

Policy Product

How to Deal with the Bear-Hug Paradox

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Introduction

The Bear-Hug Paradox is a dynamic in which Israeli gestures towards moderate Palestinian elements weaken these elements politically, while confrontation with extremist elements does the latter no political damage, and may even strengthen their status.

This document offers an analysis of the paradox and guidelines for dealing with it.

Background

The Palestinians: society in a state of struggle – The Palestinian society is in a struggle to end Israeli occupation and to establish a Palestinian state. Almost any development, whether political, economic or military, is measured by its effect on the objectives of the national struggle.

Between the ethos of struggle and historic compromise – The Palestinian political system is shaped by two competing narratives:

- The "Ethos of the Palestinian Struggle" (hereinafter: Ethos of Struggle) strives for the establishment of a Palestinian state on the territory of the State of Israel as well as in the West Bank and Gaza.¹ The "armed struggle", through the use of terror and violence, is the principal means of the Ethos of Struggle (see the concept Permanent Resistance). However, some of those who ascribe to the ethos of struggle do not object to temporary utilization of the "political option" (see below).
- The "Principle of Historic Compromise" (hereinafter: Principle of Compromise) strives for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel.² The "political option", i.e. negotiation and coordination, is the principal means for promoting this doctrine. However, some of those who ascribe to the principle of compromise also support the use of armed struggle as a tactical means.

Palestinian society is currently in the midst of an ideological, constitutional, political and economic struggle between these two narratives.³

The "Mu'amara" (conspiracy) and a zero-sum game - Many Palestinians view the struggle with Israel as a zero-sum game, i.e. what is good for Israel is bad for the Palestinians and vice-versa.

¹ According to the Ethos of Struggle, the Palestinian right to self-determination will be realized only through Palestinian control over the entire Mandatory Palestine. Since the national Palestinian goal negates the Jewish right to self-determination, there cannot be an end of conflict or finality of claims vis-à-vis Israel.

² According to the Principle of Historic Compromise, the Palestinian right to self-determination will be realized based on the principle of two-state solution. The territory of the Palestinian state will be based on the June 4th 1967 borders, and will include the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem (Al-Quds) as its capital. Therefore, end of conflict and finality of claims vis-à-vis Israel are possible, depending on a Permanent Status Agreement and resolution of all the outstanding issues.

³ An examination of the Palestinian founding documents and the Palestinian constitutional structure reveals that the Palestinians have not chosen between the Ethos of Struggle and the Principle of Historic Compromise. Although the Algiers Declaration (11/88), the Declaration of Principles (9/93) and the Interim Agreement (9/95) constitute a Palestinian acceptance of the two-state solution, the Palestinian Basic Law and the Palestinian Constitution – Draft No. 3, contain provisions that stem from the Ethos of Struggle. For further elaboration see Reut's Analysis Base: Israel's Interface with the Palestinian Constitutional Structure.

Another perception which is prevalent among Palestinians is that of the "Mu'amara", according to which Israel and the international community are conspiring against the Palestinian national movement. These perceptions create the following equation:

- Israeli support is a condemnation – If Israel supports a Palestinian political element, it goes to show that it serves Israel's interests, and therefore impedes Palestinian interests.
- Israeli assault is a commendation – If Israel attacks a Palestinian political element, it goes to show that it is harmful for Israel, and therefore serves Palestinian interests.

Bear Hug Paradox - the Predicament of Israel's Impact

Conceptual battle between the political option and the armed struggle – Due to the dynamics of Palestinian politics described above, any political event is exposed to a conceptual battle between the advocates of the political options and those of the armed struggle. Each side attempts to prove that its actions promote the national struggle, while the other side's actions obstruct it.

Due to the perceptions of the zero-sum game and the Mu'amara, every Israeli attempt to strengthen the advocates of the political options is perceived as proof that the political option is an Israeli interest and therefore contradicts Palestinian interests. Correspondingly, any Israeli attempt to undermine advocates of the armed struggle is perceived as proof that they serve the Palestinian interest.

The struggle is permanent; dialogue is temporary – In recent years, the Palestinian armed struggle has been continuous, while the Israeli-Palestinian political process has been fragmented. Hence, it is easier to support the argument that it is the armed struggle, and not the political option, that forces Israel to make concessions.

Israel's embrace is a bear-hug – Therefore, Israel's attempt to impact the internal balance of powers and bolster the advocates of the political option, may very well play into the hands of the armed struggle.

How to Deal with the Paradox

The Reut Institute identifies several guidelines and policy options that can assist Israel in dealing with the Bear Hug Paradox.

No free gifts / Continuous give and take – unilateral gestures erode the standing of the political option for two reasons:

1. **Israeli gestures are perceived as a conspiracy** – Actions taken voluntarily by Israel for the benefit of the Palestinians seem dubious for the Palestinian public and are suspected of serving Israel's interests.
2. **Israeli gestures are perceived as a defeat** – Due to the prevailing notion the Israel would not voluntarily act for the benefit of the Palestinians, Israeli gestures are often perceived as an Israeli surrender to the armed struggle.

However,

- Gestures carried out in return for a Palestinian concession following negotiations, or in adherence to demands placed by the international community, will be considered less suspicious.
- Maintaining continuous dialogue with Palestinian officials, unaffected by military events, will allow advocates of the political options to take credit for Israeli gestures.

Dealing with a political address / No intervention in internal Palestinian politics – Israel's reference point on the Palestinian side should be the Palestinian Authority (PA) or the PLO, according to context, *and not* various political factions and elements within them. This is for the following reasons:

1. **Political differentiation instigates the Bear-Hug Paradox** – Due to the dynamics described above, an Israeli action which is perceived as support of a specific political element goes to show that this element does not serve Palestinian interests. A direct Israeli action against a political element identified with the armed struggle serves its advocates in the conceptual battle.
2. **Institutions are stable; political balance changes** – The Palestinian political system is based on democratic institutional principles. Therefore, the governing institutions switch hands following elections and political arrangements, such as Abu Mazen's election (1/05) and the Hamas' electoral victory (1/06). Therefore, an Israeli policy based on personas or political affiliation may work as a double-edged sword.⁴

Differentiating between the political and the military echelons – Terrorist activity against Israel is conducted by elements who abide by the ethos of struggle, but also by some who support the principle of compromise. In order to effectively deal with the Bear Hug Paradox, Israel's military activity should focus on those involved in the armed struggle and not on the political echelon.

Relying on principles of international legitimacy – International legitimacy (expressed in UN resolutions, covenants, agreements etc.) is a principal element in the Palestinian national narrative. Basing Israel's actions on principles of international legitimacy may avert the Bear-Hug Paradox.

For example, Israel can present blocking the funds to the Palestinians as a punishment to Palestinian society for electing Hamas. On the other hand, it can present it as an outcome of Hamas' stance towards the principles of the Oslo process, and condition the transfer of funds on the recognition of the PA government (and not the Hamas movement) of the Interim Agreement.

⁴ The purpose of the amendment to the Palestinian Basic Law passed in 2003 as a result of Israeli and international pressure was to undermine the powers and authority of then-Chairman Arafat, and to bolster Abu Mazen, who was appointed Prime Minister. In hindsight, the amendment has made matters worse: following Hamas' victory (1/06) Abu Mazen found himself as a Chairman without authority, while Haniyeh gained extended powers as Prime Minister. Sine Abu Mazen will not remain PA chairman forever, any attempt to bolster his constitutional status now may turn out to be a double-edged sword when his successor takes his place. See Reut's Fundamental Early Warning: Palestinian Elections – towards Institutional Dysfunction.