

ISRAELI EMBASSY BRIEFING -- THE GAZA DISENGAGEMENT

Following are remarks by Israeli Embassy spokesman David Siegel on September 20, 2005 at the Embassy, as reported by Religious Freedom Coalition representative Scott Parker:

The late Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Palestinian Authority and its predecessor the Palestinian Liberation Organization, played the same hand against a dozen successive Israeli prime ministers. In fact, he had four cards: terrorism, demographics, the "Occupation", and the Peace Process. Terrorism successfully created an enormous drop in tourism, caused economic stagnation (the economy contracted for two years straight), and created fear and pessimism. Oftentimes one could not determine who was in the security services and who belonged to a terrorist group. Regarding demographics, Arafat encouraged the high birthrate so notable in contrast with the much lower Westernized Israeli birthrate. As for the "Occupation," Arafat emphasized a victim mentality and refused any responsibility. He courted world opinion by blaming Israel, arguing that if Israel controlled the West Bank and Gaza, then he was not responsible for what happened there. Lastly, the Peace Process card was engaged by the Israelis for fifteen years, but simply manipulated along to the precipice. Even when Arafat was offered nearly everything he wanted, he refused and encouraged the Intifada.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was determined to counter Arafat's four cards when he came to office. Aggressive anti-terrorism measures were implemented, which included the separation fence (resulting in a drop by 80-90% in suicide bombings). The demographic card was taken away by leaving Gaza. The Peace Process is still up in the air, but like the Occupation card, world opinion is now holding the Palestinian leadership accountable. Only the P.A. can disarm Hamas, Islamic Jihad, etc. Should they fail, it can no longer be blamed on Israel.

There is a much different strategic situation today than five years ago and different even from before the disengagement from Gaza a month past. At Camp David II -- between Arafat, Barak, and Clinton -- Arafat was offered nearly everything that he had asked for. Soon after, "the fire erupted" as Palestinians were firing upon even Jerusalem and the Second Intifada began. At this time, world opinion was either indifferent or blamed Israel for the violence. Now, following the disengagement, the onus is upon the Palestinian Authority to reign in the anarchy, thwart the terrorist organizations, and rebuild Gaza. If stability and security are not guaranteed, there will be no economic prosperity.

Two more major challenges remain for Israel: Iran and "the North." The former is pressing to realize its nuclear aspirations - ignoring European Union pressure - while continuing to call for Israel's destruction. On the other front, Syria is becoming diplomatically isolated and international scrutiny is relaxing the tension on the Israeli border. As world opinion is turning against these regimes, the opportunity is present for Israel to improve its international standing. To sum up, Israel is much better now than five years ago and its improved security and renewed economic vigour have created a state of optimism for the future of the country.

Mr. Siegel also noted that PM Sharon sent a letter of condolence to President Bush immediately after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina was realized and pledged his support. In coordination with FEMA, Israel sent an El Al aircraft laden with requested supplies to Little Rock, Arkansas.

Following Mr. Siegel's remarks, there was a time for questions and comments from those gathered.

One attendee suggested that the Palestinian propaganda machine was a fifth card in Arafat's hand (which could be coupled with the occupation argument). Education, she argued, was and is poisoning the minds of the children and Palestinian people into a disposition of absolute hatred. [This, of course, is a major *raison d'être* behind the RFC's [Bethlehem Project](#).] Mr. Siegel acknowledged that incitement and terror verily do go hand in hand, but also that Prime Minister Abbas had renounced terrorism and pledged to reform the entire system. Deeds, however, speak louder than words. Self-governance, the end of anarchy, and the fight against terrorism will all determine the credibility of the Palestinian Authority.

Scott Parker of the RFC pointed out to those assembled that the PA still has two major points that are emphasized in the world press. First, Palestinians say that without full control of their own air, sea, and land borders, they would still be under the Occupation and not truly free; thus they can still blame Israel for all of their ills. Secondly, we have heard Palestinian figures say time and again "First Gaza, then Jerusalem and the West Bank." That said, Scott posed two questions to the Embassy spokesman: Understanding Israel's security concerns, are there necessary avenues to bring in supplies and materials necessary to rebuild the infrastructure of Gaza? Also, is there political will in the PA to focus on rebuilding Gaza, or will they be so distracted by the call to reclaim these other areas that anarchy will reign?

Mr. Siegel's response to both of these questions was that the onus is upon the head of the PA and that world opinion (generally speaking) is in agreement that the Palestinians have an opportunity now and that they must do something with it.

Recently, Israel agreed to hand back security control of a number of West Bank Palestinian towns and cities - contingent upon faithful PA security measures. Just as an example, however, the city of Tulkarum was the second city returned to Palestinian security control, but no measures were taken to apprehend any of the thirty-one wanted militant/terrorist activists and two suicide bombers even managed to take advantage of this new found laxity by slipping out and blowing up a number of innocent Israeli civilians. If the PA cannot ensure security, then Israel will not hand over control.

Although Saudi Arabia used to be a major donor to Palestinian militant wings, it has cut back significantly faced with its own terrorist insurgent groups and under intense U.S. pressure. Iran, therefore, continues to be the major sponsor of anti-Israeli attacks, which surprises no one. Al-Qaida, however, is not a serious concern for Israel; Palestinian terrorism is. The battle continues via the military option, but more and more the battle against terrorism is waged through combatting educational propaganda, through cutting off the finances of terrorist groups, through good intelligence, and through "taking the message to the streets".

Other issues Mr. Siegel touched upon briefly were that:

Palestinians have a victim mentality. It is never "what can we do for ourselves," but "Israel needs to do this for us" or "the UN must help us," etc.

A major effort of the Israeli government in coming years is to develop the Negev. This region is 60% of Israel's total land area, but contains only 9% of its population.

Elections are to be held in Israel next month which will do much to determine the near future course of the government.

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