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The Next Intifada

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The two and a half years of uprisings in the Middle East known collectively as the Arab Spring have had an apparent hole in the middle; there has not been a new full-blown uprising during this time by Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. This fact is testimony to the ruthlessly effective control measures of Israel, with a security apparatus that outclasses any *mukhabarat* in the Arab world. The Palestinian outlook in the face of these control measures is a combination of despair and being deterred. The Palestinians have been there and done that, with two previous

multi-year uprisings, known as the First and Second Intifadas, in their recent history. They have every reason to expect that the Israeli response to a third uprising—especially given the direction of Israeli politics since the previous two—will be to press down even harder on the levers of control, not to do anything to move toward self-determination for the Palestinians.

The Palestinians also can see that, despite some erosion in the international support [4] that Israeli governments have long been able to count on, there is little sign that the reactions of the international community, and most importantly of the United States, will be appreciably different next time. The government of Benjamin Netanyahu—some elements of which are quite candid about this—evidently intends to retain the West Bank indefinitely, is continuing the colonization program that has been putting a two-state solution farther out of reach, and shows no sign of fearing pressure over any of this from the world and especially from the United States, even with the intensified international attention that a new uprising would bring.

None of this, however, changes the instability inherent in subjugation of the Palestinians. The humiliation, the heavy personal costs, the impairment of daily life and the frustration of national aspirations are all still part of that reality. Human reactions to such situations tend to be more emotional, more matters of anger and frustration than of calm calculation of the adversary's likely responses. A new uprising thus is probably only a matter of time. Exactly how much time is unpredictable; the timing of spontaneous uprisings for which the ingredients are already in place is always unpredictable. But as a point of reference, seven years transpired between the end of the First Intifada and the outbreak of the Second. The Second Intifada did not have a clear-cut end, but it has now been about eight years since it petered out.

A report [5] on instability in the occupied territories published last month by the International Crisis Group reviews some of these realities. The report does not say a new uprising is imminent, but it observes:

Many conditions for an uprising are objectively in place: political discontent, lack of hope, economic fragility, increased violence and an overwhelming sense that security cooperation serves an Israeli – not Palestinian – interest.

Outside powers, and especially the United States, need to be prepared for a new Palestinian uprising whenever it finally occurs. They also need to be prepared for the Israeli government's response, which will be to couple a crackdown on the ground with declarations that in the midst of such turmoil nothing can or should be done to move toward Palestinian self-determination. The path of least political resistance will be once again to acquiesce in practice to this Israeli posture, while paying lip service to the need for diplomacy that works toward creation of a Palestinian state.

The path of greater political resistance would be the right path, which would be to address squarely what underlies the unrest. That path would recognize explicitly that following the Israeli lead means that *no* time would ever be right for moving meaningfully toward a Palestinian state. It would recognize that if there is a crisis of legitimacy with Palestinian political entities (manifested most recently in serial resignations by prime ministers of the Palestinian Authority), this is largely because even when the Palestinians have had capable leaders [6] their role has

been limited mostly to assisting in carrying out Israel's security and administrative responsibilities as an occupying power. And it would recognize that if the Palestinians are divided between the competing political factions of Fatah and Hamas this is in large part because Israel has done everything possible to keep them from reconciling.

Taking the politically easy path will set the table for a Fourth Intifada and beyond. The current Israeli leaders evidently believe that they can live comfortably enough with this prospect. They see Palestinian disturbances now and then as a cost of doing business—the business in this case being to incorporate eventually and permanently all of the occupied West Bank into a greater Israel. The United States needs instead to pay attention to two things: what a just resolution of this long-running conflict would look like; and especially what is in U.S. interests—which run in a much different direction from the Israeli government's objective of favoring land over peace.