



The Palestinian Intifada: An Effective Strategy?

James F. Miskel

Talleyrand is reported to have said that when the Bonaparte government in France had an aristocratic critic kidnapped from a neighboring country and then summarily executed it was worse than a crime, it was a blunder. That is to say, the official responses of neighboring governments and outrage among the educated classes in neighboring states were so pronounced that France lost ground with respect to its foreign policy objectives. Can the same point be made about the Palestinian leaders who promote violence against Israeli citizens? Has this strategy, which has defined the second *intifada* (uprising) that began in 2000, proven to have been a blunder? With the change in the leadership of the Palestinian movement following Yasir Arafat's death, this is the moment for reassessing the Palestinian strategy.

Acts of organized violence against civilians are considered to be crimes under national and international law. Under certain circumstances, they may also come under the heading of terrorism, which is generally defined as violence that purposely sows fear among the general public in order to achieve a political purpose. In the Middle East, the immediate purpose often appears to be tactical—to provoke Israeli retaliation and thereby undermine political support by moderates in both the Palestinian communities and Israel for negotiations—but the tactical objectives serve strategic goals, and it is against these goals that a strategy must be measured. For Israelis, the primary strategic goal is physical security. The various Palestinian factions have different goals, but all agree that the minimum set of strategic

goals includes: a Palestinian state with standing in the international community, satisfaction of the claims of Palestinian refugees who fled or were driven from their homes during the 1948 and 1967 wars between Israel and neighboring states, and a general improvement in personal security and economic opportunity for the residents of the Palestinian state.

There are strong differences of opinion among U.N. member states about whether the definition of terrorism should include such acts of violence by Palestinian extremists as suicide bombings in Israeli shopping malls, the firing of small rockets into Israeli towns, and ambushes of settler families traveling in the West Bank. Many U.N. members believe that these particular acts by Palestinians do not fall under the heading of terrorism because they are the only form of resistance available to an oppressed people. According to this view, Palestinian violence against Israeli civilians is no different in moral terms than the violent acts carried out by the Jewish resistance against British mandate officials in the late 1940s. Or, for that matter, the guerrilla tactics of the American revolutionaries or Garibaldi's Red Shirts.

A variation of this view is that if Palestinian violence against Israeli citizens is to be classified as terrorism, Israeli violence against Palestinians should also be so classified. Thus, if Palestinian suicide bombers are to be considered terrorists, so too should the Israeli security service leaders who authorize attacks against alleged extremist leaders on the streets of Gaza or who commission the bulldozing of homes and other

buildings in neighborhoods from which Palestinian extremists operate. The opposing view holds that Israeli incursions into West Bank communities and actions against violent extremists cannot be classified as terrorism because they are carried out by legitimate law enforcement and national security agencies.

Two points are worth noting with respect to the debate in the United Nations about the definition of terrorism. One is that the debate will not end until there is peace in the Middle East, and maybe not even then. The other is that there is a consensus—even among those who argue against classifying Palestinian violence as terrorism—that Palestinian violence is indeed designed to sow fear among the citizenry of Israel, just as one of the objectives of Israeli attacks in the West Bank and Gaza is to make the Palestinian people fear future reprisals.

Violence creates the most fear when it is perceived by the general public to be indiscriminate.¹ That is to say, when the general public perceives that the average citizen is about as likely to become a victim of violent attack as a policeman or a soldier. The spectacular violence of the September 11 attacks in the United States and the September 2004 attack in the Russian city of Beslan notwithstanding, terrorist groups usually rely upon relatively low levels of violence to generate fear. For this reason, as Robert Kupperman, a noted security analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Darrell Trent, a former diplomat and fellow of the Hoover Institute, argued 25 years ago, terrorism is “theater” in the sense that the point is the reaction of the audience, not the number of casualties or the amount of destruction that the violence causes.² The emphasis on audience reaction has persisted. A recent State Department report, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, notes that noncombatants are specifically targeted precisely because their victimization will have a more disquieting effect on

public opinion than attacks on police stations and military bases.³

This is clearly one of the guiding principles behind much of the violence undertaken by Palestinian extremists. Indeed, few Israeli victims of Palestinian violence are unlucky bystanders who just happened to be near a police patrol or guard post when an attack occurred. The Israelis who have been killed or maimed by Palestinians over the past three and a half years are not, by and large, collateral damage; they are the targets. The car bombers who locate the explosives near Israeli restaurants and shopping malls know that the victims are most likely to be women, children, and the elderly. Suicide bombers target Israeli buses because they are widely used by ordinary citizens. In this respect, the violence perpetrated by Palestinians differs from the violence perpetrated by insurgents in places like Iraq and Colombia, where there is a greater emphasis on undermining state authority by destroying infrastructure or attacking government officials. Zionist violence during the last years of the British mandate in Palestine was also aimed more at the occupiers than at civilians.

For the purposes of evaluating the effectiveness of the strategy of fear-sowing violence, however, it is necessary to set aside the question of whether Palestinian suicide bombers are terrorists. The label attached to the perpetrators and their acts is not relevant to an evaluation of the strategy *qua* strategy. Questions about what to call Israeli reprisals and about the respective morality of both approaches are also irrelevant in this respect. The strategy of violence has undeniably created publicity for the Palestinian cause, but this publicity does not necessarily equal progress toward achieving Palestinian goals. What is relevant in evaluating the strategy is the amount of tangible progress that has been made toward achieving Palestinian statehood, satisfying Palestinian refugee claims, and improving economic

and personal security conditions for the residents of the West Bank and Gaza.

Repression-Provoking Violence

The third goal is the easiest to evaluate. If anything, economic and personal security conditions for Palestinians have only worsened since the beginning of the second *intifada*. The state of the West Bank and Gaza economies is particularly bleak. Per capita gross domestic product in the West Bank and Gaza has been declining on average by 5 percent annually since 1992.⁴ Half the population lives below the poverty line, and personal incomes have decreased by more than 30 percent in the past four years. In the 1980s, the unemployment rate in the West Bank and Gaza was about 5 percent, by 1995 it was over 20 percent, and in 2002 it was nearly 40 percent.⁵ The news on the personal security front is no better. Numerous Israeli incursions into the West Bank and Gaza and the inability or unwillingness of the Palestinian Authority to exercise police functions have all prevented improvements in the personal security of the average Palestinian citizen.

A World Bank study conducted at the request of both the Palestinian Authority and the government of Israel in June 2004 concluded that the principal cause of the economic collapse in the West Bank and Gaza was attributable to Israeli security measures. The specific measures that have had the greatest negative effect on the Palestinian economy are “closures,” or restrictions on the movement of goods and people, not only between the West Bank and Gaza and the neighboring states of Israel, Jordan, and Egypt but also within the West Bank and Gaza.⁶ The closures interrupt trade flows, block access to export markets for Palestinian goods (according to the Palestine Trade Center, as late as 1998 more than 90 percent of exports from Palestinian enterprises in the West Bank and Gaza were to Israel⁷), impose higher costs on those Palestinian enterprises that are allowed to operate, and

prevent workers from the West Bank and Gaza from working in Israel. The Palestinian Authority estimated in December 2002 that between 120,000 and 140,000 Palestinian workers had lost their jobs as a result of Israeli closures, at a loss of more than \$3 million per day to the West Bank and Gaza economies.⁸

Incursions by Israeli security forces have also had a negative effect on the Palestinian economy. These incursions damage or destroy homes, business establishments, and infrastructure. Moreover, the general level of violence in the West Bank and Gaza, and the corruption and inefficiency in the Palestinian Authority are powerful disincentives to foreign, and perhaps even domestic, investment.

The Israeli incursions and security measures were an entirely predictable response to the violence of the *intifada*. No government would stay in power long if it failed to take steps to protect its civilian population from such an assault. Israel's incursions and closures are not only logical steps, they may have been the only steps that Israel could realistically have taken. More draconian measures, such as mass arrests or more extensive military operations, might theoretically have been possible, but Israel would have risked retaliation by neighboring Arab states. And such measures would have been unpopular with the Israeli public and with Israel's main ally, the United States.

It is fair to assume that Palestinians understood that Israel was virtually certain to resort to incursions and closures (or to implement similar measures) in response to violence against Israeli civilians. Since such security measures have predictable economic consequences, it follows that the perpetrators must have known that the Israeli security measures they were provoking would damage the Palestinian economy. This means that declines in the living standards of West Bank and Gaza residents must be considered as intended consequences of the strategy of anti-Israeli violence.

The strategic rationale for imposing economic costs upon one's own people recalls an aphorism attributed to Lenin before the Bolsheviks took power in Russia: "The worse it is, the better it is." What Lenin meant, and what the Palestinian extremists evidently believe, is that the worse living conditions become, the better are the prospects for groups espousing revolutionary change. Lenin believed that this held true even when the economic losses were provoked by the revolutionary group. Worsening economic conditions, he argued, gradually eroded public support for the authorities and increased sympathy for the groups challenging the status quo. Since there has never been much political support for Israeli authorities among the residents of the West Bank and Gaza or in neighboring Arab countries, the Palestinian strategy of provoking economic deprivation through violence must have been aimed at eroding public support inside Israel for the repressive measures of the Israeli government and political support for Israel in the West, particularly in the United States.

In other words, the strategy is based on the assumption that the center of gravity in the Palestinians' struggle is public opinion in Israel and the United States. Given that the balance of traditional military power heavily favors Israel and is unlikely to shift in the Palestinians' favor (the strategy's economic consequences virtually guarantee that militarily Palestine will lag far behind well into the future), this assumption is well grounded.

Worsening economic conditions in the West Bank and Gaza have generated sympathy for the Palestinian people and eroded international support for Israel, as evidenced by the anti-Israeli tone of numerous U.N. General Assembly resolutions. But for the U.S. veto, the Security Council would also have been unrelentingly critical of Israel and its policies in the West Bank and Gaza. Two measures of international concern over the plight of the Palestinian people are the con-

tinuing high levels of foreign aid to the Palestinian Authority and the West Bank and Gaza communities, and funding for relief agencies that serve Palestinian refugees. The United States has given \$1.3 billion for Palestinian economic development and relief since 1993, and in 2004 the combined value of European Union and U.N. aid to the Palestinians approached \$600 million.

Under the apparently Leninist lights of the Palestinian extremists, the deteriorating economic and personal security conditions in the West Bank and Gaza—and the concern they generate overseas—are the strategy's means, not its ends. As such, their thinking goes, they ought not to be considered strategic costs (which would invite a net assessment of the strategy's costs and benefits, and might lead to doubts about the strategy itself). They should instead be considered as signs that the strategy of repression-provoking violence is working.

If one accepts this reasoning, the true measure of the strategy's success must be progress toward Palestinian statehood and the satisfaction of refugee claims. However, such small progress has been made on these fronts that the strategy should be considered a failure even on its own terms. Although there is near universal recognition that the Palestinian refugees deserve some form of compensation, no substantial progress has been made toward settling the claims of Palestinians who lost property in Israel proper and in the West Bank and Gaza after the 1948 and 1967 wars. While there has been some progress toward statehood since the Oslo Accords of 1993, no genuine progress has been made on the central issue of the status of Jerusalem, and much of the progress toward statehood that was achieved as a result of Oslo and the Wye River accords of 1998 has since been reversed. Under both sets of accords, administrative control over many West Bank communities and Gaza was to be transferred from Israeli occupation authorities to the Palestinian Authority. This was assumed by many in

the United States and Israel to be a stepping stone toward the establishment of a Palestinian state in Gaza and most of the West Bank. Indeed, the Bush administration's Roadmap for Peace of 2002 built upon the steps taken under the Oslo and Wye River accords to begin transferring administrative authority to the Palestinian Authority on a town-by-town basis. The roadmap explicitly committed the United States to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the transferred land. However, the violence associated with the second *intifada* has left the Palestinian Authority in shambles. It remains to be seen whether Arafat's death represents an opportunity for the Palestinian Authority to rebuild itself, or will only result in internal dissension among Palestinian factions.

There is one area where Palestinian violence does seem to have influenced Israel's behavior in such a way that Palestinian statehood may be achieved, but the results are both limited and mixed. Violence against Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Gaza has caused a reduction in the number of settlers in isolated locations far from the border with Israel. From the Palestinian perspective, the smaller the number of Israeli settlers, the better. A larger influx of settlers across the West Bank and Gaza would have changed the ethnic and political makeup of the territory and—as the political controversy in Israel over the proposed withdrawal of all the settlers from Gaza demonstrates—would have made it virtually impossible to effect an end to Israeli occupation. The Central Intelligence Agency estimated the number of settlers in Gaza to be “more than 5,000” as of July 2004; other sources put the number at 7,500–8,000.⁹ This small group and its supporters in Israel, particularly in the Likud Party, constitute a formidable political force in Israeli politics; a substantially larger settlement community in Gaza would presumably present an even more formidable problem. All of the settlers in Gaza reside in isolated and vulnerable communities. Approximately

2,500 are concentrated in a single community, another 900 in a second community. The remaining 1,600–4,600 settlers are sprinkled among very small hamlets of less than 500 residents.¹⁰ Protecting these hamlets is very costly, and there already is a separation barrier, or security wall, in place to protect against terrorist incursions into Israel.

On the other hand, a substantially larger settlement community has existed for years in the West Bank, where there are an estimated 350,000 settlers, including in East Jerusalem, collected in larger, more self-sustaining communities.¹¹ Several of the West Bank communities are eight and ten times the size of the largest settler community in Gaza and roughly 75 percent of the settlers live in communities adjacent to Israel proper and commute daily to work inside Israel.¹² It is difficult to imagine Israel ever willingly relinquishing its hold on these large, close-in settlements, all the more as they become ever more integrated with the Israeli economy.

A unilateral withdrawal by Israel from Gaza may well represent a step away from both the peace process and the dream of a single Palestinian state. An Israeli withdrawal from Gaza could lead to the eventual development of a stand-alone, mini/semi-state that is politically independent of whatever government structure evolves in the West Bank. Ideological differences between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which dominates the Palestinian Authority, and Hamas, the dominant political force in Gaza, increases the likelihood of a permanent separation of Gaza from the West Bank if Israel withdraws unilaterally. The majority of the PLO factions seek a two-state solution in which the Palestinian state (the West Bank and Gaza) would be free of Israeli settlers. Hamas, a well-organized and violent Islamic group that exerts considerable political power in Gaza, seeks a one-state solution, that is, an Islamic Palestinian state in historical Palestine, which is to say

in Israel as well as in Gaza and the West Bank.¹³ An independent Gaza would not represent a political setback to Hamas and might even give Hamas greater status and strategic independence. However, separation of Gaza from the West Bank would be a serious political setback to the Palestinian Authority and PLO factions that favor the two-state solution. The result could be something like a three-state solution, with a strong Israel and two weak Palestinian semi-states that could be dealt with separately and, perhaps, played off against each other.

A Cruel Irony

There is a cruel irony in the continuing reliance of many Palestinian leaders upon violence as a vehicle for achieving the goals of statehood, the settlement of refugee claims, and (a distant third in terms of priority) economic prosperity in the West Bank and Gaza. The irony is that the Palestinian movement had and still has important levers of influence that could have been used more effectively to diminish political support for Israel in the United States and reduce popular support inside Israel for repression and retaliation by the Israeli government. The Palestinian cause enjoys warm support in Western Europe and, of course, throughout the Islamic world, which stretches from the northeastern corner of Africa to the island states in the southeastern Pacific Ocean. There has long been considerable sympathy for the goals of the Palestinian movement in the United States, and even in Israel.¹⁴ Polls conducted in Israel in September 2003 indicate that more than half of the Israeli public believes that there should be a Palestinian state.¹⁵

In fact, as noted above, the Bush administration's roadmap specifically advocates a "permanent two-state" solution. It also spells out the commitment of the United States to support an international effort to improve the living conditions of the Palestinian people and for an international conference to formulate a fair and practical set-

tlement of the refugee issue (presumably in the form of reparations to the refugees).¹⁶ The substantial foreign aid payments that the United States has made to the Palestinian Authority and to economic development and relief projects in the West Bank and Gaza subsequent to the Camp David, Oslo, and Wye River accords also reflect sympathy for Palestinian goals.

Moreover, the Palestinian Authority has bully pulpits in important international organizations such as the United Nations, the League of Arab States (22 member states), and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (56 member states). The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, with some 24,000 employees, has been providing educational, medical care, and other social services to Palestinian refugees since 1950. This agency, whose very existence over 50 years is a reflection of the long-term concern among the nations of the world for the plight of the refugees, represents another vehicle for mobilizing political support for Palestinian goals. Another important resource available to the Palestinian movement has been the financial, political, and military/intelligence backing from neighboring Arab states. However, this support has not been an un-mixed blessing.

A Successful Strategy?

It has been argued that the Palestinian leadership had no choice but to resort to violence given the treatment of the Palestinian people by the Israelis over the course of five decades, or that the Palestinians had no alternative to "terrorism-like violence" given the gross disparity between Israeli and Palestinian military capabilities. These arguments may have held water during the first few decades of the Palestinian-Israeli struggle, but the first *intifada*, in the late 1980s, demonstrated that there was at least one effective nonviolent alternative.

Nonviolent demonstrations, school closures, labor strikes, boycotts of Israeli

merchants, and the occasional stone throwing by Palestinian youths at Israeli soldiers constituted the principal tactics of the first *intifada*. Israel's heavy-handed response to these protests was widely reported and severely criticized abroad. As diplomatic and political pressures on Israel began to build, however, Palestinian extremists instigated acts of violence against Israeli security forces and civilians that changed the character of the *intifada*. It has been suggested that the extremists, afraid that they would lose out to the proponents of nonviolence, took this path in order to regain political control.¹⁷ Whatever their rationale might have been, there is little doubt that they put the Palestinian movement back onto a path from which it was unable to mobilize political support in the United States and Israel.

What the first *intifada* accomplished, before it was hijacked by extremists, was to cause defenders of the status quo (in this case, principally the United States and Israel) to recognize the legitimacy of calls for change and to accept that the advocates of change were neither criminals nor perpetual malcontents. This was a crucial step. In this era of ubiquitous and continuous media coverage, recognition of a protest movement's legitimacy inevitably leads to a reappraisal of the propriety and proportionality of the actions that are being taken to defend the status quo. When the authorities are seen to be overreacting, as was the case during the nonviolent phase of the first *intifada*, support for change grows.

During the current *intifada*, the images of Israeli civilians blown apart by Palestinian suicide bombers have given the defenders of the status quo the upper hand. Israel has succeeded in depicting the suicide bombers as terrorists and in so doing has drawn the eyes of the media, and hence of the Israeli and American publics, away from Israel's repressive measures.

The strategy of violence on the part of the Palestinians has been unproductive in another sense since it has made the various

Palestinian factions dependent upon the governments of neighboring states for financial, military, logistical, and intelligence support. Given the effectiveness of the Israeli military and the fact that so many Palestinians reside as refugees in the neighboring states, some amount of cooperation with the governments of those states was inevitable. But over the years the Palestinian factions have learned that this support often comes at a high price: the subordination of Palestinian goals and interests to the short-term foreign policy requirements of their host governments.

For instance, the *fedayeen* (guerrilla fighters) in Gaza, who were trained and equipped by Egypt, were alternately supported and restrained in their attacks on Israel beginning in the early 1950s according to the tactical objectives of Egyptian foreign policy. Over the past 25 years, Iran and Iraq modulated their support for violent Palestinian organizations according to their foreign policy interests. Tehran and Baghdad, long at loggerheads, used their respective Palestinian clients as cat's-paws to reduce each other's influence in Lebanon and Syria, where there were large numbers of Palestinian refugees and, more generally, to challenge each other's anti-Israeli credentials. And the Palestinian cause was always a handy means of distracting their publics from domestic issues.

On occasion, neighboring states have used force against the Palestinian factions that were not sufficiently subservient. This was particularly true of Syria, which fought PLO units in 1976 and instigated a mutiny in the PLO ranks in 1983. In 1985, the Syrian-backed Amal militia began a three-year battle against PLO militia based in the refugee camps of southern Lebanon.¹⁸ Jordan fought a civil war against PLO factions that had set up operations in the country after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. These mini-wars cost Palestinian lives and damaged the operational infrastructures (bases, depots, political connections) of the PLO factions, and

they contributed to mutual suspicion among Palestinian factions that could have been working together against Israel to promote the goal of statehood.

There is more than one way to evaluate a strategy, but the most important question to ask is whether a particular strategy has accomplished its goals. The Palestinian strategy of fear-inducing violence has created the appearance of progress in that it has garnered publicity for the Palestinian cause. But the increased public awareness has not brought Palestinian statehood any closer. Refugee claims go unrecognized. Half of the Palestinian population is impoverished, and the other half has seen a decline in living standards since the onset of the second *intifada*.

Thus it is fair to say that the Palestinian strategy of fear-inducing violence has not been successful. This is ironic because it was based upon an acute perception that the center of gravity in the Palestinian struggle for statehood and the settlement of refugee claims was to be found in Israeli and American public opinion. Years from now, historians may view the second *intifada* as a classic example of miscalculation in this very respect. ●

Notes

1. Walter Laqueur, "The Terrorism to Come," *Policy Review*, August-September 2004, p. 58. The "dekulakization" campaign of the late 1920s in the Soviet Union, for example, was designed to frighten the mass of peasants through violence against innocent, but relatively well-off farmers (see Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941* [New York: Norton, 1990], pp. 174-75).

2. Robert H. Kupperman and Darrell M. Trent, *Terrorism: Threat, Reality, Response* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1979), p. 4.

3. U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002* (Washington, D.C., April 2003).

4. "West Bank and Gaza at a Glance," World Bank, September 3, 2003, at http://www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/aag/wbg_aag.pdf.

5. Data for the 1980s and 1995 are from the Central Intelligence Agency's *World Factbook, 2003*, <http://www.cia.gov>. For unemployment data for 2002, see U.S. Agency for International Development, "West Bank/Gaza: The Development Challenge," at <http://www.usaid.gov>.

6. World Bank, *Disengagement, the Palestinian Economy and the Settlements* (Washington, D.C., June 23, 2004), p. i.

7. Palestine Trade Center, "Country Profile: Foreign Trade," at <http://www.paltrade.org/Paltrade/business/copprofile2.htm#Foreign%20Trade>.

8. Palestinian Authority, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Analysis of the Present Status of the Palestinian Labor Force & the Role of the Production Sectors in Ending Unemployment*, December 22, 2002, at http://www.mofa.gov.ps/news_letter/details2.asp?subject_id=232.

9. "Gaza," *The World Factbook*, at <http://www.cia.gov>; British Broadcasting Corporation, "Israel and the Palestinians," at <http://news.bbc.co.uk>; "Sharon Unveils Detailed Timetable for Gaza Withdrawal," *USA Today*, August 31, 2004.

10. "Gaza Settlements Population, January 2004," Foundation for Middle East Peace, at <http://www.fmep.org/reports/2004/v14n1.html#5>.

11. "West Bank," *World Factbook*, at <http://www.cia.gov>.

12. David Makovsky and Eran Benedek, "The 5 Percent Solution," *Foreign Policy*, September-October 2003, pp. 26-27.

13. U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, Appendix B, at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/31946.pdf>.

14. Gallup polls of American public opinion indicate that almost three-fourths of the American public thinks that the United States should not favor the Israelis over the Palestinians. The polls also indicate considerable public support for a peaceful solution that would provide the Palestinians with a state. See Frank Newport, "Helping Develop Peaceful Solution to Middle East Crisis Is Important Goal to Americans," *Gallup Poll Monthly*, February 2001, pp. 19-22; Makovsky and Benedek, "5 Percent Solution," pp. 26-27.

15. "Israeli Opinion Regarding Peace with the Palestinians," at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Politics/ispopal.html>.

16. U.S. Department of State, "A Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," press statement, April 30, 2003, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2003/20062pf.htm>.

17. *The Middle East*, 9th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1999), p. 65.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 57.