

BEYOND THE HOOPLA:

BUSH'S OPTION IN THE MIDDLE-EAST

Putting all feelings and loyalties aside, a realistic assessment of the forces at play in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict produces the following equation:

1. A broad national unity government commands the loyalties of a large and solid majority of the Israeli population. This government is pledged to not negotiate with the P.L.O. whose basic charter still commits it to Israel's destruction. But the real reason Israel refuses to deal with the P.L.O. is that it is not actually a factor in the conflict. Basically it is no more than an entrenched political bureaucracy living comfortably in Tunisia, Syria, Europe, and the United States and thus able to stick forever to extreme and unrealistic positions that bar any compromise. The P.L.O. rules over neither territory nor population, and it thus lacks a physical base in the disputed terrain. Its status and recognition are entirely derived from its ability to disrupt, destroy, and damage the efforts of others.

2. The P.L.O. cannot really reform even if it genuinely renounces terrorist acts against Israel since its hold on the Israeli Arabs is almost wholly a result of a reign of terror. Emerging local Arab leaders have regularly been murdered and maimed as soon as they dared to seek ways to co-exist with the

Israelis; for instance, Elias Freij, the veteran mayor of Bethlehem, proposed a truce in the year-old Arab uprising in exchange for an Israeli release of prisoners and a cessation of punitive measures. A few days later Arafat warned publicly that anyone advocating a stop to the rebellion "exposes himself to the bullets of his people." Freij now opens his mail with a metal detector, and even so the odds on his living for long are low. Fear of P.L.O. violence is much greater among the Arabs than it is among the Israeli Jews. The P.L.O. would quickly disappear if it were to really renounce the use of force.

Arafat always understood the urgent need to acquire a territorial foothold. He and his organization have tried for forty years to establish themselves as an actual presence in the field by destroying Israel, by taking over Southern Lebanon, and by overthrowing Jordan, whose population is 70% Palestinian, all without success.

3. The Palestinian Arabs in Israel and in Jordan have greatly benefitted from their long association with the Westernized Israelis. Their standards of living and education are among the highest in the region, and they know the real strengths and weaknesses of the Israeli society. They want and need a settlement since they do not share the delusional expectation of many others that Israel will simply be eliminated and be no more. But, like the Israelis, they have also acquired real national aspirations and pride, and those too will continue

to exist, and probably even to grow.

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To establish peace, any government in Israel will have to reach agreement with the local Arab population and with those who rule in Amman, but not with the P.L.O. If they ruled Jordan, members of the P.L.O. could not be disqualified, but Israel can afford not to negotiate with those whose claim to represent the Palestinians is based on force and coercion. Yet a weak and vacillating Hussein is not a good negotiating partner, and the Israelis may well prefer to make a deal with reliable Palestinians, whatever their past.

Those familiar with the geography and the puny size of the disputed area see clearly why it is almost certain that only two, and not three, independent states will ever exist between the Mediterranean and the desert, one Jewish and one Arab. No one can predict whether the Palestinian state of Jordan will eventually be ruled by the Hashemites or by the Palestinians, but one way or another, it will surely end up being the focal point for the legitimate national aspirations of the Palestinians who reside there, and elsewhere. Even under Shamir Israel will cede at least partial control over those parts of "the territories" with heavy concentrations of Arab population.

Sections of the West Bank and Gaza will become autonomous, but they will also have a political and cultural affiliation with such a Palestinian state, even as Israel continues to maintain some role to guarantee its security. The Israelis

will have no choice but even to allow the flag of such a Palestinian state (with Amman as its capitol) to fly over an independent Islamic religious enclave within Jerusalem (consisting of the Mosque of Omar), a position resembling that of the Vatican within Italy. No other viable option exists.

The Palestinian uprising is aimed as much against the P.L.O. as it is against the Israelis, which is why the former was forced to change. The Arabs of Israel are demanding more realistic solutions than the dream of driving the Israelis into the sea. Hussein realized quickly that the intifada will not destroy Israel even if it damages it, but it may succeed in creating enough political momentum to destroy him. This is why he suddenly broke his long association with the West Bank a few months ago.

The P.L.O. will also realize finally that even the United States cannot, and will not, deliver Israel on a silver platter. Arafat will have to try again to base his Palestinian state in the territory now known as Jordan, or be passed by. Only time will tell whether he can achieve this by negotiation, by force, or not at all. But he will try until the Hashemites prove themselves vulnerable or invincible. One way or another, some accommodation will be worked out sooner or later between the Israeli Arabs and Jews who share an existence together, based on autonomy and economic integration. Most probably it will have some ties with the independent Palestinian state in Jordan.

An all-out war between Israel and its neighbors is not likely, whatever else happens. Libya and Iran may sponsor and finance terrorist activities, but with no common border this is all they can do. Long-distance hit-and-run attacks, even with missiles carrying chemical weapons, can cause a great deal of suffering and harm, but they do not win a war. Besides, they would cost the attackers so much that they might not even try. Only Syria can wage a war, but it is not likely to do so as long as the odds remain in Israel's favor.

But it is very difficult to put feelings and loyalties aside. The power of these irrational forces is such that they often confuse issues and misguide policy makers, prolonging conflict. The relationship between the United States and Israel may become very strained in the process, but the final result cannot be much different. It may not be the most desirable or even the most just solution, only the most possible one. And this, after all, is all that the political process is designed to do.

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