

**THE WAR ON TERROR AND THE PALESTINIAN INTIFADAH**

Testimony before

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by

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History will surely mark September 11, 2001 as a day of infinite infamy, a turning point for the United States and the civilized world. It could also mark a turning point for Palestinians and Israelis -- the day the intifadah ended.

Whether that in fact is the case will depend above all on the actions of Chairman Arafat. But Israeli and American responses to efforts he has begun to make to stop the violence and terrorism can help create a new, positive dynamic in Israeli-Palestinian relations. If, as a result, a viable negotiating process replaces the bloodshed and hatred of the past year, America's war on terrorism will benefit. And if the Palestinian leadership definitively repudiates violence and terrorism as legitimate means of pursuing its political objectives, then Israeli-Palestinian peace becomes an achievable objective again.

This potential for a silver lining in the very darkest of clouds is already evident in Yasser Arafat's reaction to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Recognizing that the spontaneous glee shown by the Palestinian street in West Bank cities and east Jerusalem risked ending any remaining chance for international intervention to pressure Israel, Arafat took a series of steps designed to show empathy with America's victims rather than the suicide bombers who had taken Palestinian terror tactics and raised them to a new, heinous art form. But beyond the PR effort (which included his own personal donation of blood, memorial services at Palestinian schools, and suppression of media reporting of support for the terrorists), Arafat also took a number of other unusual steps to stop Palestinian violence:

- He declared another ceasefire, but this time issued the orders publicly, in Arabic, with the injunction to his forces not to fire, even in self-defense;
- He appears to have persuaded both Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) to stop their terror activities, at least for the time being;
- He made some arrests of lower-level people involved in terror activities;
- He sent his police to patrol sensitive areas and friction points;
- He made it clear to some Tanzim militias that this time he was actually serious about stopping drive-by shootings of Israelis;
- And for the first time since the outbreak of the intifadah he visited the gangland of southern Gaza and ordered the arrest of a mortar gang there.

As a consequence, suicide bombings on Israelis appear to have ceased and the number of violent incidents is declining, although the drive by killing of an Israeli woman on Monday indicates there are still serious violations.

We have been through this kind of cycle several times before in the course of the Intifadah. Yet each time Arafat took steps to halt the violence, his failure to follow through combined with an Israeli inability to tolerate casualties while he made his half-hearted efforts to prevent them led to the inevitable reinvigoration of the cycle of violence.

Why should this time be any different?

First, it's important to recognize that much of the steam had already gone out of the intifadah. By June 2001, popular demonstrations and confrontations at checkpoints had all but ceased. The "struggle" had been left to armed gangs of Tanzim, Hamas and PIJ terrorists, a few mortar gangs in Gaza and the smugglers in Rafah.

The Palestinian society and economy had paid a very high price with nothing to show for the sacrifice of over 500 lives and the severe economic hardship resulting from Israel's tight closures of the West Bank and Gaza. Unemployment was over 40%, and some 50% of Palestinians were beneath the poverty line.

In Israel, Barak's "peace cabinet" which had been prepared to negotiate and make concessions under fire was replaced by Sharon's national unity government that refuses to even meet Arafat while violence continues. Rather than fall apart in the face of daily casualties, the Israeli polity had come together and shifted dramatically to the right in its attitudes towards the Palestinians. The independent Palestinian state on all of Gaza and 97 percent of the West Bank, with east Jerusalem as its capital, an Israeli offer which had been on the table at the end of 2000, was now lost, perhaps forever.

In stark contrast to the Clinton Administration, the Bush Administration had essentially withdrawn from the arena. Arafat had become *persona non grata* in Washington and the US was blocking his efforts to internationalize the conflict through the UN Security Council. The EU had also become more sympathetic to Israel because of the far-reaching concessions the Barak government had been prepared to make. At the same time the Europeans had become more impatient with Arafat because of his tolerance of suicide bombers.

Perhaps most significant for any longer term Palestinian strategy of a war of attrition, the Arab world had only responded with lip service and minor financial subventions. The hope that the intifadah would generate regional instability which in turn would precipitate American-led, international intervention, proved forlorn. The Arab street had calmed down after some initial rumblings in the early days of the intifadah. And Arab leaders had made clear that they had no intention to be dragged back into war with Israel on the Palestinians' behalf. President Mubarak was particularly outspoken in this regard but enjoyed support from Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Even Syria, which has an interest in keeping pressure on Israel to remind it that the Golan Heights are occupied territory, was not prepared to allow Hezbollah to provoke an Israeli-Syrian confrontation.

In sum, before September 11, Arafat's every avenue had been blocked off. Lacking an exit strategy, he had resorted to what he does best, surfing the waves of Palestinian anger and violence in the hope that one would eventually carry him to a safe shore.

Instead he was hit by the tidal wave of September 11, which threatened to destroy any chance of salvation. Arafat understood immediately that if he allowed any further suicide bombings, he would immediately be cast into the same pariah status as the Al Qaeda terrorists. So as President Bush was making clear that the United States would "draw no

distinction between the terrorists and those who harbor them,” Arafat was already busy expressing his condolences, donating blood and suppressing Palestinian popular support for the World Trade Center and Pentagon bombings. By the time President Bush had declared that “you are either with us or you are with the terrorists,” Arafat had convinced both Hamas and PIJ to stop their attacks, at least for the time being.

To be sure, Arafat did not want to repeat the mistake he had made in backing Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, a move which brought the Palestinian cause to its lowest point since the disaster of 1948. And this gives him an explanation for his own people for calling off the violence to prevent damage to the Palestinian cause. But Arafat also sees in this global crisis, an opportunity to rebuild his international standing, particularly in the United States, by bringing the Palestinians into the coalition against terrorism. By his calculation, that would do much to defuse Arab anger with America and help cement a coalition between the United States and the Islamic World. This belief in the importance of his own contribution to the war on terrorism helps provide him with his own incentive for demonstrating that he is in fact on the right side of President Bush’s dividing line.

This significant change in Arafat’s own calculus is behind the actions he has taken in recent days to end the violence. Even though Arafat’s view of the contribution he can make is overblown, the United States has an interest in reinforcing his new calculus. While we focus our initial efforts on Usama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban, we do not need the distraction of a flare-up in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that would complicate our efforts to secure Arab backing for our coalition. Moreover, we also have a new opportunity to help put Israelis and Palestinians back on the long path to reconciliation. And that would help demonstrate to the Islamic world that we are cognizant of their concerns even while we are confronting the extremists and terrorists in their midst.

However, we cannot assume that left to his own devices, Arafat will continue to do the right thing. For his new calculus to be translated into a sustained effort to stop the violence and arrest the terrorists, Arafat will need Israeli reciprocal steps and American engagement. On the Israeli side, Sharon has already ordered the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to stop “initiated actions” into territory controlled by the Palestinian Authority. But as Arafat takes effective steps to prevent the recurrence of violent incidents, Sharon will need to ease the pressure on the Palestinian people by lifting the closures, redeploying the IDF and allowing a return to normal life. Both sides will then need to take confidence-building measures that will begin to heal the wounds of a year of bloody conflict and restore the trust and mutual respect so necessary to any resumption of negotiations.

All these reciprocal steps to end the violence, restore normalcy and rebuild trust are outlined in the Tenet work plan and the recommendations of the Mitchell Report. Both sides have accepted them without reservation. The challenge is in the implementation. And we know from the experience of the last year, that implementation will not be effective unless we actively engage with the parties, making clear that we intend to hold both sides to their commitments. Unfortunately, this cannot be done effectively by phone

calls from Washington and instructions to our Ambassador in Israel and Consul General in Jerusalem. And this is especially the case when our leaders are necessarily preoccupied with waging the war on terror.

Therefore, in my view, now is the right time to appoint a Special Envoy to take on this specific responsibility. To be effective, the envoy would need to be a person of stature and experience, enjoying the trust of Israel and the respect of the Arab world. The Envoy would need to be seen in the Middle East as having the ear of the President, but would report to the Secretary of State and be staffed by the Near East Bureau. The Envoy's objective should not be to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, but something much more modest: an end to the violence and a restoration of meaningful negotiations as provided for in the Mitchell Report.

The Bush Administration abolished the Special Middle East Coordinator's position established by the Clinton Administration, believing correctly at the time that there was no real opportunity for peacemaking. But the horrible events of September 11 have created an opportunity to end the Palestinian-Israeli violence and this has become a more important priority now that we are embarked on a complicated war on terrorism and need to avoid distractions and sources of division. The appointment of an envoy would demonstrate our interest in the Palestinian issue even while our leaders devote themselves to the cause at hand. It would give us something to point to for those who would use our lack of engagement on the Palestinian issue as an excuse for not supporting the coalition. It would give us the means to keep Arafat focused on the tasks that he now needs to fulfill if he wants to be considered eligible to join the coalition.

Most importantly, it would help reestablish a principle vital to the war on terror as well as the promotion of Middle East peace: that terrorism is an unacceptable, illegitimate and counterproductive means for Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims, or anybody to use to try to achieve political objectives.