



Commentary from
Congressman Joe Pitts
Sixteenth Congressional District of Pennsylvania

204 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515

Contact: Gabe Neville, Press Secretary: 202 225-2411 www.house.gov/pitts

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Blame Yassir Arafat

By Congressman Joe Pitts

In 1994, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Yassir Arafat, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority. He shared it with Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin of Israel following the conclusion of the Oslo Accords, which promised to bring peace to the Middle East at long last.

But peace did not come. A year later, in a radio interview, Arafat said, "The struggle will continue until *all* of Palestine is liberated." In the same year, Ariel Sharon—former Israeli Defense Minister and soon to be Prime Minister—said, "I don't know anyone who has as much civilian Jewish blood on his hands as Arafat since the Nazis' time."

These are strong words. Clearly the conflict had not been resolved, and today Israel and the occupied territories are being rocked by a level of violence the region has not seen in decades. What happened? Who is to blame?

Yassir Arafat is to blame.

In July of 2000, President Clinton brought Arafat together with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak for a marathon 15-day negotiation. Barak went further than any Israeli leader ever had in offering concessions for peace. He offered to meet virtually every Palestinian demand, and even met some new ones. Barak offered to withdraw from 95 percent of the West Bank and 100 Percent of the Gaza strip. He agreed to the establishment of a Palestinian state. He offered to remove isolated Israeli settlements so they could revert to Palestinian control. He offered Palestinian control over parts of Jerusalem, including most of the Old City. He offered "religious sovereignty" over the Temple Mount, which has been controlled by Israel since 1967. In return, he asked that Arafat simply declare an "end of conflict" and agree that no further claims on Israel would be made in the future.

Arafat refused.

Disappointed, outraged, and blaming Israel, Palestinians reacted with a new wave of violence. Israel has responded with its own violence, bombing Palestinian facilities and engaging in gun battles with militants.

The situation is frequently described as a “cycle of violence.” It is an accurate description, but it does not explain much and ignores the distinctions evident in the tactics and motivations of the two sides. Palestinian militants kill Israeli civilians, using crude bombs detonated by teen-aged suicide bombers who are promised wealth and pleasure in Heaven for their martyrdom. Israeli troops kill Palestinians in self-defense—either their own or in defense of their countrymen.

Any person who attempts to achieve a political goal by murdering civilians is a terrorist. A soldier who fires a weapon to defend himself, to prevent a terrorist act, or to apprehend a terrorist is justified in what he does. There is no moral equivalence.

Yassir Arafat has made occasional and unenthusiastic efforts to quell the violence of Palestinian militants. There has been a long-standing debate about his actual ability and authority to do so. New evidence produced by Israel’s recently launched war on Palestinian terrorism, however, should end that debate. It is no longer a matter of his ability, but of his desire to do so.

On Sunday, Israeli troops discovered large quantities of counterfeit Israeli currency in the basement of Arafat’s Ramallah headquarters, along with the printing machinery that made it. On Tuesday, an invoice for \$8,500 to cover bombing supplies was found in the office of Arafat’s chief financial officer. It was on the letterhead of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, an offshoot of Arafat’s Fatah Party. The invoice specifically requested \$150 to build each bomb, saying the group would need five to nine bombs per week. Colonel Miri Eisen, spokesman for Israeli Army Intelligence said, “For the first time, this connects directly bombs prepared for suicide bombing to the Palestinian Authority officials.”

Clearly, Arafat is guilty of either promoting terrorism or willfully allowing it to continue. Is Israel guilty of anything? Sure. At times Israel has miscalculated and been heavy-handed with Palestinians (a small minority of whom are terrorists). But there is no moral equivalence. Yassir Arafat is to blame for the current violence, and it is likely that only he can end it. There is little evidence, however, that he wants to.

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