FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Ties That Bind

Americans, Arabs, and Israelis After September 11

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Since the tragedy of September 11, 2001, much has been said about how U.S. foreign policy, and especially U.S. policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has bred resentment in Arab and Muslim countries. Far less has been said, however, about an issue no less central and consequential: how the attacks and subsequent events have reshaped the perspectives and strategies of Israelis and Palestinians themselves. Growing insecurity has pushed Israel to rely more than ever on its close relationship with the United States, whereas Arabs and Muslims have rallied around the Palestinian cause. As these alliances are reinforced, the divide between the United States and the Arab and Muslim worlds is inevitably deepening.

ISRAEL'S DILEMMA

The suicide bombings that followed the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian talks in the summer of 2000 sent Israel reeling. Far beyond their tragic human consequences, the bombings undermined the principal defensive strategy Israel has developed since its founding: deterring attacks by projecting an image of strength and resolve.

In recent decades, Israel has generally succeeded in deterring its Arab foes by maintaining an overwhelming advantage in conventional power and developing an implicit nuclear capability. To keep its deterrent credible, Israel has been prepared to pay a significant price. After the first Palestinian intifada in the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, the Israeli military establishment rejected the notion of a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, even though the occupation of Gaza drained Israeli resources and provided few direct benefits. Withdrawing in the absence of a political agreement, it was believed, would look like a retreat in the face of a few ill-equipped but determined Palestinian fighters—something that would lead to more threats in more vital areas and eventually undermine Israel's very existence.

In 1993, when former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was mulling whether to sign the Oslo accords with the

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Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the most serious alternative discussed was a plan for unilateral withdrawal from Gaza (advocated especially by a retired Israeli general, Shlomo Gazit). A major reason that Rabin went ahead with the Oslo approach was that, in trying to maintain Israel's deterrent, he decided that it was better to take risks through a negotiated settlement than to send a message that Israel was on the run.

Similar calculations explain Israel's reluctance throughout the 1980s and 1990s to pull its troops out of Lebanon. Even though the post-1982 occupation of a slice of Lebanese territory brought Israel no direct strategic benefits and led to a steady stream of Israeli casualties and growing public discontent, Israeli military and political elites were adamantly opposed to pulling back without a political agreement with Lebanon and Syria.

Even when Ehud Barak promised, during his 1999 election campaign, to withdraw from Lebanon within a year after becoming prime minister, he wanted to do so in the context of an agreement with Syria. This helps explain why, after assuming office, he chose to focus his diplomatic efforts first on the Syrian track of the peace process. Only after those negotiations failed did he decide to withdraw unilaterally from Lebanon—and the consequences were exactly what Israeli strategists had feared all along. Withdrawal under duress in the absence of an agreement sent a message of weakness and fueled rather than diminished attacks against Israel elsewhere.

The Arab world, contrasting Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon with its continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, drew the lesson that Hezbollah-style operations worked where other methods did not. As the only party that could "win" a war against Israel, Hezbollah became an inspiration for many Palestinian militants, and its success helped prompt the start of the second intifada in 2000. In fact, although Hezbollah has remained a threat to Israel, it has inflicted far less pain on Israel than have Palestinian militants— and far less than Israel has inflicted on Lebanon. Hezbollah's threat is mostly metaphorical. And this metaphor has been closely watched by others.

The proliferation of suicide attacks against Israel in the past few years has further undermined the credibility of the Israeli deterrent. The bombings have generated deep feelings of insecurity throughout the country and highlighted a weakness in Israel's strategy. The nuclear and conventional arsenals that Israel has so carefully built up, it seems, can dissuade attacks by states sensitive to punishments and rewards, but not those by small, decentralized groups of individuals willing to die for their cause.

In light of all this, and aside from any designs the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon might have on the West Bank, Israel's strategy over much of the past three years has sought less to make peace than to prevent defeat and restore deterrence by finding ways to project power. On the one hand, this has involved demonstrating its military capability and determination; on the other, it has meant binding itself even closer to the United States so as to gain strategic depth.

DEFENSE IN DEPTH

Since its founding, Israel has feared that Arabs would continue to view it as a small, weak, and temporary entity that

could be overwhelmed by one devastating defeat. As a result, a central component of its strategy has been to latch itself to the United States, convincing Arabs that they could not defeat Israel without defeating its champion as well.

This linkage eventually became so strong that by the 1990s many Arabs had come to believe that the shortest route to better relations with the United States went through Israel. The U.S. acceptance of the PLO and its leader, Yasir Arafat, in 1993, for example, was largely a function of Israel's decision to do the same. The Palestinians never had a significant independent relationship with Washington. The Israelis knew this full well, and they took such a strong anti-Arafat line in the wake of the collapse of the Camp David negotiations sponsored by President Bill Clinton and the onset of the second intifada in part to make sure the Palestinians understood that their relations with Washington could be shut down if the peace process did not move forward.

September 11 confirmed Israel's need to solidify its relations with the United States, for two reasons. First, Israel feared that the demonstration of how much damage and pain a few suicide bombers could cause would inspire and embolden militants in the Middle East. Second, Israel feared that the American public might blame the attacks on U.S. support for Israel and hence undermine such support. Although Israel's concerns were proven wrong—two years after September 11, U.S.-Israeli relations are stronger than ever—they were hardly groundless. In times of national tragedy, states often redefine their national interests, and the Bush administration's first move after the

attacks was indeed to build coalitions with moderate Arab and Muslim governments so as to win their support in the war on terrorism. Within weeks of the attacks, George W. Bush became the first U.S. president to explicitly support the creation of a Palestinian state. But as Israeli-Palestinian fighting worsened, this effort got tangled up with U.S. relations with Muslims and the Middle East more generally, creating yet a new context for the dispute.

THE PALESTINIANS' PROBLEM

Like the Israelis, the Palestinians have also been troubled by their limited resources and precarious position since the collapse of peace talks and the September 11 attacks, and they have also responded by seeking to prevent defeat and gain strategic depth. The majority of Palestinians fear that, because of Israel's military superiority, they will have no answer if Israel decides to impose a solution. These fears in part lie behind the societal tolerance for suicide bombings, which enable the Palestinians to cause Israelis pain in ways that other, more conventional, tactics of confrontation do not. Some militant groups, such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas, may favor suicide attacks as radical means to radical ends (such as the utter destruction of Israel), but unfortunately even many Palestinians who favor an eventual two-state solution have condoned the horrifying bombings as one of the few levers available to an otherwise weak and helpless people.

The Palestinians have also always feared being abandoned by other Arabs and Muslims. This fear explains the frequent Palestinian attempts to rally support for their cause in the broader Arab and Muslim world. Palestinian

leaders have always understood that Arab governments serve their own political interests above those of the Palestinians, but they have recognized that Arab and Muslim popular opinion can be mobilized to secure at least some outside succor, especially in times of crisis.

During the heyday of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s, appeals to Arab identity were often sufficient for this goal, and the Palestinian issue ended up becoming the core symbol of pan-Arabism. In recent years, Islamic identity has become increasingly important, and so—despite the secular PLO's initial hesitations—the Palestinians have repositioned themselves somewhat, playing the "Jerusalem card" to bolster their cause's Islamic credentials. It is thus not surprising that when the second intifada began in October 2000, it was in reaction to Sharon's police-escorted visit to the most prominent Islamic and Jewish holy place in Jerusalem, al Haram al Sharif (the Temple Mount). Getting support from other Arabs and Muslims had become more important to the Palestinians than peacemaking. Public opinion surveys and reports since then have demonstrated stronger support for the Palestinian cause not only among Arabs but also among Muslims in remote non-Arab countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, something that has affected government policies as well.

THE PEOPLE'S PULSE

Even as divisions between the United States and the Muslim world have grown and dealings with the Middle East have moved to the center of public discourse in recent years, the American public's views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have remained remarkably stable—if also quite complex.

More than 60 percent of Americans want their government to avoid taking sides in the conflict, but of those who do want Washington to take sides, the vast majority favor Israel. More than 70 percent of Americans, meanwhile, believe that U.S. support for Israel makes attacks against the United States more likely, yet most Americans favor continuing such support nonetheless.

The American public remains adamantly opposed to all terrorism, including that carried out by Palestinians against Israelis. But in four different national surveys conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes of the University of Maryland between May 2002 and October 2003, about half of the respondents said they saw Israel's war with the Palestinians as "a nationalist conflict over land," and only 13 to 17 percent saw it "as part of the war on terrorism, similar to the U.S. war on al Qaeda."

Public opinion in the Arab and Muslim world, on the other hand, has changed over the past three years, largely as a result of U.S. policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to the State Department, in the spring of 2000, when the prospects of Arab-Israeli peace seemed promising, more than 60 percent of people in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates expressed confidence in the United States. By the fall, after the collapse of the negotiations and the onset of the second intifada, expressions of confidence had dropped sharply, and by the spring of 2001 they had fallen to around 35 percent. They continued to drop after September 11, until by March 2003, on the eve of the Iraq war, only about 4 percent of people in Saudi Arabia and 9 percent in the United Arab

Emirates expressed favorable views of the United States.

Although some of this shift might be accounted for by resentment over U.S. unilateralism, it is clear that in Arab and Muslim countries the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a critical issue. This fact should hardly be surprising. Every people has a "prism of pain" through which it views the world. For Americans today, that prism is the tragedy of September 11—which serves the same function Pearl Harbor served for an earlier generation. For Jews in the second half of the twentieth century, the traumatic event was the Holocaust—although for many Israelis, this is now being supplanted by the recent wave of suicidal terror. For most Arabs, however, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been the lens through which they see the world. Generation after generation since the 1940s has come of age through the painful experience of war, defeat, and dispossession. The continuing violence on the Israeli-Palestinian front and the humiliation of the Palestinians, now conveyed to every home almost instantly through satellite television, exacerbate the pain.

American public attitudes toward Arabs and Muslims would have been affected by the tragedy of September 11 regardless of what was happening simultaneously on the Israeli-Palestinian front. That said, however, the relationships between the United States and all Middle Eastern countries have clearly been complicated by the escalating Israeli-Palestinian troubles and the role the United States is perceived to have played in them.

As a result, most Arabs and Muslims today see the U.S. war on terrorism as an attack on them, whereas an increasing number of Americans see Islam as a threat. Most Arabs and Muslims also think of the United States and Israel as joined at the hip. In a sense, this perception is a major victory for Israel's long campaign to acquire the United States as a protector, and there is little doubt that it has helped strengthen Israel's strategic position in the short term.

Over the longer term, however, the picture is less clear, because the credibility of Israel's deterrent is now linked not just to Israeli actions but to American ones as well, and to U.S. policy in Iraq in particular. If the United States is seen to retreat in the face of increasing Iraqi resistance, the consequences for Israel will be dramatic. It will be a replay of the Hezbollah example on a vastly greater scale—precisely the sort of outcome Israel had hoped to avoid by linking itself to U.S. power.

Over the past three years, both parties in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have managed to protect their core alliances and increase their standing with important patrons. In the end, however, these successes have not only sharpened the divide between the United States and the Muslim world but also made it more difficult for outsiders to help solve the dispute. Both sides have survived, but unless they change their strategies, it will be only to continue fighting.☯