

Intifada II: Israel's Nightmare

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ISRAEL IS in bad trouble. It is in far worse trouble than it was in September 1993, when the Oslo agreement was signed. This needs to be said to those in the Israeli "peace camp" and to its supporters in the United States and elsewhere who, having jubilantly celebrated that agreement while refusing to recognize its terrible flaws, now protest: "Perhaps Oslo has not worked out as we hoped, but what alternative was there? Under the circumstances, it was something that had to be tried, and there is no need to regret having tried it."

But there is every need, not only to regret Oslo, but to beat one's breast with horror at what one has done. Nothing about the circumstances in 1993 justified taking such a risk. And there were alternatives—or, at the very least, the same alternative that Israel has now, except under far more favorable circumstances.

The first half of 1993 was not a bad year for Israel. The newly elected government of Yitzhak Rabin had inherited from Yitzhak Shamir a country in good economic shape with a solid national consensus on key issues of security and on minimal conditions for peace with the Arab world; those conditions included Israeli control of the Golan Heights,

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parts of western Samaria, the "Etsion bloc" of settlements in the Judean Hills, the Jordan Valley, and greater Jerusalem. The *intifada* of the late 80's and early 90's had largely subsided. Palestinians were working in Israel in large numbers, and incidents of terror were few. The PLO, its influence and finances at a post-Gulf war low, was sidelined in Tunis. Israel's international standing had improved. The peace with Egypt, while cold, was holding. The borders with Jordan and Syria were quiet, and contacts with both countries, formalized by the 1991 Madrid conference, were going on. The Hezbollah in Lebanon was not yet the efficient fighting force it soon would become.

True, this was not a situation that could have continued indefinitely. The military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip inflicted a fundamental injustice on the Palestinians that was intolerable not only for them but for any thinking Israeli—and in any case, purely demographic considerations ruled out long-term retention of most of the Palestinian territories, since Palestinian Arabs had one of the world's highest birth rates and would eventually outnumber Jews west of the Jordan. Palestinian support for the Hamas terrorist organization was on the rise. Although the balance of military power with the Arab world was in Israel's favor, the Gulf war had shown Israel to be both militarily and psychologically vulnerable to missile attack.

Something, then, had to be done, some new course of action needed to be taken. But there was

no emergency. There was time to deliberate, to thrash out issues in public debate, to weigh the pros and cons of possible moves.

What might those moves have been? One was to offer the Palestinian population of the territories genuine self-rule without dealing the PLO in on it. You say this would not have worked because, as had already been proved at the Madrid conference (where the supposedly non-PLO negotiators turned out to be PLO-approved after all), the Palestinian population lacked independent leadership? Perhaps not; but in that case Israel might have tried negotiating with the PLO in Tunis without, as it did at Oslo, precipitously admitting it into the territories it claimed with its leaders, its organizational structure, its armed battalions, and a degree of international legitimation and financial backing never enjoyed by it before. The PLO, you say, would never have agreed to talks along such lines or enabled them to be concluded successfully? Perhaps not; but in that case there was still the option of unilateral Israeli action—that is, of Israel's deciding on its own what its borders should be, withdrawing its troops and citizens to them, and letting the Palestinians fend for themselves on the other side. Such an option was never realistic? Perhaps not; but it is precisely the one that the Barak government, much of the Israeli Left, and the great majority of Israelis who supported Oslo have now been calling for.

This, then, is the absurdity: the same unilateral separation of Israel from the Palestinian territories that, if capable of execution today, was far more so in 1993-94—that at the time would have met with international sympathy as a major Israeli concession and would not have had to be carried out in the teeth of an armed PLO state—that would have saved seven years of internal dissension that tragically tore Israeli society apart—that might have prevented the assassination of Rabin and the bloodshed of the 1995-96 PLO-Hamas terror campaign—is now the mantra of those who have no regrets over Oslo!

II

IS UNILATERAL disengagement possible now? In terms of Israeli politics, the answer is yes. Not only did such a course of action suddenly appear to be the only game in town following the collapse of negotiations with the Palestinian Authority and the outbreak of violence, but it has become, for Israelis, a highly attractive one. Unilateral separation, it is said, would return the initiative to Israel, dispelling the oppressive feeling of helplessness that became the prevailing mood after the "peace

process" turned into daily violence, and free the country of a large Palestinian Arab population that Israelis are now prepared to say goodbye to once and for all. Indeed, "prepared" is too mild a word; "eager" or even "desperate" would be more accurate.

Given the long history of violence and counter-violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there might appear to be no logical reason why Israeli attitudes toward Palestinians should have changed so radically after the bloodshed began on September 29, going beyond frustration, anger, or even hate to ultimate revulsion and despair. Perhaps, then, the change may turn out to be only temporary; perhaps, if and when the current round of clashes subsides, these emotions will prove transitory. One doubts it, however. For what Israelis have seen on the Palestinian side, projected with unprecedented clarity on their TV screens, has also gone beyond frustration, anger, and even hate. They have seen a society that, whether in the form of its street mobs, its politicians, or its supposed intellectuals, seems so easily incitable, so emotionally collectivized, so blindly conformist and devoid of thinking individuals, so incapable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood or subjecting itself to the slightest degree of self-criticism or self-analysis that—not for the first time, certainly, but possibly for the last—they have asked: are these people we can expect, or ever want, to live together with?

The point is not that Israeli actions have themselves been beyond reproach; it is that—on television, over the radio, and in the newspapers, let alone in private conversation—Israelis *have* reproached themselves, often excessively, whereas even in the rare instances in which their Palestinian counterparts have done the same, it has been a calculated performance for the media. (As in the case, for example, of the Palestinian police chief of Ramallah, who, several days after its occurrence, expressed his dismay over the lynching in one of his police stations of two Israeli soldiers, not one of whose murderers, all known to him, had been arrested by his police.) If Palestinians with Ph.D's from American universities could tell reporters without blushing that thousands of stone-and-firebomb-throwing youths were "peaceful demonstrators" and that Israeli soldiers were deliberately firing to kill them—in the face of photographs and statistics showing the exact opposite*—whom was there to talk with, and about what?

* As of late October, the Palestinians were claiming close to 4,000 wounded and some 140 killed, or a proportion of wounded to killed of 30 to one. Since in battlefield conditions the proportion of wounded to killed usually runs in the neighborhood of three or four to one, it is clear that Israeli soldiers, unless they were the world's worst shots, were deliberately trying *not* to kill.

The argument has been made that Israel cannot live in a truly dependable peace with its Arab neighbors until these neighbors enjoy democratic governments. But what should have been apparent by now is that the historic inability of 21 Arab-Muslim states to produce a single democratic regime such as has been achieved by numerous other non-Western people—the Japanese, the Indians, the Koreans, the Thais, and the Taiwanese, to name but some—is a symptom of a much deeper illness. Something is wrong at a more profound level, something that goes to the heart of Arab-Muslim society and is structurally rooted in its fundamental values and relationships. It is this something that Israelis have found themselves staring in the face this fall. A large number of them have come to the conclusion that they do not want to have to look at it any more.

THUS, FOR the first time since the 1973 Yom Kippur war, a strong political consensus has formed in Israeli society. It is a consensus built on the ruins of two dreams, the nationalistic Right's dream of Jewish possession of, or at least presence in, an undivided land of Israel that would also be inhabited by many Palestinians, and the universalistic Left's dream of Jewish-Arab rapprochement. Although die-hard ideologues in both these camps have continued to resist the obvious, the great majority of Israelis want out—out of the conflict with the Palestinians, out of more than minimal contact with them, and out of the territories they are concentrated in. The political basis for unilateral separation exists.

Economically, too, such a separation, assuming it would mean closed borders with minimal movement of goods and labor across them, would be feasible. An economic divorce would have a devastating effect on the small Palestinian economy, which has been heavily dependent on Israel for employing its work force and buying its products; but for Israel, whose GNP is fifteen times greater than that of the Palestinian Authority, the consequences would be negligible. Some Israeli companies that sell to Palestinians in significant quantities, such as manufacturers of chemicals, cement, processed food, and soft drinks, would be hurt; sectors like agriculture and the building trade, which have employed large numbers of Palestinians, would suffer temporarily. But overall goods and services sold to the Palestinian market have accounted for less than 10 percent of Israel's total exports; and more foreign workers from Asia and Eastern Europe, of whom there are already tens of thousands in Israel, could

easily be brought in to take up the labor slack. Separation might make Israel's economy sputter briefly, but no more than that.

Diplomatically, by contrast, Israel would be in a highly difficult position. Whether before or after, unilateral separation would be accompanied by the declaration of a Palestinian state claiming as its borders the 1967 ceasefire lines between Jordan and Israel; indeed, such a state may have already been declared by the time this article appears. Since this state would be recognized by a large part of the international community—including the General Assembly of the United Nations, some or all of the countries of Europe, and perhaps eventually the United States—any part of its territory remaining in Israeli hands would be regarded as occupied by a foreign invader. (Although the world considers Israel today, too, to be an occupying power in the West Bank and Gaza, its military presence in these territories has been viewed not as illegal but as a stopgap measure until the issue of sovereignty in them will have been resolved.) And since the logic of unilateral separation is that Israel would, without Palestinian agreement, keep parts of the West Bank and possibly Gaza that it deems essential, it would be in clear violation of international law, leaving it open to punitive measures while legitimizing armed Palestinian attacks on its citizens and settlements as a form of just war.

Such a state of affairs in fact would seem precisely what the Palestinian Authority has lately been aiming for, and may very well have had in mind since Oslo—that is, not the ending of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but its perpetuation along more advantageous lines. And the advantages gained by the Palestinians would be great, for whereas in 1993 Israel was the legally recognized administrator of the territories facing at most a few dozen active Palestinian guerrillas bearing arms, it would now be an internationally condemned aggressor forced to cope with 40,000 or more Palestinian “policemen” equipped with assault rifles, machine guns, and other weaponry. Nor would its annexation of parts of these territories even be taken seriously as a sign of determination to remain in them—not when every Israeli prime minister since Oslo had offered to return the Golan Heights, officially annexed in 1981, to Syria, and Prime Minister Barak proposed at Camp David to surrender sections of Jerusalem annexed in 1967.

Unilateral separation would thus inevitably lead to military hostilities with the Palestinian state, in which Israel would be unable to count on international or possibly even American support. These

hostilities, to be sure, so long as the rest of the Arab world was not drawn into them (though it might very well be), would not involve a full-scale war, in which the Palestinian Authority would stand no chance of success. Rather, they would take the form of guerrilla warfare in which Palestinian forces carried out low-magnitude daily operations against Israel while at the same time resorting to urban terror. Would Israel be able to fight such a campaign better because it had separated from the territories? This is ultimately the key question—and one to which the answer is probably no.

IN PURELY physical terms, it is not easy to envisage exactly what, on the ground, unilateral separation would entail. Presumably it would mean erecting as hermetic a border as possible between a Palestinian state and an Israel that included greater Jerusalem, the Etsion bloc, parts of western Samaria, and possibly the Katif settlements in the southern Gaza Strip, while evacuating a large number of small Israeli settlements elsewhere in Gaza and the West Bank. In a situation of guerrilla warfare, this would enable Israel to concentrate its forces more efficiently; to avoid having to establish numerous small garrisons of troops for the protection of dozens of Israeli enclaves surrounded by Palestinian towns and villages; and to obviate the necessity of having to patrol and clear the roads leading to these enclaves. On the face of it, this makes military sense.

And yet apart from the enormous difficulty and expense of relocating the evacuated settlers, such a scenario is problematic. What about the Jordan Valley, for instance, control of which would be crucial not only as a first line of defense against a possible attack of Arab countries joining the fighting from the east but also for cutting off the Palestinians from their Arab allies and preventing them from being supplied with reinforcements and heavy weapons? With the Jewish settlements in eastern Samaria and Judea having been evacuated, Israeli forces in the Jordan Valley would become more isolated and exposed, and the roads leading to them would be harder to keep open. Moreover, Palestinian guerrilla units would be able to move in their own areas with less chance of being detected or intercepted.

Nor would the evacuation of Israeli settlements necessarily reduce points of friction or lower the overall level of violence. No matter what borders Israel were to withdraw to, numerous Israeli settlements would be left in putative Palestinian territory close to or practically on these borders, easily

reached by Palestinian infiltrators and Palestinian bullets. As is shown by the case of Gilo, the southernmost Jewish neighborhood of Jerusalem that was repeatedly hit by small-arms fire from Palestinian Bethlehem this fall, the distances involved are simply too small for there to be any withdrawal to relatively safe lines.

Would an electronic security fence along the unilaterally determined border with the Palestinians, similar to the fences Israel now has on its borders with Lebanon and Jordan, solve the problem? Hardly. The expense, time, and labor needed to erect such a fence, which would zigzag back and forth over hundreds of kilometers of hilly terrain and over many more running through urban areas around Jerusalem, would be horrendous. And as has been true of Israel's other borders in the past, the army units patrolling such a barrier would themselves become regular targets. Moreover, security fences work both ways: while making it more difficult for the enemy to enter your territory, they hinder you from entering his in response or in hot pursuit. Finally, experience has shown that such fences, while effective, are never 100-percent hermetic. They can be cut and crossed by properly trained forces, and, needless to say, by mortars and rockets aimed far into the interior.

In short, unilateral separation would give Israel no military advantage that would not be balanced or outweighed by its disadvantages. It would not significantly increase Israel's security and would certainly win it no points in the international arena. It is an appealing idea to Israelis for understandable reasons. It is just not particularly practical. Perhaps it was in 1993; but no longer.

III

IF UNILATERAL separation would not dramatically improve a situation that is in fact likely to get progressively worse, what should Israel do? Swallow its pride, return to the negotiating table with the PLO, and do what it can to hammer out a deal in spite of everything?

Alas, this too would not be practical. Pride could be swallowed, of course. But to believe, at this late date, that the PLO really wants a deal, or, more crucially, that it would stick to the terms of one once it had been arrived at, would be to cling pathetically to the illusion of PLO moderation and good will that led to Oslo in the first place. It is common knowledge that, in their talks at Camp David, Ehud Barak offered Yasir Arafat concessions that would have been unimaginable in Israel as lit-

tle as a year ago: nearly all of the West Bank and Gaza, nearly all of Arab Jerusalem, an additional sliver of the Israeli Negev, Israeli absorption of a large number of Palestinian refugees. Had Arafat been interested in a final settlement, here was his golden opportunity. These were, after all, Barak's *starting* positions; with the help of American mediation and pressure on Israel, Arafat could have gotten even more. (Including, no doubt, Palestinian sovereignty over the Temple Mount, which many Israelis would not particularly have minded letting him have.)

But a final settlement was never Arafat's goal. That goal was to get as much as he could by taking the road opened by Oslo and then to abandon it before it reached its final destination. An internationally recognized Palestinian state still partially occupied by Israel that would allow the Palestinians to fight on while engaging Israel in a long-term war of attrition in which its hands would be tied, and which chronically threatened to explode into a regional conflagration, was an almost ideal situation for him.

For Israel, however, it is a nightmare. Told for years that peace was just around the corner, Israelis today are ill-prepared to make the conceptual switch

now called for and adjust to a new period of prolonged danger in which military victory is not even imaginable—or rather a situation in which the re-occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, though easily accomplishable in the space of a few days or perhaps even a few hours, would be politically futile.

When once asked by a friend in the good old days of post-Oslo euphoria why I perversely insisted on being so gloomy about the future, I answered with a parable. Imagine, I said, two families living in a house over which they have constantly quarreled. One family is stronger and forces its decisions on the other; but the weaker family has homeless relatives who roam the street outside and occasionally fire bullets through the stronger family's windows. Naturally this makes things uncomfortable, and so one day the stronger family says to the weaker: "Look, we are going to divide this house between us. But since we cannot decide at the moment who gets which rooms, why not in the meantime invite your gun-toting relatives to move in with you? That way they will stop shooting and we can discuss things calmly until we reach an agreement." That is very generous, I said to my friend; but what happens if in the end they don't agree?

We are about to find out.