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**Escalating to Nowhere: The Israeli-Palestinian War**

***Rough Working Draft: Circulated for Comment and  
Correction***

# **Introduction**

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**January 13, 2005**

## **Introduction**

The reader should be aware that this is an initial rough draft. The text is being circulated for comment and will be extensively revised over time. It reflects the working views of the author and does not reflect final conclusions or the views of the CSIS.

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# I. Introduction

One of the many tragedies of the war between Israel and the Palestinians that began in late September 2000 is that it has become a low intensity conflict in which asymmetric warfare has replaced the peace process, and politics have become an extension of war by other means. There are still many reasons for hope. However, it is too clear that the peace process *is* reversible, that the Israeli-Palestinian War can become a progressively more lethal asymmetric conflict, and that efforts to put peace negotiations back on track can fail entirely, or become locked in an explosive stalemate that could last for months or even years.

The present conflict also differs sharply from the first struggle between Israel and the Palestinians. If the Intifada from 1987 to 1993 was largely a popular uprising, dominated by stone throwing and sporadic acts of violence, the Israeli-Palestinian War is dominated by the steady escalation of a battle between conventional and unconventional forces. The Intifada was primarily a political struggle; but the Israeli-Palestinian War is a war. If the Intifada was a struggle for recognition that a peace had to be reached that was just for both sides, the Israeli-Palestinian War has polarized both sides away from peace, convincing them of the justice of their own cause and tactics and the fundamental injustice of the other side's tactics and goals.

Modern warfare has been a struggle of ideas as well as a test of force, and there is nothing new about the fact that each side always sanctifies its own behavior and demonizes that of its opponent, while both sides struggle for the support of their neighbors, neutrals, and world opinion. The Israeli-Palestinian War does, however, illustrate that it is incredibly difficult for two sides that have different values and use different tactics to understand the pressures that shape the other side's military behavior, and the reasons behind the other side's behavior. It also illustrates that combat does not have to be intense, and casualties do not have to be high, for war to become extremely bitter.

If anything, the Israeli-Palestinian War has shown that each step of escalation can lead to further asymmetries in tactics, weapons, and targeting. These asymmetries in turn convince the opposing side that the other's actions are not only immoral and illegitimate, but that it cannot be trusted to move back towards peace. At the same time, each side's battle to win external political and military support pushes it to publicly attack the other, and to couple political weapons to military action.

The struggle for political and media attention has also pushed both Israel and the Palestinians to use human rights, international law, and civilian casualties as political weapons. Each side's own casualties become martyrs while the civilian casualties and collateral damage it inflicts on the other side is perceived as legitimate or a necessary evil. "Terrorism" is used as a political weapon against "excessive force." Suicide bombings are posed against F-16 strikes. Each side to legitimize its actions parses the history of a near century of conflict, and international law is used to justify war rather than the search for peace.

Even the best outcome of the current war seems likely to be a worse future than would have occurred if the peace process had been successful. In practice, even the best outcome may one in which both sides grudgingly return to positions similar to those raised at Camp David II, and reach compromises that will remain unsatisfactory to both sides. Such a peace is nearly certain to be "cold," reflect the anger and frustration of a half-decade of fighting, and involve the constant threat of violence from extremists and terrorists on both sides. In any other scenario, the Israeli-Palestinian War will be a tragedy for both sides. It will leave a legacy of anger and hundreds, if not thousands, of casualties that will take years to overcome. It is all too possible that the "Israeli-Palestinian War" will either continue on for months or years, and leave both sides sadder, but not wiser, or that there will be an awkward and unstable end to open violence without a real peace. Such a "false peace" would simply disguise an underlying structure of continued terrorism and extremism.