

Toward a New Assertive Approach to Peace and Security in the Middle East

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At its root the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, currently passing through one of its bleakest phases, is a political conflict, not a religious or an ethnic one. The conflict has a political solution: the creation of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip—all illegally occupied by Israel since 1967—along with resettlement and compensation for Palestinians made refugees during the 1948 war.

The Palestinian uprising which began in late September 2000 broke out because seven years of the US-sponsored Oslo “peace process” had failed to produce meaningful progress toward the goal of an independent state. Despite 19 months of continuously escalating Israeli military repression, the Palestinian will to resist Israeli occupation has not broken. To the contrary, the fierce Palestinian defense of Nablus and Jenin during the March-April 2002 Israeli invasions of those towns showed that Palestinians now regard themselves in a struggle for the survival of the idea of independence. Both Islamist and secular factions appear to have adopted suicide bombings as a weapon of last resort, to send a message that maintaining the occupation will exact a devastating toll on Israelis.

Whatever George W. Bush may say, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is not a “man of peace.” Allied with the right-wing settler movement, Sharon is opposed to Palestinian independence and will try to block its emergence by all means at his disposal. At present, Israeli public opinion backs his strategy of crushing Palestinian resistance through military force—though this cannot provide Israel with security. Sharon may employ still harsher force if more Palestinian attacks on civilians within Israel provide him with the excuse.

This drastic impasse requires a drastic solution: a UN peacekeeping force armed with a mandate to end Israel’s occupation of Palestinian lands. Such a force would oversee the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 242, supplanting Israeli troops in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. Removing the occupation would remove the prime cause of anger and desperation among Palestinians. The hated curfews, closures and internal checkpoints would disappear, enabling the Palestinian economy to begin its recovery from the disastrous losses of the last two years. With a political future for Palestine safeguarded, the Palestinian leadership could act decisively to prevent rejectionist elements from attacking Israel. Israel and the Palestinians could re-engage in good-faith negotiations, under UN supervision, to resolve the issues of borders, settlements, refugees, Jerusalem and water. Peacekeepers could assume the tasks of evacuating settlers or dismantling settlements—both likely to be politically impossible for the Israeli government to do by itself.

Prompt deployment of a peacekeeping force may be the only chance of halting an increasingly horrible, and one-sided, war between Israel and the Palestinians. But it can’t happen without a fundamental transformation in US policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In our unipolar world, the US can make or break effective international intervention.

So far various proposals for international intervention in the conflict have fallen short of what is required. Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah included a vague call for a multinational force in his eight-point memorandum on Middle East peace presented to Bush on April 26. A week earlier, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan suggested the deployment of a multinational force to act as a buffer between Israeli troops and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Buffers will not be respected by Palestinian militants because they may legitimize the existing forward positions of the Israeli army as semi-permanent lines of demarcation between Israeli- and Palestinian-controlled areas.

The worst-case scenario here is that UN troops, whether armed or not, might find themselves caught in skirmishes between Israeli occupation forces and resistance fighters, as happened from time to time during Israel’s occupation of south Lebanon. As in Lebanon, the Palestinians would denounce the UN presence as a means of preventing them from prosecuting their war of independence. Meanwhile, the Israelis would protest that the international force was doing nothing to prevent attacks on soldiers and settlements (and perhaps civilian targets within Israel). Fighting on the ground would be matched by a war of words in the international media.

Complicating the picture is the lack of a clear message from the Palestinian leadership. The Palestinian Authority (PA) did broadcast a demand for international peacekeepers as Israel pursued various measures of collective punishment for the bombing of a settler bus in November 2000. Nasser al-Kidwa, the PA's representative at the UN, pressed this case to Security Council members. But Annan, as well as the US, France and Britain, replied that any such demand was conditional upon the approval of Israel.

Successive Israeli governments have rejected a peacekeeping force as foreign interference in what they regard as an internal security problem. Since this original demand was nixed at the UN, the PA has backed down, often using the terms "observers" and "monitors" instead of "protection force." The National and Islamic Forces—a coalition of militias that exercises nominal "field leadership" of the uprising—has not taken a uniform stand on international intervention. Only Palestinian NGOs and civil society leaders have consistently sounded the call for an armed protection force.

US policy, echoing Israel, has generally dismissed the idea of international intervention. The Bush administration vetoed a UN resolution that would have sent unarmed observers to the region in March 2001. Recently, US officials have referred to the possibility of using CIA or State Department personnel to "monitor" implementation of US ceasefire plans. At worst, Palestinians would perceive that US monitors were merely sent to tamp down their resistance to the occupation. "We should be extremely cautious about calling for any kind of intervention unless it is explicitly linked to removing the Israeli occupation, because the more likely scenario would be to 'police' the PA areas," says Adam Hanieh, a Palestinian human rights activist who has written about the issue.

At best, the monitors envisioned by the US might be akin to the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH), deployed in 1997 after a rash of violent incidents involving tiny communities of religious-nationalist settlers living amidst a hostile Palestinian population in that West Bank town. TIPH has no mandate to do anything but report back to participating governments, which in turn have no mandate to recommend action based on TIPH reports. Accordingly, TIPH can do nothing to prevent settler or soldier attacks on Palestinians, which have been frequent since the uprising began. TIPH vehicles are regularly pelted with rocks and bottles by settlers. In late March, two TIPH personnel were shot dead in mysterious circumstances while driving from Hebron to Jerusalem. These observers may be a target of violence, but are powerless to stop it.

The failed TIPH experiment underlines the fact that not just any international intervention will do in Israel-Palestine. To be effective, the peacekeepers must be armed and empowered to disarm and arrest those from either side who would disrupt the peace. But more importantly, their mission must be primarily political—to effect the two-state solution to the conflict—and must adhere to strict timetables so as not to become semi-permanent and hence part of the problem.

UN intervention to ensure independence for East Timor makes for an interesting, if imprecise, comparison to the Palestinian case. As with the Palestinians, the world overwhelmingly supported East Timorese self-determination, against the wishes of the occupying power, Indonesia, which was also heavily backed by the US. When Indonesia and proxy militias embarked upon a war to suppress the spirit of East Timorese independence in September 1999, the US and Australian governments balked at armed intervention because Indonesia wouldn't accept it. Finally, reports from East Timor became so grim that the US suspended aid to Indonesia; three days later, Jakarta relented. UN peacekeepers are now watching over East Timor's transition to statehood.

Washington's refusal to endorse a far-reaching international presence in Palestine is of course rooted in its acceptance of Israel's characterization of the present conflict as a security crisis, rather than a political crisis of the occupation. Despite claims to be an "honest broker" and protestations of loyalty to Bush's "vision" of a Palestinian state, the US has pointedly refrained over many years from using its enormous leverage with Israel to bring its ally into compliance with UNSC 242. Despite Sharon's defiance of his calls to withdraw Israeli tanks from reoccupied Palestinian cities in April, Bush did not threaten any portion of US aid to Israel to bring his ally into compliance with UNSC 1402, either. John Negroponte, US ambassador to the UN, promised to veto any new resolution based on Annan's recent call for a (presumably toothless) multinational force.

International intervention to end Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands—the best hope for peace and security for Palestinians and Israelis alike—is a pipe dream until the US puts ending the occupation at the center of its own policy toward the Middle East and relinquishes its stranglehold upon Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy. One fervently hopes that the parallels between East Timor and Palestine do not grow any stronger before these things happen. In the meantime, the thin gruel of ceasefires and “confidence-building measures” on offer from Washington, coupled with Sharon's aggression and Palestinian desperation, are a recipe for indefinitely prolonged and agonizing conflict.

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