting to impose a unilateral agreement. Such an impression would only arouse further confrontations. In any event, failure of the political option would still leave the middle-range option available as an alternative.