



Palestinian arguing with Israeli soldier, Hebron.

AP/Wide World Photo (Nasser Shiyoukhi)

Israel's Strategy for Combating Palestinian Terror

By JACOB AMIDROR

Many observers think that Israel does not have a clear and coherent strategy in confronting the Palestinians who are attempting to force their demands on Israel by violence, especially against civilians. It seems that Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are caught in a Sisyphusian dilemma whereby defensive operations are conducted to reduce terrorism. Although this mission is critical, it does not

provide direction for a conflict that the IDF Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Moshe Yaalon, refers to as the most important since the War of Independence. Moreover, fighting terror has become more complicated after human bombers became major instruments. Nonetheless, it is the priority of every soldier and commander, and critical to achieving strategic goals.

Origins of Strategy

No document articulates the current strategy, partly because Israel does not have a tradition of producing them. Drafting such strategy is complicated by the omnipresence of the international

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2002		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2002 to 00-00-2002	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Israel's Strategy for Combating Palestinian Terror				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National Defense University, 300 5th Ave SW, Marshall Hall, Washington, DC, 20319-5066				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 7	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			



AP / Wide World Photo (Gil Cohen Magen)

Prime Minister Sharon (right) with his foreign minister.

media, under whose gaze the success and failure of technical and operational practices are revealed. This exposure impacts on strategic planning and decisionmaking. Plans require time to implement. During the Grapes of Wrath campaign in 1996, the mistaken firing of some artillery salvos, which killed 100 Lebanese civilians, forced an end to the operations before they achieved all strategic goals. When the goals are made abundantly clear, commanders on all levels are less likely to make errors that harm strategic aims.

While Israel was still negotiating with the Palestinians, who were engaging in premeditated violence, the goals were less clear—some might say confused. But since the first government of Ariel Sharon was formed, policy statements and actions appear to present a more coherent strategy.

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Theoretically, it would be preferable if strategy was defined from the top down, complete in every detail. But it evolves gradually through a process of trial and error, a less orderly approach but one that often reflects political and diplomatic realities.

Palestinians, in a gambit seen by most parties as illogical, initiated waves of violence rather than diplomatic counteroffers. Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered far more than any Israeli leader to date, including over 95 percent of Judah and Samaria, 100 percent of Gaza, sovereignty over parts of East Jerusalem, and the ingredients of autonomy as an independent state. Although it was legitimate for the Palestinians not to accept the deal, there were certainly grounds for continuing to negotiate. It is also clear that Barak was ready to talk, as indicated by his agreement to a

meeting in Taba, although by then the Palestinian Council President, Yasser Arafat, had launched the war of terror. Moreover, as the Taba process revealed, Barak was ready for more concessions. But Arafat was not satisfied and unleashed the torrent of violence which he had publicly foresworn years before.

The Palestinian leader chose violence over negotiations because he could not give up certain demands, either because it is writ permanently into his character as the *raison d'être* for the Palestinian struggle or because he might destabilize his own position by upsetting various factions. The Israeli misunderstanding stems from a belief that since Arafat had an independent state within his grasp, he would make concessions. But instead he decided to wage war when it became clear that, while Israel was yielding, the Palestinian side would not get everything it demanded. Now it seems obvious that Arafat truly thought the Israelis would collapse under a wave of continuous terror and would make concessions that they were not ready to make in peacetime negotiations.

Arafat believed that violence would achieve more after Camp David. His assessment that Israel could be pressured into greater concessions was shared not only by Palestinians but others in the Arab world. This perspective arose because Israel did not react during the Persian Gulf War, went to Madrid against its will to avoid friction with the United States, made concessions at Oslo in 1993, and crossed lines that were interpreted as a retreat from its basic principles. Furthermore, because Israel turned over Hebron after the Tunnel Riots and did not end talks even when promises were broken on the first day, there was a perception that Israel was war-weary and desperate. Finally, the unilateral IDF withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 was the straw that broke the camel's back, furthering the view that Israel could no longer stomach casualties.

There are five elements in Israeli strategy: altering perceptions among Arabs (particularly Palestinians), negotiating with responsible Palestinians to achieve a mutually beneficial agreement, reasserting the ultimate responsibility of the state to protect its citizens, destroying terror by force, and engendering international support.

The Arab Mindset

The result of the war on terrorism must change the outlook of Arab nations, and especially among Palestinians. Israel must regain credibility to make it clear that retreats or concessions will not be made while under fire, and that force—military or terrorist—will never change its

Palestinian militia
rallying in Gaza.



AP / Wide World Photo (Adel Hana)



AP / Wide World Photo (Muhammad Muheisen)

Chairman Arafat.

position. Israelis are ready to negotiate, but neither threats nor violence will evoke concessions.

Three conditions are vital to achieving this goal. The first is steadfastness. Israelis can handle tough situations, and the present times are extremely difficult. One of the greatest mistakes the Palestinians made is failing to fathom democracy and how Israel would respond if backed into a corner. Those who criticize Barak as a negotiator tend to forget his critical contribution. When Palestinian ambitions were seen in the light of day, Israel discovered that they contained almost no flexibility. Accordingly Israelis are united in a war that they view as imposed on them. Without having gone the extra mile for peace, only to be answered by terror, the people of Israel would not be ready to make sacrifices.

The second condition is that Israel must not be pressured to give up anything that could be interpreted as capitulating to terrorism. Unfortunately, any concession would seem to be a success for the terrorists and hinder the ultimate goal of two states existing in harmony. From this point of view, the danger of the road map proposed by the United States is an assumption that even if Israel does not give in to violence, America will and will pressure Israel to do the same. Even more troubling is ignoring the condition set by George Bush on the Palestinians in June 2002—a continuous and determined war on terrorism. Washington can make the difference. It must be unequivocal in refusing to accommodate terror as the President emphasized.

The last condition is determination by the national leadership to make no concessions while under fire. To evacuate settlements or retreat unilaterally while violence continues could be seen as total capitulation to terrorism and only engender further incidents.

These three conditions are vital from the strategic point of view, and not just because they are linked to ideology or negotiations with the Palestinians. If Israel wants to achieve the first and most important part of its strategy—reshaping the Arab mindset on Israeli steadfastness—it must convince Arab leaders that it will not collapse, give up, or make concessions when terror is used. Terrorism must be seen as an illegitimate tool that achieves nothing for those who appeal to it. And there are emerging signs of change in Palestinian society. Its leaders are saying in private that terror must be stopped for the benefit of their cause. Time is needed to allow moderate heads to prevail, but concessions merely inspire radicals to violence.

The second element of the strategy concerns the post-war situation. Israel wants to negotiate with responsible Palestinians and sign a mutually beneficial agreement. To achieve this, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon says his country is ready to make “painful concessions.” But from the Israeli point of view, the current Palestinian leadership is incapable of being a partner

for negotiations because they believe they can successfully wage war rather than attempting to wage peace. Israel must wait for a leadership that fights terror. The Palestinians

need “leaders [who] engage in a sustained fight against the terrorists and dismantle their infrastructure,” as President Bush stated in June 2002.

Israel must not only conduct a war against terrorism, but change the Palestinian leadership. Such action must be initiated carefully while taking into account four select groups. The first is the international community, particularly Americans, but also Europeans, who are no less significant. The goal is the creation of a situation in which Arafat and people around him lose their legitimacy, which was gained mainly after Oslo. The second group includes Arab leaders—most importantly in Egypt, and the so-called Arab street, especially in Jordan—who are allied with Arafat, although many are coming to realize that he must be replaced. The third is the Israeli public, many of whom after Oslo accepted Arafat as a leader who deserved trust. Although the recent terror campaign has changed their views dramatically, some are not convinced that Israel should wait for an alternative. The fourth group is the Palestinian people who accepted Arafat not only as a revolutionary leader and head of the Palestinian Authority, but also as a symbol. More importantly, Palestinians regard victory differently from Israelis or those in West. They measure success not by achieving

Madrid and Oslo

The United States and Soviet Union cosponsored the Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991 to help initiate a settlement of the Middle East conflict. The conference was attended by Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, including the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The Oslo Peace Process was begun in September 1993 by Israel and the Palestinians. A declaration of principles outlined in a letter from Chairman Arafat committed his movement to the right of the State of Israel to exist, accepted U.N. Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, and renounced the use of terrorism and other acts of violence. In response, Israel recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization as the representative of the Palestinian people and agreed to negotiate with it. [For details, see the Search for Peace Historical Documents Section, U.S. Embassy to Israel, at <http://www.usembassy-israel.org.il/publish/peace/peaindex.htm>.]

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positive results for their people, but rather by the amount of suffering inflicted on their enemies. It is not at all clear to many Palestinians that they are losing the war. Israel must make this reality apparent. Only then will a change in leadership become more likely.

There is no interest in seeing Palestinian society disintegrate because Israel must eventually negotiate and live with it. The war, therefore, must be conducted with a continuous aim to not destroy the civilian infrastructure, economy, or administrative apparatus. It is important to attempt to limit damage to terrorist networks and producers of violence. Of course, while this goal is intellectually clear, it is difficult if not impossible to entirely implement.

A Responsible Partner

Israel must have a legitimate negotiating partner with four qualities. The Palestinians must fight terrorism regardless of its source—Islamic groups, the Fatah party, et al. Israel can negotiate only with a partner who decides that terrorism is not an option. There is no need for declarations; leaders are judged by their acts. Second, Palestinians must work to change public discourse on Israel. The inflammatory language used by their media must end. Similarly, the image of Israel in textbooks



AP / Wide World Photo (Brennan Linsley)

Stringing wire in
Bethlehem.

must be adjusted. Next, a new leadership must move toward accountability, away from corruption, and build a civil society that in the long run will be democratic. Finally, Palestinians should renounce the desire for a massive return of refugees, acknowledge the right of Jews to their own sovereign state within agreed borders, and accept an agreement as the end of conflict, thereby forswearing any future claims. Without these prerequisites every negotiation is doomed. In their absence it is better not to begin negotiating with the Palestinians at all.

Israel must consider a number of negotiating points. It cannot neglect its historical roots in disputed areas. Jews have lived in Hebron longer than Tel Aviv. Another point is demography. There will soon be more Arabs than Jews between the Jordan River and Mediterranean, yet Israel has an interest in retaining the Jewish majority and identity of this area. Next is security. Israel must be able to defend itself in war and against terror. Such threats require Palestinians to accept certain constraints on their state. Although some measures may not be easy to accept, others may

have merit. With limited military capabilities, for example, they may not have to levy heavy taxes. And finally, Israel must maintain liberal democratic values because they are important to its citizens and because they are the basis for international support.

At the end of the day Israel will have to negotiate with the Palestinians, for the solution of the conflict is political, not military. But from an Israeli point of view, it would be better to come to the table with as many advantages as possible, and only after defeating terrorism so that it cannot be considered a negotiating tactic.

Self Defense

Another element of strategy involves a new definition of a principle that has been accepted since Israel was founded: the state is ultimately responsible for defending its citizens by whatever means necessary. Although this principle may seem obvious, Israel effectively abandoned it after signing the agreement with the Palestinians at

Room-to-room search
in Ramallah.



AP / Wide World Photo (Jerome Dela)

Oslo in 1993. It is not an easy decision to reverse, and many nations do not approve of efforts to do so. With regard to fulfilling this responsibility at present, there are key operational and tactical objectives. For example, Israel Defense Forces reoccupied areas in Judah and Samaria from which terrorists launched the murder of Israeli citizens. This was the logic behind Operation Defensive Shield, begun in April 2002, after the Passover massacre in Netanya. It symbolized a change in outlook. And on this basis, Israeli troops have gone into the Gaza Strip when militarily necessary, and special forces are doing everything possible to arrest and hit terrorists operating inside Palestinian-populated areas.

Reasserting this principle is not easy. Many Israelis had expected Arafat to honor his part of the bargain and fight terrorism. Also, some in the international community anticipated that Israel would not operate in newly administered Palestinian areas, constraining military action regardless of the provocation.

War in the future will depend on the way Israel fulfills the principle of protecting its citizenry. Decisionmakers who understand the seriousness of self-protection must stand ready to act even if, for example, the only way to prevent terror is to reoccupy either the city of Gaza or the huge refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. It is clear that no

possibility, however unpalatable, can be excluded. It must be recognized that Israel will always react to a threat and evaluate the best way to deal with it. Israel accepts the concept of preemption—that it is legitimate to strike at terror before it occurs. Now that the United States is defending preemptive action, Israel has no reason to discard this option. The responsibility to defend one's citizens, which for Israel combines self-defense with eliminating threats before they emerge, characterizes the strategic concept. Moreover, it influences day-to-day operations and tactics.

Destroying Terrorism

The fourth element is that the terrorists must be met by force. Because terrorism cannot be completely prevented, terrorists and their supporters must be defeated. Bringing them to justice is often impossible, so justice must be brought to them. For Israel this means killing them—not as punishment or revenge, but to prevent future terrorism.

Preemption was something of an anomaly in the liberal world order at the dawn of the 21st century, but it has become more acceptable since 9/11. It places a heavy burden on the military and intelligence communities. It is clear that the

capability of Israeli society to conduct wars in the long run is connected to success in fighting terrorism, even if victory is not total. And the steadfastness of Israeli leaders against pressure to give in to terrorism is becoming stronger with each success. At the same time, Palestinian leaders are finding it harder to justify their policies to the public given continuing terrorist failures and mounting costs. For the Palestinians, fighting terror could be the first step in abandoning terror as a tactic. Israel must make Palestinian violence a failure practically to make it a failure politically. This will take time, but it is the best approach.

The mandate that flows from combining the third and fourth elements of strategy—defense of citizens and destruction of terrorist capabilities—is fighting to the end. Success means control on the ground to provide intelligence and eliminate

terrorist infrastructure, including recruitment, production of explosives, and sanctuaries. Control is necessary to arrest suspects for interrogation because terrorism cannot

be countered without questioning its supporters. Along with preventing local authorities and the population from helping terrorists, these concerns brought Israel Defense Forces back to Jenin and Nablus. Experience teaches that there is no way to fight terrorists short of controlling both the areas in which they operate and those from which they operate.

International Support

A small country like Israel needs as much international support as possible without risking its vital interests. This course is problematic because it imposes constraints on freedom of action. Even the United States prefers to wait for support from the international community before taking action, such as in the war against Iraq. The Israeli people must appreciate this diplomatic need.

Israel must strive for understanding, if not approval. It will be difficult to implement the necessary actions in the long run. But it is better to have broad support around the world, including Europe, since Israeli legitimacy is simultaneously seen as Palestinian illegitimacy. From the perspective of Arafat, international support, specifically European, is vital in the struggle against Israel. Denial of such legitimacy would place heavy stress on him.

Accordingly, Israel must gain international legitimacy to relieve pressure on itself and exert pressure on the Palestinians. This requires a delicate balance. Israel must fight under conditions in which terrorists come from populated areas and target civilians. This has led to adopting tactics

that are not favored by countries which do not face similar challenges. It is not surprising that it is easier for Israel to explain itself to Americans after 9/11 than to Europeans. Both the United States and Israel are often on the same side of the table, which explains the need to act forcefully against terrorism.

Israel must fight in densely populated areas and the terrorists often use civilians as shields. Thus it is sometimes impossible to strike without risks to innocent people. But to not hit populated areas means to not combat terrorism, and it cannot be done in every operation. While the need for international legitimacy is great, and Israel exposes its soldiers to danger to prevent harm to Palestinian civilians, the war against terrorism cannot stop. Accordingly, Israel seems doomed to continuous friction with world opinion to some degree.

Israel must emphasize the first strategic element. This war must bring about change in the minds of Arab leaders who thought the Israeli people could be brought to their knees by terrorism. Those who understand this fact know that the war against terrorism is only one part of a strategy. It is likely that if Arafat had appreciated that these principles would be implemented before initiating the war, he would have continued to negotiate.

Terrorism can only be defeated by the use of force, and it is the responsibility of Israel to defend its citizenry until the Palestinians select a leadership with whom it can seriously negotiate. A clear articulation of strategic goals not only can influence an enemy but can clarify the goals and reduce distractions for operational forces.

This strategy fits the current Israeli government. But a future government, like that of any democracy, could introduce a new vision. If some leader decided, for example, to negotiate under fire, retreat from Judah and Samaria, or annex Judah and Samaria, Israel would have to formulate a strategy that used force in a way which was consistent with its political goals.

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