

In his address to the Israeli people last Sunday, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon declared his intention "to root out the terrorist infrastructure in the Palestinian territories." Sharon is absolutely right that Israel should attack terrorism at the roots. But he is wrong if he thinks that this can be done with tanks, fighter planes and bullets.

The root cause of Palestinian terrorism is Israel's 34-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and none other.

If Israel ends the occupation, then Palestinians will no longer use violence in an attempt to overthrow it. If Israel withdraws to its legal borders and gives Palestinians some opportunity to live with freedom and dignity, suicide bombers will no longer find death to be preferable to life.

Usually when we speak of the "roots" of a phenomenon, we imply its root causes. Sharon's speech, however, made repeated references to terrorist "infrastructures" but no mention whatsoever to its "causes." Infrastructures are the "how" of terrorism; any genuine effort to eradicate it must address the "why." Even if Sharon is able to chip away at the institutions that recruit and train would-be suicide bombers, other institutions will inevitably spring up. The only way to stop suicide bombings is to deal with peoples' reasons for committing them.

Far from addressing the root causes of Palestinian resistance, Mr. Sharon's current war on the Palestinian people will only reinforce their will to fight. The rampage of Ramallah is a case in point. I lived near this West Bank city for many months both before and during the current Intifada, and I never once came upon anything you could call terrorist infrastructure. Nonetheless, much of the city in which I studied and worked has now been reduced to rubble. Most Palestinians have never known Jews except as Israeli occupiers: still, as an American Jew, I showed my Palestinian colleagues and neighbors respect, and met with immeasurable kindness and respect in return.

Israeli troops have wrecked the hospital where I once visited a sick colleague. They have ransacked the offices of a number of local human-rights organizations, including the one where I worked. They have rounded up hundreds of my former classmates from Birzeit University, detaining them without even the pretense of a provable charge. They have destroyed the movie theater that provided young people with a precious escape from the misery of life under occupation. They have set fire to restaurants, bombed police stations and flattened any car unlucky enough to be parked on the street. They have cut electricity and water and placed 70,000 residents under curfew. Some 10,000 of these people are Americans (many are Palestinians with U.S. citizenship who returned after the Oslo process; others are students and people working for nongovernmental organizations). They have conducted house-to-house searches, destroying anything they wish with complete impunity. They have announced that they would shoot anything that moved . . . and they have followed through with their threat.

Apparently, everything that I had come to know as the infrastructure of civilian life in the West Bank -- hospitals, universities, stores, homes and even running water -- was really "terrorist infrastructure." In Sharon's campaign to "squash" terrorism, any person and any object in the Palestinian territories is a valid target.

The stories I am hearing from friends in Ramallah tell of unthinkable horror. One friend describes how he saw a man shot in the street and then left to bleed for an hour before Israeli soldiers finally permitted an ambulance to pass. Another says that Palestinians were forced to bury their dead in the hospital parking lot when they were prohibited from reaching the cemetery. Another talks of counting the missiles dropping on his neighborhood, night after night. Yet another talks of the agony of waiting for news of her brother, who was arrested and whisked away to who-knows-where with hundreds of other young men similarly presumed guilty because they are Palestinians. Everyone says that the terror has brought them, ironically, to a point of fearlessness beyond fear. The word on the "Palestinian street," they say, is that people are prepared to die before they surrender to Israel's siege.

What we are witnessing in the Palestinian territories today is an all-out onslaught on a captive civilian population. While President Bush's speech Thursday calling for Israel to withdraw to recognizable borders is welcome, it is unfortunate that he had to couch any criticism of Israeli transgressions in a whole package of empty rhetoric about how Yasser Arafat isn't doing enough to stop the violence.

The Palestinian struggle is a struggle of an entire people, and its violent forms are an expression of their exasperation with the accumulated oppression and degradation of life under occupation. It is nonsense to think that a full national liberation movement is instigated -- or could be halted -- by any single individual.

The time is overdue for us to move past the hollow accusations against Arafat and forge a genuinely even-handed policy in the Middle East. We can start with two basic steps. First, President Bush must put real pressure on Sharon to comply with his request that Israel halt its incursions into Palestinian towns. The Palestinians death toll rises with every hour he waits to do so. Second, President Bush must abandon the false notion that it is possible to achieve a cease fire without dealing squarely with the substantive issues at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Secretary of State Powell's current visit to the region, in contrast to Gen. Zinni's earlier efforts, must be dedicated to brokering a political agreement alongside one for security. If Powell divorces security issues from political issues, then he is allowing Sharon to dictate his diplomacy. It is Sharon's strategy to pound the Palestinians so ruthlessly that they will beg for quiet and forsake the national goals for which they are fighting. The sooner that we all realize that only an end to the occupation and a just resolution to the plight of the refugees will bring an end to the hostilities, the more bloodshed can be avoided.

Yes, Sharon is right: There can be no compromise in the battle against terrorism. No battle against terrorism will ever succeed, however, as long as it compromises Palestinians' legitimate rights.

#### **CITATION (AGLC STYLE)**

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