

# THE END OF THE TUNNEL

*Josef Joffe looks back on the latest twist in the middle east process and wonders whether Israelis and Palestinians can learn the lessons of the past 50 years*

**T**AKE A PUDDLE of petrol. Add more. Then hand a burning match to a reformed pyromaniac. This is the three sentence story of Benjamin Netanyahu, Yasir Arafat and the Three Day War between Israelis and Palestinians that exploded the myth of a relentless "middle east peace process."

The puddle started spreading last March when the "martyrs" of Hamas massacred 56 Israelis on their own land, in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. As a result, Netanyahu was elected prime minister in May, whereupon he began to pour on petrol by stopping the peace process. No, the Likud premier did not actually tear up the Washington agreement of 1995 that laid out on 335 pages a three year timetable for less Israel, and more Palestine, in the occupied territories. But by word, deed and indirection, he made clear to Yasir Arafat that he would not get what was implicit in the "Oslo process": a separate Palestinian state.

When Netanyahu decided to open up the last section of an archaeological tunnel alongside Temple Mount, he handed Arafat the burning match. Never mind that most of the tunnel had been there for years, or that it would liven up tourist trade in the Old City. By now, the atmosphere was so poisoned that any occasion would do, and so Arafat decided to play his last best card: violence, and the threat of more. Had not the *intifada* of 1987-1993 softened up the Israelis all the way to Oslo? Here, he told Netanyahu, is another taste of yesterday's medicine, except that it is no longer rocks, teenagers and molotov cocktails, but the hard men of Fatah and their AK-47s.

Clearly, Netanyahu had calculated that imperious inaction was a safe way to teach the Palestinians modesty so that they would gratefully gobble up any

morsel of "autonomy" he might throw their way. Clearly, Arafat thought likewise when he decided to unleash *intifada 2*. Show the Israelis some muscle, and they will return to the accommodating ways of the Labour-led government.

What now? Both men are bound by the chains of their respective histories. Since the handshake on the south lawn of the White House in 1993, nothing has really changed the fundamentals of the Israeli Palestinian game. What are they?

From the independence war of 1948-49 to the Yom Kippur war of 1973, the Arabs learned in one bloody lesson after the other that they have no military option against Israel—not even when they attack first, as they did in 1973. For the next 20 years, the PLO would learn the same lesson on a smaller scale. No matter how spectacular the terror they unleashed inside and outside the Jewish state, the Israelis would not budge, but only return the favour with the ruthlessness of *ein breira*—there is no alternative.

But since the Lebanese war of 1982-84, the mighty Israelis have also learned about futility. Like the US in Vietnam, like the USSR in Afghanistan, they were forced to absorb the paradox of great power. As a regional superpower, they might best all comers; but a sophisticated military

panoply could not dictate political outcomes in neighbouring Lebanon. Nor could it chasten a would-be nation willing to suffer the consequences of a seven year *intifada*. F-16s and precision guided missiles are like a jack hammer where only a dentist's drill will do.

Force will deter force, but it will not compel your enemy to do your bidding—that is the moral of 50 years of war between Arabs and Israelis. Netanyahu can hold off the Palestinians forever, and they can make life miserable for Israel *ad infinitum*. But then what? If neither can prevail over the other, why bleed in vain?

Indeed, why fight a dirty war that pits Israel's citizens' army against teenagers and women—or against elusive terrorists who want retaliation to engulf innocent civilians? Nor can Arafat happily countenance an endless engagement. The more brutal the battle, the more brutal his rivals who will be swept into power by the rising tide of extremism. The revolution not only devours its children, but also the old men who unleash it.

Netanyahu and Arafat surely feel the chains. The real question, as always, is whether they can suppress their pyromaniac reflexes and pitch in with the fire brigade. So far, they have only demonstrated great talent for miscalculation and servility to their extremist allies. Neither of

them is a great strategist, but "Abu Ammar" is a consummate survivor while "Bibi," after only four months in power, should not be counted out of the learning game.

They played their cards—and have nothing to show but bloody knuckles. Before they bash in each other's heads, they might ponder the great lesson of the past 50 years: each can frustrate the other, neither can prevail against him. ■

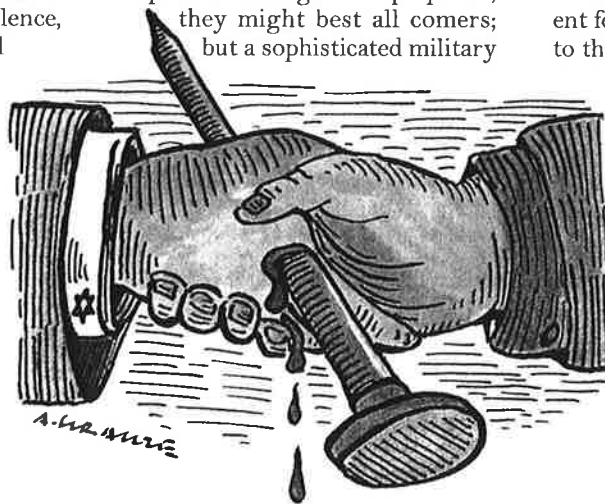


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