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Light Weapons and Israeli-Palestinian Peace

by Jeffrey Boutwell

On January 17, 2001, the director of the Palestinian television network, Hisham Miki, 54, was gunned down while dining in a Palestinian restaurant in Gaza City. Murdered in a style reminiscent of the heyday of the Chicago mob, Miki was shot repeatedly in the head and chest with a silencer-equipped pistol by three masked gunmen.

Reports that followed listed various motives for Miki's killing. Some attributed it to corruption within the Palestinian Authority (PA), others to anger over the way Miki was running the Palestinian broadcasting operation. Whatever the reason, the killing in broad daylight in Gaza symbolizes a sober new reality for the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people: the very peace process that might someday lead to true self-determination for the Palestinians has in the meantime let loose a flood of illegal weapons into the West Bank and Gaza Strip that threatens to undermine the very peace for which the Palestinians are fighting.

The surge in Israeli-Palestinian violence that began in September 2000 not only has resulted in hundreds of deaths and injuries on both sides; it also led to the fall of the Labor government of Ehud Barak, the holding of new elections and the formation of a national unity government under Likud head Ariel Sharon, and a freeze on further progress in the peace process. By March 2001, more than six months after the start of what the Palestinians call the *Al-Aqsa intifada*,¹ the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Israel itself were caught up in a daily cycle of shootings, bombings, and massive civil unrest. In figures provided to the international fact-finding committee headed by former U.S. senator George Mitchell, Israeli authorities cited more than 2,700 live fire attacks by Palestinians on Israelis in the first one hundred days of fighting.² For their part, Palestinian officials accused Israel of using excessive force, including extra-judicial assassinations, to smash the *intifada*, noting that the 350 Palestinians killed during the struggle (by early March 2001) outnumbered by almost ten to one the number of Israeli deaths.³ Proposals for more active international involvement to stop the fighting, including sending two thousand unarmed UN peacekeepers to the region, have thus far come to naught (indeed, the Mitchell commission was a compromise effort by the Clinton administration, in support of the Barak government, to forestall UN action).⁴

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In terms of domestic politics, the Likud-Labor national unity government (led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres) is certain to have a difficult time reconciling party differences over the Oslo peace process in seeking a way out of the impasse. Similarly, Palestinians remain deeply divided over the wisdom of continuing the Oslo process, with important elements of Fatah (the largest faction of the PLO), the Tanzim (an armed militia of Fatah), and other organizations within Palestinian civil society operating either as armed militias of the PA or, at times, independently of PA control.

Underlying the grim near-term prospects for revitalizing the formal peace process is the reality that Arab-Jewish communal relations have deteriorated sharply since the outbreak of fighting in September 2000. Wanton and vicious violence on both sides has claimed thousands of killed, wounded, and displaced and has made any prospects for reconciliation seem illusory. When one factors in the large numbers of small arms and light weapons held by both Arab and Jewish civilians in the territories, and the inability of either the Israeli army or Palestinian security forces to effectively police their respective populations or confiscate illegal weapons, future prospects are grim indeed.

PROLIFERATING LIGHT WEAPONS

"If I call my clients and say I've got 100 guns, they come running," says Palestinian gun dealer Khalil Abu Ali of Nablus in the West Bank.⁵ During the relatively peaceful days of the Oslo process in the 1990s, when Palestinian-Israeli violence in the territories dropped markedly, an estimated tens of thousands of illegal weapons were making their way into the West Bank and Gaza Strip from Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and even Israel itself.⁶ Today, Israeli government sources talk of as many as 70,000 such illegal weapons, ranging from automatic pistols, submachine guns, and assault rifles to hand grenades, mortars, Katyusha rockets, and anti-tank missiles. No longer are Palestinian attacks on Israelis confined to individual drive-by shootings of Jewish settlements or ambushes of Israeli cars traveling through the West Bank. Increasingly, Fatah and Tanzim militants, Islamic terrorists from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and even Palestinian police and security personnel are carrying out paramilitary operations, in squads of ten or more fighters, against Israeli military outposts using hand grenades, mortars, and rockets.⁷

Violence on the part of militant Jewish settlers against Palestinian civilians has increased as well. During the 1990s, settler attacks against Palestinians were most often carried out in retaliation for Palestinian shootings and terrorist attacks against Israelis. Beginning in 2000, however, even before the outbreak of the new *intifada*, settler leaders spoke of increased violence as a way of attempting to derail the peace process. In June 2000, when it appeared that a summit meeting of President Clinton, Prime Minister Barak, and Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat might produce a last-minute agreement, settler leader Pinchas Wallerstein warned that Jewish settlers would "react with the greatest harshness" to what they considered "immoral, illegitimate, and illegal" concessions on the part of the Israeli government in giving

up West Bank and Gaza territory.⁸ One need only think back to Yigal Amir's rationale for assassinating Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 to take such talk seriously. In the end, the summit collapsed with no agreement, paving the way for Palestinian frustrations to erupt. Once full-scale violence did break out, the more militant Jewish settlers, armed with government-issue Galil and M-16 assault rifles, contributed to the escalating cycle of violence with both unprovoked and retaliatory attacks against Palestinians.

PEACE FROM THE BARREL OF A GUN?

The Oslo peace accords signed by Israel and the Palestinians in 1993 and 1995 contained a wide range of measures for promoting both Palestinian self-government and Jewish-Arab reconciliation. One of the most important components of those accords was the right of the Palestinian Authority to raise and equip a strong domestic police and security force that could enforce order in the West Bank and Gaza Strip while also cooperating with Israeli security forces to thwart terrorist attacks against Jews. Specifically, the 1995 Oslo II accord (and later, the January 1997 Hebron Protocol) provided for a Palestinian police force of some 30,000 personnel, equipped with 15,000 automatic rifles and pistols, 240 heavy machine guns, 45 armored vehicles, lightly armed shore patrol vessels, and associated communications and transportation equipment. Oslo II also set limits on the number of armed Palestinian police and security personnel that could be deployed in individual towns and villages.

The peace process let loose a flood of illegal weapons into the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In addition to limiting authorized weaponry to one for every two Palestinian police and security personnel, the Israeli government insisted on the creation of an Israeli-Palestinian Joint Security Coordination and Cooperation Committee (JSC) to oversee "arrangements for entry of the Palestinian Police and the introduction of police arms, ammunition, and equipment."⁹ Initially, most of these weapons were Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifles (standard issue of the Palestine Liberation Army), brought by Palestinians returning from abroad. In addition to keeping an updated register of any and all firearms in its possession, the Palestinian Authority was also required to pass legislation and strictly control small arms and light weapons in the civilian population.¹⁰

Almost from the beginning, however, the issue of illegal weapons in the Palestinian community was a major stumbling block to further progress in the peace process. In October 1996, the Israeli government published a list of "Major PLO Violations of the Oslo Accords," which noted that while "the PA is obligated to disarm and disband all militias operating in the autonomous areas," it has "failed to undertake a systematic crackdown on illegal weapons, and has confiscated just a few hundred of the tens of thousands of weapons circulating in the autonomous areas."¹¹ In addition to describing how Palestinians were smuggling illegal weapons across the Jordan River and

Dead Sea and through underground tunnels linking Egypt to the Gaza Strip, the Israeli government accused the Palestinian Authority itself of complicity in organized smuggling by capitalizing on the VIP status of PA limousines and aircraft entering the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

In turn, Palestinian officials consistently note that Israelis themselves are heavily involved in running guns into the territories. Israeli underworld figures coordinate shipments of black market M-16s and Uzis into the West Bank and Gaza, while Israeli soldiers have been caught stealing weapons from army depots and selling them to Palestinians.¹² A more recent import are M-16s sporting the cypress tree of Lebanon, stolen from weapons stocks of the South Lebanese Army when it was disbanded as Israel withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000.¹³ As is common elsewhere around the world, weapons smuggling from Israel to Palestinian areas is heavily intertwined with narcotics, stolen cars, and other contraband.

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Despite the profits to be made in weapons smuggling (an M-16 can command up to \$5,000), the main motivations among Palestinians for acquiring small arms and light weapons are political and cultural. For many individuals, according to Palestinian legislator Hussam Khader, "buying a gun is a priority . . . it comes before buying a house, or marriage. Palestinian women will sell their gold to buy guns for their husbands or sons."¹⁴ For groups like Fatah and Tanzim, weaponry ensures political power and independence, whether in relation to the Israeli army or rival militias or the Palestinian Authority itself. For Arafat and the heads of his security forces, the stockpiling of illegal weapons, in excess of the 15,000-plus allowed by Oslo II, likewise represents a lever of control over an increasingly divided Palestinian community.

MILITANT JEWISH SETTLERS

An additional stimulus for Palestinian acquisition of weapons, of course, is the constant friction and violence between Arab and Jew in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. For more than 30 years, since Israel took control of the territories following the 1967 war, Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza have daily witnessed well-armed Jewish settlers, as well as Israeli soldiers, living and traveling among them. Armed with government-issue M-16s, Galil assault rifles, and Uzi submachine guns, the Jewish settlers are a constant reminder to the Palestinians that complete sovereignty and control over their lives remains a distant dream. While only a small minority of the more than 170,000 settlers living in the territories is considered extremist (with an even smaller percentage belonging to such outlawed organizations as Kach and Kahane Chai), the settlers do have wide autonomy over their own affairs and considerable political influence in the Israeli Knesset. As often as not, the well-organized settlers tangle with the Israeli government as much as with the Palestinians among whom they live. The same is true for the often uneasy relations between the

settlers and the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) who are deployed in the territories in part to protect the settlements. Despite the fact that the settlements themselves are part of the IDF communications network and territorial defense structure in the territories, many settlers feel that the Israeli army does not do enough to protect their security. As Arab-Jewish relations have grown even more tense at the prospect of additional transfers of West Bank territory to the Palestinians, friction between the settlers and the army has increased. This is especially so in and around such right-wing settlements as Hebron and Kiryat Arba, where settlers have clashed openly with the soldiers.

The sense of vulnerability felt by Palestinians living among well-armed Israeli civilians in the territories was brought home as never before by the Baruch Goldstein massacre of twenty-nine Palestinians at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron in February 1994. Goldstein, a physician who often treated both Jewish and Arab victims of sectarian violence, was also an IDF reservist (as are most settlers, male and female) and thus was allowed to carry his Galil assault rifle past the IDF troops ostensibly guarding the Arab worshippers that early February morning. Despite the outrage felt by many Israelis following the massacre, Goldstein's grave outside Hebron was made into a shrine by many settlers, and fears have been expressed by more moderate settler leaders about another "Goldstein incident" carried out by settler extremists.¹⁵ The most extreme supporters of greater Israel (Eretz Israel) also applauded the tragic assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, carried out by Yigal Amir precisely to stop the peace process and the return of the West Bank to the Palestinians.

The inability of successive Israeli governments to adequately control the actions of the more militant settlers in the territories continues to be a grave concern for the future of the peace process. In June 1998, the Likud government of Benjamin Netanyahu actually solidified the settlers' position in the territories when it approved the creation of settler civil guard units in Ma'ale Adumim, Ariel, and other large West Bank settlements, a move long opposed by previous governments, Israeli military commanders, and police officials. As criticized by then member of the Knesset Dedi Zucker, such units could evolve into "armed militias of extremist settlers serving as a private army of the Yesha (Jewish settler) Council."¹⁶ This has indeed happened at times, with armed settlers operating independently of, or even in direct opposition to, army and police authority in the territories. Despite the prohibitions on militant organizations like Kach and Kahane Chai, supporters of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane have formed new groups, such as the Committee for Safety of the Roads, that act as little more than vigilantes in mounting armed patrols on the roads and byways of the West Bank.

WEAPONS, PEACE, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The widespread availability of small arms and light weapons among Palestinians and Israelis in the West Bank and Gaza Strip poses a significant challenge on three separate but related levels.

First, of course, are the ramifications of the daily gun violence between Arabs and Jews that has characterized the *Al-Aqsa intifada* from September 2000 to the present. It is unclear whether Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation is remotely possible in the near term because of the nature of the violence and the number of victims it has claimed. Even if a formal peace treaty is concluded—one that is acceptable to a majority of both Palestinians and Israelis—how stable will such a peace be when individual security is based so strongly on the carrying of weapons and the use of deadly force?

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Second are the implications of the flood of weapons for a stable Palestinian government and civil society, one based on democratic principles and a tolerance for criticism of authority. In addition to the host of political, economic, and social challenges faced by the Palestinians, can a pluralist, democratic society take root in Palestine in the face of multiple, heavily armed political militias and official police and security personnel operating outside the rule of law?¹⁷

Third are the implications for Israel itself at a time when the country faces the most contentious and existential issue of its fifty-year history. Will a majority of Israelis ultimately decide not to be politically blackmailed by a small militant core of settler and religious supporters of Eretz Israel? Will they accept the hard reality that there can be no coexistence with the Palestinians unless the settlers are removed from the West Bank and Gaza Strip and brought back behind the Green Line?

The ability of just a few individuals to disrupt and even block the peace process has already been demonstrated by Amir's assassination of Rabin in 1995 and the outbreak of terrorist attacks inside Israel just prior to Shimon Peres' failed bid for prime minister in 1996. For his part, Arafat is ever mindful of the staunch opposition to peace with Israel on the part of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. More than once during Hamas demonstrations in Gaza against Arafat's policies has been heard the chant, "Arafat, Arafat, remember what happened to Sadat," a reference to the Islamic militants who assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

In light of the poisoned atmosphere enveloping Israeli-Palestinian relations, what should, and can, be done to prevent violence from escalating still further and to resume some semblance of the peace process?


Despite visceral Israeli opposition to any form of substantive international involvement, the time has come for a strong international peacekeeping presence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Under the leadership of the United Nations, and with full support from the five permanent members of the Security Council, the UN should insert an armed peacekeeping force into the West Bank and Gaza Strip to separate Palestinians and Israelis. While such a mission entails great risks, not least for the

international peacekeepers who likely will find themselves targets of both Jewish and Arab extremists, one must ask: if Kosovo, Bosnia, and East Timor, why not the West Bank and Gaza Strip? Following more than one hundred years of Arab-Jewish communal violence in Palestine, and with the Oslo peace process all but dead, the international community has a responsibility and a moral duty to act.

Such an international intervention, however, will succeed only if positive, unilateral steps are taken by both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority to reduce the threat of armed violence, whether aimed at each other or at an international peacekeeping force.

For its part, the Israeli government should affirm the existence of a new Green Line, as previously discussed with the Palestinians, that would bring a large number of existing settlements along the current Green Line into Israel proper. A number of different border alteration proposals have been advanced that would incorporate 70 to 80 percent of the settlers at a cost to the Palestinians of 10 to 15 percent of total West Bank territory. In return, Israel would agree to disband all remaining settlements in the West Bank, and all of the Gaza settlements, and to turn over all housing and infrastructure to the Palestinians (with immediate compensation paid to Israel by the international community). Only by removing Jewish settlers from the heart of the Palestinian community can there be a chance for peace.

Lastly, international pressure (including the withholding of international aid) must be brought to bear on Yasir Arafat and the Palestinian Authority to crack down on the armed militias of Tanzim and Hamas, to resume joint security cooperation with Israel to thwart terrorist acts, to seize illegal weapons from civilians, and to enact a civil constitution for Palestine that safeguards political dissent and due process. As noted in March 2001 by the European Union's commissioner for external relations, Christopher Patten, "In order for us to go on and provide substantial assistance to the Palestinian administration, we will need to see a tough realistic budget, some real transparency, and measures to ensure complete anti-corruption."¹⁸ Given losses to the Palestinian economy of \$1 billion (25 percent of GDP) in the first six months of the *Al-Aqsa intifada*, the international community should use whatever economic leverage it can muster. In the absence of positive reforms, Arafat must be made aware that neither continued international support (in the form of either money or peacekeeping troops) nor a viable resumption of the peace process with Israel will be possible.

Are such developments at all possible? Very likely not. Are they genuinely needed for there to be peace in Israel/Palestine? Unfortunately, yes. A mere picking up where Barak and Arafat left off in the summer of 2000 is unlikely, especially if there is no resolution of the threats posed by militant Jewish settlers and Palestinian rejectionists (whether secular or religious). Only by separating the two peoples, and removing the weapons they carry, can the international community provide the assistance that will be needed for Israel and Palestine to focus on devoting their domestic resources to where they are most needed and for Arabs and Jews to escape the endless cycle of demonization and violence in which they are now trapped. 

Notes

1 The violence that began on September 28, 2000, was precipitated, according to Palestinians, by the provocative visit to the Al-Aqsa mosque on the Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount) by Ariel Sharon; many Israelis claim the Sharon visit was only a pretext for massive violence that had already been planned by the Palestinian Authority.

2 See "Israel Submits Statement to Mitchell Committee," *IsraelLine* (distributed by the Israeli Consulate, New York), February 1, 2001.

3 See "Palestinian Memo to the Mitchell Committee of Inquiry," Palestine Negotiation Affairs Department, Ramallah, January 13, 2001. According to Israelis such as Knesset member Naomi Chazan, former prime minister Ehud Barak admitted that Israel was carrying out targeted assassinations of Palestinian activists, a measure that Chazan condemned as immoral and "totally illegal according to any international criteria or law" (quoted in *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2001).

4 A point made by Israelis as well, such as Meron Benvenisti, who has criticized the Mitchell Committee as "one more instrument for stifling any initiative for examining the actions of Israeli security forces and for uncovering the truth lurking behind the propaganda smokescreen." Quoted in Cheryl A. Rubenberg, "The Clinton Years: US Policy Toward Israel and Palestine, Part Two," Palestine Center for Policy Analysis, Washington, DC, January 10, 2001 (available online: <http://www.palestinecenter.org/frames.html>).

5 Quoted in "Smugglers from all sides arm intifada," *Toronto Star*, December 17, 2000.

6 See Jeffrey Boutwell, "The Wild West Bank," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January/February 1999.

7 See "Palestinians Use Anti-Tank Grenades for First Time," *IsraelLine*, November 1, 2000.

8 Quoted in "Settlers Escalate Resistance to Peace Process," *IsraelLine*, June 23, 2000.

9 Oslo II, Annex I, Article III (#1.h).

10 Article XIV of the Oslo II accord states that "no one but Palestinian police may manufacture, sell, acquire, etc., firearms, ammunition, weapons, explosives, unless otherwise provided for in Annex I," while Annex I (Article II) allows the PA to "issue permits in order to legalize the possession of and carrying of arms by civilians."

11 "Major PLO Violations of the Oslo Accords," Government Press Office, Jerusalem, October 25, 1996, item 4.

12 See Khaled Abu Toameh, "Partners in Crime," *The Jerusalem Report*, December 25, 1997, pp. 28–29.

13 See Suzanne Goldberg, "Guns for sale—how stolen Israeli weapons arm Fatah's fighters," *Guardian*, December 16, 2000.

14 Quoted in "Smugglers from all sides arm intifada."

15 Gideon Alon, Nadav Shragai, and Mazal Mualem, "Settler-rabbi warns: Another Goldstein incident could be coming soon," *Ha'aretz* (EIE), November 1, 1998.

16 Quoted in Amos Harel and Nadav Shragai, "Army approves civil guard in West Bank settlements," *Ha'aretz* (EIE), June 12, 1998.

17 In April 1999, the chair of the legal committee of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Abdel-Karim Abu Saleh, criticized the lack of action on passing a Palestinian constitution, noting in particular how "the presence of state security courts is a real danger to the freedoms of our people." See "Palestinian Lawmaker Urges Reform of Courts, Arms," Reuters, April 19, 1999.

18 Quoted in "EU to Monitor PA Funds," *IsraelLine*, March 14, 2001.