

# Security and Violence in the Middle East<sup>1</sup>

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## Terms and definitions

I refrained from using the term “**terrorism**” since it has been so poorly defined and so widely misused in the past few years. Furthermore, it has been used selectively by the stronger party against the weaker one, be the weaker party a liberation movement (within the country) or an international network against globalization and global issues. During the first half of the twentieth century, colonial powers used this term widely to describe underground movements fighting against the occupying power - Britain in Kenya, Egypt, and Palestine, and France in Syria and Algiers as examples. In all these cases, it did not matter if the fighters attacked soldiers or civilians belonging to the occupier, they were called terrorists. However, it was clear to the civil society, in the countries themselves and outside, that those so-called “terrorists” belonged actually to the resistance movement in the country, irrespective whether the methods used by these groups were acceptable to the majority or not.

During the last fifty years, the logarithmic advance in weaponry, and the greed of the powerful nations, raised the scales of violence to enormous proportions, be that in the amount of devastation meted on the civil society under the guise of fighting terror, or as “collateral damage” while supposedly attacking military targets. At the same time, the reaction against the colonial and neocolonial powers and against perceived or actual greed of these powers, also went up and varied widely in the degree of destruction and sophistication, from the three thousand killed in the sophisticated operation on the WTC in New York City, to the crude abduction of European tourists in Yemen. The tragedy in all cases is that the victims or most of them are unarmed civilians.

The other term that is misused or abused is the term **security**. Emergency laws are issued “for security reasons”, crimes against humanity and war crimes are often committed under the same pretext of “security”. That is why when we talk about security we should be very clear and transparent. The most important component of security is the human being. His well-being and preservation is above all considerations. I must quickly add though, that when we talk about the human being we are talking about **all** human beings, and we cannot “for security reasons” take the life of a human being for the security of another. (Some human lives are more precious than others!). We can then talk about other aspects of security- economic, social and political- and the role of the State and the international community in protecting the security of the civilian population.

Human rights as outlined in international humanitarian law and the Geneva conventions of 1949 as well as the relevant UN statutes and resolutions cannot be violated for the sake of “security”. This matter merits the concern of the world community, and while keeping in mind the real security of individuals and state, the restrictions on military action and

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the respect of human rights should be at the top of the agenda. Collective punishment affecting large groups of people, or, for that matter, colonization or the subjugation of a whole nation to occupation lead invariably to instability and the lack of security in the region, including the security of the power that is supposedly committing these violations for the sake of its own security.

### **Security in the Middle East**

At present, the hot areas where violence is leading to a state of lack of security are Iraq and Palestine/ Israel. They are two different cases and I will concentrate on the latter as I am closely involved in this conflict.

Since its establishment by the UN according to resolution 181, Israel went into four wars under the guise of security, each time occupying parts of Palestine and parts of other neighboring countries. In 1948 it occupied half of the area allocated to the Palestinian state (Palestine was partitioned into an Israeli state on 56% of the area and a Palestinian state on 44% of it) and expelled the Palestinian Arabs from the cities and villages in that area (thus creating the refugee problem), and destroyed over 400 villages. In 1956 it allied with Britain and France (the tripartite aggression) and occupied the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, but was forced to withdraw from these areas after four months when the US intervened. In 1967 it occupied what remained of Palestine (the remaining 22% of Palestine-the West Bank and Gaza strip) as well as the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt and the Golan Heights from Syria. After the October war of 1973 (the only war which Israel did not pre-empt ), Egypt was able to get back the Sinai Peninsula through the Camp David agreement, but the Palestinian and Syrian territories remained under occupation **for security reasons** until this day. In fact, it is clear that this occupation and the illegal settlements that accompanied it gave anything but security to Israel and the people it continues to occupy. The fourth war that Israel started was in Lebanon in 1982 where it reached Beirut (and when the infamous Sabra and Shatilla massacres took place). It withdrew within a few months from Beirut and its environs to the south after the huge demonstrations of Peace-Now movement, but stayed in the southern strip of about 40 kilometers deep into the Lebanese territory (and controlled it through the proxy SLA) for almost twenty years. It was clear to the Israeli Prime Minister Barak that this occupation of the so-called **security zone** never brought security to their northern border towns and indeed the unilateral withdrawal three years ago ended an era of violence and agony which was totally useless and costed the lives of hundreds of Israeli soldiers and several times as many of Lebanese civilians and fighters.

The most dangerous act that accompanied the Israeli occupation is the settlement policy, which, in total violation of the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention of 1949, installed Israeli settlements in the areas that it occupied –in Sinai, the Golan Heights, the Palestinian areas of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip<sup>2</sup>. Not only are these settlements illegal, but they are also a source of instability and violence in the region and certainly the major obstruction to a comprehensive peace in the area. Their presence in

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<sup>2</sup> See the excellent document “Land Grab Israel’s Settlement Policy in the West Bank” May 2002 by B’tselem, Israel.

the midst of the Palestinian population as “Jewish only” enclaves built on expropriated Palestinian land with their own system of roads all connecting to Israel have transformed the Palestinian areas into disconnected Bantustans and an apartheid regime. This is a recipe for violence par excellence. To insure the security of the settlers and settlements, Israel had to take extreme measures against the Palestinians including the establishment of checkpoints and road closures that only led to further hardship and economic stunting and hence mounting lack of security. No doubt, these settlements pose the greatest danger to the security of the region, as they need the army on a continuous basis to protect them. Added to that is the fact that they will not enable the Palestinians to have their own viable independent state, which is an essential condition for peace amongst the two people and for a stable and secure region. In essence, the settlements are the embodiment of the Israeli policy of permanent occupation, i.e. colonization of the Palestinian area as well as part of Syria (the Golan Heights). As such, I need not cite what such a policy of colonization led to in general in the past, and undoubtedly what it would lead to in this case as well. To understand the present policy of Israel one can look at what Vladimir Jabotinsky ( who is Sharon’s mentor) wrote back in 1923:

"Zionist colonization must either be terminated or carried out against the wishes of the native population. This colonization can, therefore, be continued and make progress only under the protection of a power independent of the native population - an iron wall, which will be in a position to resist the pressure to the native population. This is, in toto, our policy towards the Arabs... A voluntary reconciliation with the Arabs is out of the question either now or in the future....If you wish to colonize a land in which people are already living, you must provide a garrison for the land, or find some 'rich man' or benefactor who will provide a garrison on your behalf. Or else-or else, give up your colonization, for without an armed force which will render physically impossible any attempt to destroy or prevent this colonization, colonization is impossible, not 'difficult', not 'dangerous', but IMPOSSIBLE!...Zionism is a colonization adventure and therefore it stands or falls by the question of armed force. It is important.... to speak Hebrew, but, unfortunately, it is even more important to be able to shoot - or else I am through with playing at colonizing."<sup>3</sup>

In brief, the occupation by Israel of Palestinian (and Syrian) lands, is a flagrant violation of human rights, and is an extreme act of violence by itself as well as by its policy of settlement in the occupied territories. This is leading the whole region into a vortex of violence. It is spilling over into all the areas where Palestinian refugees are present – awaiting a solution for the Palestine problem in accordance with international legitimacy.

Security is a human necessity and people are entitled to it. States establish laws that guarantee the security of their citizens. Group security (security of states) is naturally governed by international law and agreements. Like freedom, security cannot be absolute, and one’s security cannot be obtained at the expense of another person’s security. This applies to nations as well. The United Nations should in the final analysis be the arbiter.

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Jabotinsky, “The Iron Wall”, 1923

Unilateral actions and measures should not be taken by states on their own as this will lead to anarchy, chaos and eventually less security to all concerned. Unfortunately, superpowers tend to behave in this fashion and in the ME region Israel is the superpower that rules supreme and it is supported by the sole superpower in the world today. But will there be security for Israel or for the whole region? Looking at the past and what is happening these days, the answer is: very unlikely.

### **Suggestions to end violence**

Before tackling this subject, it is necessary to make clear the various forms of violence and which of those require intervention.

- Intrastate violence, mainly by dictatorships against their population or minority groups. Example: Iraq prior to its occupation by the allied forces and Afghanistan during the civil war. Dictatorships vary in the degree of oppression and in the amount of popular support. The longer they stay, the more likely is the oppression and corruption which will lead to more violence in order to suppress opposition. Short of internal reform or success in a coup d'état leading to a democracy, third party intervention –UN- will probably be needed to end such violence.
- Intrastate violence, by minority groups rebelling against the regime. Examples: the Islamic groups in Algeria and Egypt and the Kurds in Turkey. Usually democratic reform in such cases would suffice in bringing the level of violence down to manageable proportions. Countries friendly to the regime in question could help or put some pressure (economic or otherwise) to push in that direction. The cases we are talking about so far have not reached critical proportions, although in Algeria it is indeed alarming and pressure should continue to be borne by friendly countries on the governments of these countries, but the situations in these cases do not warrant UN intervention so far.
- Interstate violence, mainly the occupation of one state or parts of it by another state. Examples in the area are: Israel occupying all the Palestinian areas of the West Bank and Gaza strip and the Syrian Golan Heights since June 1967 and the occupation of Iraq by the US and its allies since April 2003. In the case of Israeli occupation, this is very serious indeed in the sense that it is taking the form of a permanent status. The annexation of large tracts of the Syrian Golan Heights and the enlarged East Jerusalem area coupled with the settlement policy is gradually making the withdrawal from the whole occupied territories an almost impossible task. In spite of the innumerable number of UN decisions, and agreements by Israel to withdraw, these remain paper agreements because Israel continued to build facts on the ground, which are totally in contradiction with these agreements. Third party intervention is necessary, and there is call for a UN protection force to keep the calm in the area while withdrawal takes place as will be outlined below. In the case of Iraq, the sooner the UN will be given a major role the better, as this will alleviate the fear of the people that the occupation is a long term project with all the negative consequences this may entail.
- Collective punishment including: closure of areas and erection of checkpoints (choke points), demolition of homes and the infrastructure in whole cities,

curfews, uprooting of trees and expropriation of land. The targeted assassinations and the killing of civilians as “collateral damage” is another major form of violence. All these acts are part of the Israeli occupation policy, which is aiming at the ethnic cleansing in the areas that Israel is hoping to keep and eventually annex. Again here, a protection power should be named in accordance with the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention, as mentioned in the previous point.

- Violence against occupation and the occupying power. Examples: Palestinian groups and individuals in the occupied territories, and Iraqi (and possibly other) individuals and groups in Iraq. In the Palestinian areas, violence is directed against Israeli targets, be they soldiers or civilians regardless where these targets are (in the occupied territories or in Israel). It is mainly taking the form of suicide bombings against military and civilian targets, the latter being the majority of the victims. In the majority of the cases, Ariel Merari, professor of psychology at Tel Aviv University found in a study about suicide bombers that “In the suicides' notes and last messages the act of self-destruction was presented as a form of struggle rather than as an escape. There was no sense of helplessness-hopelessness. On the contrary, the suicide was an act of projecting power rather than expressing weakness”<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, this kind of violence is not condoned by many Palestinians although more and more are finding a justification for it in light of the harsh Israeli measures meted on the general population. On the other hand it has been named as terrorism regardless of the target group. Whatever one calls it, it is violence that the majority of its victims are civilians. The disproportionate violence which Israel is using to counter this kind of violence has proved to be totally futile, and the way to end it and to achieve security and quiet is by going to the root cause of this violence, which is the occupation itself as mentioned previously. It is essential that action on the ground should start immediately to indicate seriousness. So far the Israelis have been saying one thing but doing exactly the opposite on the ground. Starting with Oslo, the idea was to end occupation ( in accordance with SC Resolution 242)-at least this is what the Palestinians and the rest of the world thought- but Israel continued to build and enlarge the settlements which were totally in contradiction to the idea of withdrawal from the occupied territories. In the Road Map, Israel had fourteen reservations which essentially empty the Road Map of its content. Under US pressure it finally claimed to accept it, but did not act or carry out what it was supposed to do in the first phase: dismantling all the illegal (unauthorized) outposts, and freezing the settlement activity. The Palestinians were able to reach an agreement among themselves on a cessation of violent acts against Israel. Unfortunately this cessation of violence was one sided and Israel did not stop for one day its violent acts against the Palestinians. These were not limited to targeted assassinations of people that Israel claimed to have been involved in “terrorist attacks” or people planning to carry out a suicide attack against Israeli civilians, but went further to include the demolishing of homes, expropriation of land, uprooting of olive and other fruit trees as well as the killing of innocent civilians who were considered “collateral damage”. During this period of relative quiet of

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<sup>4</sup> See the paper of Ariel Merari presented at the Pugwash workshop in Como October ,2003

over six weeks, Israel also continued to build its “apartheid” Wall, with all the devastation that this inflicted on the Palestinian population<sup>5</sup> In view of these violations, the unilateral ceasefire failed and the return to the cycle of violence resumed. What I mentioned above is just to show that what is needed by both parties is a sincere commitment to peace. It is generally agreed that peace will not be achieved without insuring that the Palestinians have a sovereign state on the areas occupied by Israel in June 1967 (the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem). It has to be stated clearly by Israel that it will work towards this end and the Palestinians will state at the same time their respect of these mutual borders. Words and pronouncements are not enough. Acts on the ground leading to the final status should be started immediately. The issues that need to be dealt with are:

1. The settlements in the occupied territories. The so called illegal or unauthorized outposts should be **immediately** dismantled and no new ones allowed to be erected (as happened the first time when Israel announced that it will start the dismantlement of these outposts). A total freeze on the existing settlements should be strictly observed. Israel should start a building program within its borders (the so called green line) to accommodate the settlers who will be gradually moved to these new settlements, in accordance with a plan and deadlines. Only such acts will give credibility to the commitment by Israel to the peace plan (be it the Road Map or the Geneva Initiative or any plan agreed upon by both parties towards this end).
2. Stopping of violent acts by both sides **immediately**. This entails Palestinians halting all their attacks on Israelis (army and civilians), and Israelis halting all their acts of violence against Palestinians, their land and property. It will also entail the removal of all 160 checkpoints within the West Bank and Gaza. This should lead to a cooling down period and an improvement of Palestinian economic and social conditions, an important factor in reducing the violence and encouraging the positive feeling for the need and possibility of coexistence.
3. Free and internationally supervised elections for a new Palestinian legislative council and for municipal councils within the Palestinian territories. This is essential before any further steps towards reform and peace can be taken. Naturally, elections can take place only after the actions in the two steps above have been completed. A newly elected leadership will be needed to carry out the duties and responsibilities required for a state-in-the-making.

An international protective force which can oversee the implementation of the steps above as well as protect the civilian population(s) is absolutely essential and I would think even vital for the success of any plan that will eventually lead to a comprehensive peace and hence **security** for the whole region. All plans (the Road Map, the Geneva Initiative) came to the same conclusion that there is no military solution to the conflict and have essentially the same end product: An end to the Israeli occupation and the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state within the June 4, 1967 borders side by side with Israel, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states, and the evacuation of the settlements

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<sup>5</sup> for full information on this wall see the website [www.stophthewall.org](http://www.stophthewall.org)

from the areas occupied in 1967. The plans differ in one important point namely, an acceptable solution to the Palestinian refugee problem in accordance with the international legitimacy. This thorny issue should not be left till the end but should be tackled from the beginning with a courageous decision by both parties. For the Israelis, the essential first step is the recognition of their responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem or the greater part of it, and hence their moral and physical responsibility as well, in finding a just solution for it. An apology to the Palestinian people for years of dispossession and deprivation will go a long way and will pave the way for a mutually accepted solution. The right of return of the refugees in accordance with UN resolution 194 should not be exaggerated and taken by Israel as an issue that will lead to the destruction of the Israeli State but rather should be dealt with as a principle, with the solution that needs to be handled compassionately and practically. . For the Palestinians, they need to take the necessary steps to settle those refugees who are asking for settlement within the Palestinian state and to take the leading role in the collective negotiations for a fair and acceptable solution for the refugees and their compensation (psychological as well as financial) and the logistics in accordance with the final agreement.. Such action will lead to a permanent solution to this complex situation that has been going on for almost a century. Once this issue is resolved, there is nothing that can stand in the way of two states living in peace side by side. This would not only end the nightmare of the Palestinian people but should bring security and prosperity to Israel and to all the states in the region<sup>6</sup>. A peace agreement with Syria should not be far behind. In such a situation, it will be the duty (and interest) of each state to preserve its own security and that of its neighbors. Is this utopia? Perhaps. But it obviously is in the real interest of all the parties to have it and because of that it will be a reality. The time frame will depend on how soon people will see the obvious.

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<sup>6</sup> see also the paper "The Necessary Ingredients of a Comprehensive Peace in the Middle East" presented by the author at the ISODARCO Workshop at Andalo in January 2001.