

Chapter 6

Western Crisis Response and the Question of Palestine

Alfred Pijpers

For various reasons the lessons of Afghanistan do not easily apply to Israel/Palestine, one of the most risky crisis areas in the world. First, the conflict is ruled by certain parameters, which make a Western military response rather predictable. Israel takes care of its own security, and will never allow any Western or other foreign interference in this area without its consent. And in the unlikely case that Israel's security or existence is really endangered, the U.S. will provide the required assistance, probably followed by some EU countries as well. In the West there is also widespread support for peacekeeping in this area in case a final agreement is concluded without the usual political, military, or budgetary constraints invoked for other post-Afghanistan crisis areas.

Palestinian Calm for How Long?

While tanks killed hundreds of mainly peaceful demonstrators in Syrian cities, and NATO aircrafts helped rebel forces destroy the power bases of Muammar Qaddafi, the situation in the Palestinian territories is relatively quiet. But one wonders for how long this will remain the case. The (so-called) Middle East Peace Process has been deadlocked since September of 2010, and a poisonous cocktail of Arab revolts and the bid for Palestinian statehood in the UN might pose serious problems for stability in this part of region spanning North Africa and the Middle East. What are the implications of these developments for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? And what are possible Western responses?

The Impact of the Arab Revolts on the Peace Process

The Arab revolts are essentially national rebellions against a series of corrupt and autocratic regimes, linked by a common inspiration among millions of deprived people in similar backward economic and social settings. For once, Israel is not invoked by the demonstrating masses as the main culprit of their troubles, though the beleaguered regime in Damascus tries particularly hard to divert attention to the traditional Zionist foe. Nevertheless, upheavals may have a considerable impact on the strategic environment of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship.

In the case of Egypt the impact of these upheavals is obvious. The Camp David Accords did not lead to a warm mutual relationship between the two former enemies (polls still consistently show that a very large majority of the Egyptian people harbor hostile feelings against the Jewish state), but they have provided peace and stability in southern Israel for more than three decades, freeing Israeli troops for deployment in northern Israel and the Palestinian territories. The Multinational Sinai Force and Observers (MFO) has always been a showcase of peacekeeping in the Middle East. Shortly after the fall of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, Padam, the Southern Command of the IDF, went on alert over Sinai, when an Iranian warship likely heading for Syria was allowed passage through the Suez Canal by the new Egyptian authorities for the first time in thirty years. The Suez Canal is crucial for all

CENTCOM operations across the greater Middle East—from Egypt to Pakistan—and its loss is undoubtedly a *casus belli* for the U.S.

At the moment, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty itself does not seem to be in danger. Its abrogation would not only risk renewed conflict with Israel but would also end the relationship with the U.S. as the main sponsor of the Egyptian military. Over the years Egypt has become heavily addicted to the steady flow of advanced weapons and technology from the U.S. If this flow is interrupted, there is no longer a suitable alternative as there was during the Cold War, when Cairo could turn to Moscow and its allies for arms and cash. The current American-Russian understanding about spheres of influence in the Middle East would hopefully prevent that. Other possible partners, Iran included, cannot easily foot the bill for weaponry that matches Israeli capabilities. Without spare parts, updates in software, and continuous training in the U.S., the Egyptian Air Force would soon become obsolete, and Cairo is probably not longing for a replay of the Six-Day War.

For the time being, therefore, the Egyptian military establishment remains the best guardian against the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical forces who might wish to end the peace agreement with Israel. But the fact that the new leaders in Cairo were able to broker a Hamas-Fatah deal in May, unlike their predecessors, proves that Egypt seeks more distance from Washington and Jerusalem while preparing to take a new leadership position in the Arab World. The mob assault on the Israeli Embassy in Cairo in September 2011 was also a bad omen.

The effects of the Syrian revolt on the Israeli-Palestinian theatre are still uncertain. President Bashar al-Assad will not seek a change in the status quo with Israel as long as he focuses all his energy on surviving the domestic battles in his own country. The busloads of demonstrators driven to the Syrian-Israeli truce lines

were not an attempt to court a new military conflict with Israel but rather an attempt to provoke a disproportional Israeli response for domestic and Arab media consumption (with some success, considering the shoot-outs by Israeli soldiers, when the deployment of riot police would have been more appropriate instead). Brutal repression without the risk of foreign military intervention is preferred over adventures in Syrian foreign policy, a trade-off that comes in handy for the outside world as well. With the outcome of the civil war in Libya still unresolved, no one in the U.S. or Europe has any inclination for another “humanitarian” intervention, even though the human rights record of Assad is worse than that of Qaddafi. The problems in Syria, however, could easily spill over into Lebanon or Jordan. The Arab League is in disarray from Tunisia to Yemen and no longer a steady vehicle for Saudi peace proposals. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran compete for predominance in a rapidly evolving regional setting. The fate of Israel/Palestine still forms an essential part of their calculations.

The Palestinian Quest for UN Membership

The decision by Mahmoud Abbas to ask the UN Security Council for a positive opinion on UN membership in September 2011 further complicates the Palestinian-Israeli relationship to a considerable degree. Though the U.S. will veto a vote in the Security Council, if a large majority in the UN Assembly can be sustained to support the Palestinian bid, this could have quite negative effects on a possible peace agreement between the two parties. The Palestinian Authority will consider such a majority as an enormous international boost for its territorial claims on the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Large-scale demonstrations against Israeli settlers and occupation forces may follow.

The position of Hamas remains also unclear despite the reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah concluded in Cairo in May 2011. So far Hamas is not prepared to renounce violence against Israeli citizens, to recognize Israel, or to honor previous agreements between Israel and the PLO. Jerusalem will, therefore, flatly refuse to deal with a new Palestinian government that includes Hamas representatives, hidden or not, behind a technocrat façade. The peace process would thus become more moribund than it already is. Even worse, security coordination between the Israeli military governor in the West Bank and the Palestinian Authority would be halted, and after a brief honeymoon, the two rival Palestinian movements would soon replay the bloody civil strife of Gaza in 2007. Hamas would prevail, followed at best by a unilateral Israeli withdrawal behind the separation barrier and at worst by clashes between the IDF and the Palestinian armed forces, with the usual high number of civilian casualties among the Palestinian population.

How will this affect the (presumed) democratic Arab Spring? Will Israel again become the favorite scapegoat if reforms are delayed and the new Arab regimes are not able to fulfill the expectations of the rising masses? Even if these new regimes are of a secular liberal nature, it will be difficult for them to refrain from helping their Palestinian brothers. Anti-Zionist solidarity may soon be restored across the wider Middle East, should Israel resort again to massive violence against a Palestinian uprising. During the October War in 1973 Israel was confronted by military forces from Egypt, Syria, Jordan (fighting via Syrian territory), Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Pakistan, as well as by a small Palestinian brigade (apart from the Cuban and North Korean troop contributions). If things go wrong, a similar broad Muslim coalition could re-emerge in the near future, now with the additional support of Iran and its proxies near the borders of Israel. Today these organizations

are much better equipped and trained than the occasional Palestinian raiders of the past. Hezbollah, for instance, has thousands of short-range rockets and advanced anti-tank missiles in South Lebanon and also possesses the necessary command and control capacity to conduct effective modern warfare, as became clear in 2006.

Israel remains the dominant conventional power in the region, but this could very well change if Egypt and Jordan also throw their military weight into the scales of a large anti-Israeli coalition. Turkey might also wish to join the fray. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in any case seems bound for a collision with Israel, particularly after the publication of the Palmer Report in the UN, which conceded Israel's right to a naval blockade of the Gaza strip. Cordesman and Nerguizian have already observed that "Israel does not face any meaningful threat to its decisive conventional 'edge' of superiority as long as Egypt and Jordan adhere to their peace treaties." Many people in the region still regard a large conflict with Israel as the perfect unifier of the Shiite-Sunni divide in the Muslim world. A doomsday scenario undoubtedly, perhaps not very likely, but not completely unthinkable either.

Possible Western Responses

Leaving aside this worst case thinking, the U.S. and EU should pursue five priorities in handling the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the near future:

1. Maintain transatlantic cohesion over the principal aspects of the conflict.

These include all the final status issues, and for the short-term policies towards Hamas and a (possible) vote in the United Nations about a Palestinian state. Transatlantic cooperation has served Western interests rather

well, particularly since “9/11,” when a joint strategy against terror helped also to formulate common principles for the peace process. A two-state formula is now part of a broad international consensus, reflected in the Quartet, but the U.S. and the EU differ over tactics, particularly where the EU is more prone than the U.S. to denounce Israel for its occupation and settlements policies. The vote in February 2011 over a draft resolution of the UN Security Council, which declared the Israeli settlements in the West Bank illegal, is a case in point. This draft resolution was vetoed by the U.S., but supported by the EU members in the Security Council.

One complication is the present U.S. attitude. Since the beginning of his term in office President Obama has tried very hard to produce a Palestinian-Israeli deal, which he considers a key to other U.S. interests in the region, particularly to the formation of a large Arab bloc against Iran. After numerous clashes with the Netanyahu-Lieberman team, and the departure of George Mitchell as the special U.S. envoy for the peace process in May 2011, it has become clear that Obama’s approach to press the Israeli government for major concessions has failed. Obama’s speech to the State Department on May 18, 2011, in conjunction with the 26 standing ovations for Netanyahu in the U.S. Congress two days later, can be read as a farewell address to active U.S. mediation efforts, at least for the time being.

If the U.S. fails to move the Netanyahu government, Europe cannot possibly be of much help either. A group of former EU politicians has recently argued that the European Union, as one of Israel’s main trading partners, should apply economic sanctions and disinvestments in order to change minds in Jerusalem. In their view, the EU-Israeli Association Agreement should also be used to punish Israel instead of linking the country more closely to Europe’s internal market. But Germany,

Italy, France, the UK, and other EU member states are against such measures for various reasons, even if their domestic audiences grow increasingly impatient with Netanyahu’s intransigence. Without the support of the U.S., European sanctions will not bite, and Israeli foreign trade has already found new outlets in Asia. A separate role for the EU in the peace process, distinct from the U.S., does not seem likely, even though European diplomacy—and money—remain an integral part of Western involvement.

2. Prevent a resumption of violence and escalation.

The situation in the West Bank is relatively calm, and even the Gaza Strip has not seen open warfare during more than two years. A top priority is to maintain this “peace,” and to prevent escalation in the case of minor incidents, whatever the mounting political differences between the two (or three) conflicting parties.

At the same time both the U.S. and the EU should also try to decouple the Palestinian question from the many other problems in the area. An Israeli-Palestinian settlement is not necessarily the key to peace and stability in the wider Middle East, as President Obama unfortunately has suggested in his Cairo speech two years ago. The bloody Arab revolts have already falsified this myth, as has the continuous building up of the Iranian nuclear program. Global diplomatic forums, like the Quartet, the G8, or even the G20 are also useful for the prevention of conflict if a direct U.S.-EU involvement is to no avail.

3. Preserve the *Fayyad acquis*.

Outside the public limelight the West Bank has been doing rather well over the past few years. With the help of General Dayton and the EU police mission in the Palestinian

territories (EUPOL COPPS), prime minister Salam Fayyad has turned a series of rival, heavily armed militias into a more or less centralized Palestinian Security Force, the cornerstone of an orderly Palestinian state. Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories has been closely involved throughout the reforms. Hamas' military structures have been dismantled, and many of their militants put behind bars. Palestinian police forces have managed to significantly reduce the number of fatal crimes and feuds in the area. Large-scale Israeli military intrusions seem a thing of the past. Time and again president Mahmoud Abbas has strongly advised against a resumption of violence against Israel. In his view, a third intifada would be a disaster. The West Bank was carefully kept outside the Gaza War. Much progress has also been made with the further buildup of state structures, such as the judiciary, ministries, and other governmental agencies, though corruption and the violation of human rights are still big problems. The IMF, the World Bank and the Special UN Envoy for the Peace Process, Robert Serry, have favorably reported about this progress.

In the meantime, Israel has removed a considerable number of roadblocks and checkpoints in the A and B areas, thereby facilitating the free movement of goods and persons between Palestinian cities. The EU and the U.S. furnish a large part of the Palestinian Authority budget, while the World Bank and the IMF provide loans and technical-financial assistance. Hundreds of construction works are undertaken for schools, hospitals, law courts and business parks, including a complete new city between Ramallah and Nablus. Internal and external trade is on the rise. The economic growth rates on the West Bank are higher than those in Europe. Although the peace process may be dead, at least some degree of peace has been attained (which is perhaps better than

the other way around, for instance during the run-up to the Roadmap).

For the first time in their battered history at least part of the Palestinian leadership seems to have traded its long-standing principal of violent resistance against Israel for the priority of Palestinian state-building. It is of critical importance that these achievements be preserved and further developed, whatever the composition of the next Palestinian government or the fate of the Palestinian state in the United Nations. The Palestinians should also be aware that a successful state-building process is dependent neither on the *desirable* size of its state territory nor on the preferred location of its capital. West Germany created one of the most successful states in the world, with one-third of German territory occupied by the Red Army and a provincial town as its proclaimed capital. The borders of "1967" are a legitimate point of reference for the Palestinians, but not attaining them can never be an excuse for the resumption of violence. A fully independent, prospering Palestinian state in 100% of Gaza and the West Bank is not totally different from a similar state in only 93% or 95% of the same territory, though the end of Israeli occupation is of course an essential precondition in both cases.

4. Make sure that Hamas will renounce violence as a matter of principle.

In the short-term the U.S. and the EU must take a position on the question what to do with a new Palestinian interim-government if this—directly or indirectly—includes Hamas representatives. So far Hamas has not met the criteria of the Quartet. This does in itself not preclude contacts with this movement, but a regular dialogue at an official level is another matter. Here Western countries face an awful dilemma. If they refuse to deal with the new Palestinian government, as Prime Minister Netanyahu has urged them to do, they run

the risk of alienating Fayyad and his people. If they proceed with the expectation that Hamas will gradually turn around, they will perhaps make the same mistake as in 2006. At that time the U.S. and the EU supported Hamas' participation in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, in vain hope that the resistance organization would moderate its principles as soon it had joined the regular Palestinian institutions. The numerous informal contacts between the Hamas leadership and the many EU, Swiss, Norwegian, Russian, and U.S. envoys, including a former U.S. president, apparently were not successful, so one wonders whether a further engagement along these lines makes much sense. The West should also be careful of rubberstamping the coming Palestinian elections as "democratic," based on whether the polls are organized in a correct way, without further questioning the peaceful intentions of the participating political parties.

It is also a matter of principle. Both the military and political wings of Hamas have been placed on the EU and U.S. blacklists of terrorist organizations. Western anti-terrorist policies would lose all credibility if such organizations were henceforth accepted as regular interlocutors, without any prior change in their programs. One cannot blame Israel if it refuses to negotiate with representatives of a

movement that is not prepared to renounce forever the deliberate targeting of Israeli citizens (apart from a tactical *hudna*). It would be silly to turn the clock backwards to the pre-Oslo era, and to renegotiate again the principles of non-violence or the recognition of Israel. Any new Palestinian government should be made aware of these points after so many years of unavailing fights. Clearly, the transatlantic understanding about Hamas should be continued.

5. Remind Jerusalem about the inevitability of a Palestinian state.

Having said that, it is obvious that Israel also needs to understand the signs of the times. Jerusalem may put obstacles in the way of a decent peace process, but it cannot block the gradual development of Palestinian statehood. Under international law, the Palestinian people have the full right to self-determination, though the timing and wording of Palestinian independence should in itself not violate the previous accords between Israel and the PLO. And the principles of non-violence must be an essential part of its constitution. Israel cannot prevent a large majority of the General Assembly from giving its (non-binding) blessing to a Palestinian state, thereby hugely upgrading the legitimacy of Palestinian aspirations.