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### **Defeating Arafat's War: The IDF's Success Against Asymmetric Warfare**

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In his analysis of the IDF's response to the Palestinian terror campaign (*The IDF's Record in the Current Intifada: An Interim Scorecard*, BESA Perspectives No. 3), Prof. Stuart Cohen concludes that the performance of the Israeli forces was "no better than mixed," and he is highly critical. This assessment, however, was not backed up by a presentation of the evidence. A closer examination of the facts, summarized below, leads to the very different conclusion that the security forces performed extremely well, by any reasonable measure, in what is known as *Arafat's War*. (The term "intifada," referring to a "popular uprising," was developed in the media campaign, but is highly misleading.) Indeed, the successful Israeli responses to Palestinian strategic use of terror and asymmetric warfare are already being studied by the armed forces of the world's other democracies. For the first time since Britain's Malaysian campaign of the early 1960s, the IDF and the other security services exposed the myth that "the terrorist will always get through."

Indeed, Cohen's analysis begins with an admission that the IDF had "several tactical achievements," particularly in pre-empting and defusing planned terrorist attacks. But his use of average statistics seriously underestimates the casualties in the 2001/2 period, thereby reducing the scale of the Palestinian offensive, and thus, of the achievement in bringing it to a halt. In the four years of this war, over 550 suicide-bombings were attempted, in addition to drive-by shootings and attempted mega-terrorism. At its height, in March 2002 (including the Passover-eve Park Hotel attack), the terror campaign killed over 140 Israelis in a month, and severely wounding hundreds more. Palestinian leaders (as well as some Israelis) who viewed the society as too weak to respond with the necessary force, mistakenly assumed that this carnage would escalate, and Israel would be forced to retreat and eventually surrender. Instead, by 2004, terror casualties

were reduced to about 100 deaths for the entire year, and over 80 percent of attacks were aborted en route, essentially marking Arafat's defeat.

### **The Centrality of Intelligence and Preventive Action**

This accomplishment can be credited to five key dimensions, acting together in a very complex, dynamic environment, and not, despite claims in *An Interim Scorecard*, generally separated and in opposition:

- 1) Highly advanced intelligence capabilities;
- 2) Precision-guided weapons for preventive targeted attacks against terrorists;
- 3) Isolation of the political leaders (Arafat);
- 4) Extensive perimeter defense;
- 5) A motivated and resilient civilian population, which continues to identify closely with the IDF.

While all five elements are essential in fighting a terrorist war, the development and advanced use of intelligence and surveillance resources is central, and in a manner which deserves far more credit than the cursory acknowledgement in *An Interim Scorecard*. The transfer of control of cities and villages to the PLO and other groups under the ill-considered Oslo “peace process” had severely impaired Israel's capability to monitor and, where necessary, act against Palestinian terrorist activities. But, to compensate, the IDF used its technological resources and highly skilled manpower to monitor every activity and movement within these areas. Israel's best and brightest recruits were routed into the intelligence corps and parallel groups for this mission, and proved their capabilities with astonishing achievements. In April 2002, when the political conditions finally permitted the launching of a major counterattack (“Operation Defensive Shield”), this intelligence provided the basis for locating and destroying the core of the Palestinian terror network.

This also marked the beginning of the end of Arafat as an effective leader, and the defeat of his strategy. Operationally, the number of terror operations that were intercepted and blocked grew steadily over the next two years. In parallel, the policy of isolating Arafat in a “closed military zone” without ready media access was a highly successful example of psychological and political warfare, and clearly a better option than arrest, exile or assassination, however morally justified. As a result, Palestinians no longer heard his support for “martyrs,” but saw his impotence daily, particularly when first the U.S. government, and then, with reluctance, even Arafat’s European backers, agreed that he had become “irrelevant.”

### **The Political and Social Dimensions of Asymmetric Warfare**

The analysis of *An Interim Scorecard* also focuses criticism on the IDF's failures, particularly in the “broader political and societal dimensions.” Regarding the core mission to defend “the integrity of the State and the safety of its citizens,” he faults the military for allowing that “1,000 citizens

have been killed, and over 5,500 injured.” Yet this war, and the fact that most of the casualties occurred during the first year of intense attacks (from May 2001) cannot be laid at the doorstep of the military. It was, in fact, the Israeli political leadership that chose the direction of the Oslo process and the transfer of power to a Palestinian Authority led by a corrupt and rejectionist leadership. The IDF, as a military force in a democratic polity, voiced its concerns but correctly did not intervene in this modern “march of folly.”

To their credit, the security forces, at all levels, were prepared for the counterattack, including training for urban warfare necessary to destroy the terror cells located in the densely-packed quarters of Jenin, Shechem (Nablus) and elsewhere. Had these preparations not been made, Israeli casualties would have been ten times higher, as Arafat had expected. And had the IDF not responded powerfully to the Kassam rocket barrages from Gaza, they would indeed have continued, as claimed in the apparently premature conclusion in *An Interim Scorecard*. Instead, the military response created the necessary conditions for a return, at least for now, to a political relationship and a deterrence-based cease-fire.

His critique also faults the IDF for a “scale of destruction and death on the Palestinian side” not justified by military realities, and for failing to win over Palestinian “hearts and minds,” thereby weaning them “away from their allegiance to Arafat and the other gangsters who bear prime responsibility for the insurgency and its destructiveness.” There is no evidence for the claim from Cohen and other well-intentioned Israelis that such opportunities existed and that Israeli military behavior, rather than internal Palestinian societal factors, prevented implementation. After generations of Palestinian incitement, violence, and rejection of any “Zionist” historical rights, the hope that restrained Israeli responses to war and terror would lead to political compromise and mutual acceptance remains a messianic dream. And it is particularly unfair to blame IDF soldiers, including those who gave up their lives to avoid unnecessary civilian casualties, as highlighted by the deaths from the ground operations in Jenin, for this dashed faith in a false messiah.

### **The IDF and “Soft Power”**

By the same token, there is no basis for blaming the IDF in the context of the political war that has been waged to delegitimize and demonize Israeli responses to terror. No examples are provided for sweeping claims in *An Interim Scorecard* of improper links between Israel’s democratic political leadership and the IDF, or the assertion of ill-conceived strategies based on “a simple resort to force.” A small number of targeted attacks against terrorists may have, in retrospect, applied “excessive force” that resulted in accidental civilian deaths, but the vast majority were morally and militarily justified, and saved countless Israeli lives.

In reality, the IDF was confronted by a politically and ideologically motivated coalition that automatically condemned any Israeli actions in self-defense, regardless of the details. After decades of Israeli political incompetence in the realm of public diplomacy and “soft power,” there is little that the IDF could have done to prevent the Arab regimes and Europe’s anti-Israel ideologues on the UN Human Rights Commission, the NGO networks, the media and on university campuses, from portraying the Palestinians as “righteous victims” of Israeli aggression.

This coalition was responsible for the 2001 UN Durban Conference on “racism and xenophobia,” which demonized Jewish sovereignty and stripped Israeli citizens of the basic human right of self-defense. In this forum, political groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and other powerful non-governmental organizations exploited the rhetoric of international law and human rights for use as weapons against Israelis. Similarly, in response to the IDF operations in Jenin, Gaza, and elsewhere, the highly politicized use of terms such as “war crimes” and “violation of international law” by these NGOs is entirely inconsistent and unjustified. Their reports, as analyzed by Prof. Alan Dershowitz, and in the NGO Monitor, show the lack of credibility in the reliance on biased sources (primarily unverified Palestinian claims), as well as other faults.

This is not to say that there were no mistakes and every Israeli decision was perfect – the critique in *An Interim Scorecard* of the IDF Military Spokesman's Unit (in reality, a political framework) is on the mark, as is the criticism of checkpoint procedures, resulting from the pressures of constant life-and-death judgments for every Palestinian attempting to cross. And yes, not every Israeli soldier and operation reflects the ideals embodied in the IDF's code of ethics and Jewish moral requirements. Improvements are always necessary, even though the evidence indicates that, despite the particular brutality of this terror war, IDF ethical standards and their implementation fare well in comparison with the US and British forces in Iraq.

### **The Tasks Facing Israel’s Political Leadership**

However, the main question is not how well the IDF performs relative to the armies of other democracies fighting similarly “dirty wars.” For Israelis, the core issue is whether their freedom and their lives are protected to the greatest possible extent. When Arafat and his colleagues returned to terrorism to achieve their goals, they had good reason to believe that Israeli society was too weak to defend its independence and core interests. Terror appeared to be the most effective means of gaining Israeli concessions through international intervention, and without the need for Palestinian acceptance of the rights of the Jewish people to sovereign equality and independence. Four years later, the terror groups, including the PLO and its off-shoots, are in disarray, Palestinian economic gains achieved under the Oslo framework are gone, and the political achievements that Arafat rejected in 2000 are no longer within reach. And despite the pain from the

brutality of Arafat's war, Israeli society, including the economy, has recovered.

On the basis of these achievements on the battlefield, the IDF has again given the Israeli political leadership the conditions necessary to take the required measures to improve Israel's long-term security. Whether they can rise to the occasion, and avoid repeating the mistakes following previous military successes, remains to be seen; if they fail, this cannot be placed on the IDF's doorstep. When the details are considered, there is a strong case for concluding that this victory was the IDF's greatest and most difficult achievement since 1948.

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