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Should the U.S. Military in Iraq Adopt Israeli Methods?

by James Bovard

The Associated Press reported on September 18 that an Israeli military official declared that the U.S. military “is showing interest in Israeli software instructing soldiers on how to behave in the West Bank and Gaza.” The United States is looking at the Israeli policies as examples of how American soldiers can better handle a hostile population in Iraq.

That may not be the perfect recipe for peace in the American-occupied territory. The Israelis are justifiably anxious to protect themselves from the torrent of murderous suicide bombers. While some Israeli policies may reduce short-term casualties among Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), other Israeli policies stir up hostility that can help inflame Palestinians.

The IDF has sought to tightly control Palestinian activity. Uri Savir, the chief Israeli negotiator for the Oslo accords between the Palestinians and the Israeli government, noted that before the 1993 agreement a West Bank Palestinian could not build, work, study, purchase land, grow produce, start a business, take a walk at night, enter Israel, go abroad, or visit his family in Gaza or Jordan without a permit from us.

Though Palestinians expected restraints to decline and new settlement activity to slow or cease after the 1993 accords between the Israeli government and the Palestinian leadership, punitive restrictions greatly increased. And while Palestinians believed the Oslo agreement meant a curtailment of new settlements, the total number of Israelis living in the Occupied Territories almost doubled — from 110,000 in 1992 to more than 200,000 in 2000.

As settlements proliferated, the IDF clamped down ever more tightly on nearby Palestinians. A 2002 report by B’Tselem, Israel’s premier human-rights group, noted,

The areas of jurisdiction of the Jewish local authorities, most of which extend far beyond the built-up area, are defined as ‘closed military zones.’ Palestinians are forbidden to enter these areas without authorization from the Israeli military commander. Israeli citizens, Jews from throughout the world, and tourists are all permitted to enter these areas without the need for special permits.

The Israeli government has commandeered more than half the land in the West Bank. The occupied territories have been splintered to maximize the number of Israeli chokepoints on Palestinian life. Dr. Sara Roy, of the Harvard University Center for Middle Eastern Studies, observed in a 2002 study entitled “Ending the Palestinian Economy,”

By December 1999, the Gaza Strip had been divided into three cantons and the West Bank into 227, the majority of which were no larger than two square kilometers in size. While Palestinians maintained control over many of the cantons and were promised authority over more if not most, Israel maintained jurisdiction over the land areas in between the cantons, which in effect gave Israel control over all the land and its disposition. Hence, the actual amount of land under Palestinian authority proved far less important than the way that land was arranged and administered.

As Danny Rubinstein noted in Haaretz, Israel’s most respected newspaper,

The West Bank is a land of roadblocks.... Palestinians are banned from most roads. To prevent Palestinian traffic, most West Bank towns and villages have been surrounded by hundreds of roadblocks and are under permanent siege and closure.... Movement restrictions ... automatically turn most of the Palestinian public into law breakers. Almost every Palestinian who leaves home for work, school, shopping, medical treatment or family visits must bypass a barrier and, as a result, violate Israeli security regulations.

Curfews

Palestinians are often forced to live in perpetual lockdowns, with capital punishment awaiting violators. B’Tselem noted in an October 2002 report titled “Lethal Curfew,”

The IDF has turned curfew, the most extreme method of restriction on movement, into a routine, daily measure, thus harming hundreds of thousands of people.

B’Tselem condemned

the frequent use of live ammunition to enforce the curfew. Sometimes, the soldiers fire without warning. Fifteen Palestinians, twelve of them children under age 16, have been killed by soldiers enforcing the curfew. Dozens of others have been wounded. None of those killed endangered the lives of soldiers.... Shooting a person simply because he left home during curfew constitutes an excessive use of force. Curfew is no longer a tool to meet specific security needs, but a sweeping means of collective punishment.

Curfew killings have resulted from

the lack of clarity of the procedures for imposing curfew and of the hours of curfew.... Contrary to IDF claims, the IDF does not provide information in an orderly manner to the residents regarding the hours of curfew; as a result, the residents are often uncertain if the curfew is in force,

B'Tselem reported.

One curfew confusion case occurred in Jenin, a West Bank city, on June 21, 2002, after residents had been confined to their homes for three days. Word spread that there was a one-hour break in the curfew. When people gathered on the streets and in the marketplace, Israeli tanks opened fire without warning. One tank opened fire on young boys on bicycles, killing two brothers and badly wounding a third. An amateur cameraman on a Jenin roof captured the scene, showing that the tank crew had a clear view down the street before firing at the boys. Another tank fired shells into a crowded marketplace, killing a 5-year-old girl and a 50-year-old teacher and wounding 19 other people.

No one was attacking Israelis at the time of the killings. The tank fire reportedly destroyed 20 cars and 30 shops. The initial Israeli military statement claimed that an IDF force searching houses in Jenin

identified a group of Palestinians who broke the curfew over the city and approached the forces. The force fired two tank shells in order to deter the crowd from approaching.

The IDF later issued a statement conceding, "An initial inquiry indicates that the force erred in its action."

Destroying buildings

The Israeli government uses the law and legalisms to give itself prerogatives to destroy whatever any Palestinian builds in some areas of the West Bank and Jerusalem. As a B'Tselem study noted,

While facilitating Jewish settlement, the planning system works vigorously to restrict the development of Palestinian communities. The main tool used to this end is to reject requests for building permits filed by Palestinians.

In some areas of the West Bank, the Israeli government almost never approves an application from Palestinians to build a home or other building on their own land. If someone builds anyway, the IDF can come in and raze the home or marketplace because it is illegal.

The IDF has sought to discourage suicide attacks on Israeli forces by destroying the homes of the bombers. In other cases, Palestinian homes are destroyed in order to create a larger buffer area for settlements.

From September 2000 through April 2003 Israel demolished the homes of more than 12,000 Palestinians. The rate of destruction increased sharply in early 2003, despite a lull at that time in Palestinian suicide attacks on Israelis. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees noted in May 2003,

Demolitions often occur late at night with little or no warning. Israeli military units — supported by tanks, APCs [armored personnel carriers], and helicopters — enter Palestinian areas to destroy a variety of targeted houses.... Houses close to settlements are often also destroyed.... Increasingly, explosives rather than bulldozers are used to destroy property, creating widespread collateral damage.

Many Palestinian civilians have been killed in house detonations. Jeff Halper, an anthropology professor at Ben Gurion University and the chief of the Israeli Committee against Home Demolition, observed that the IDF will

use any excuse to demolish as many houses as possible. The idea is to deter Palestinian building and keep as much area as possible free for Israeli building and the military.

Rachel Corrie, a 23-year-old college student from Olympia, Washington, was crushed to death by an IDF bulldozer on March 15, 2003, while she was protesting Israeli demolitions in Gaza.

Israel's tactics have failed to either quell opposition or protect Israelis. In the past three years, Palestinians have killed more than 700 Israelis, while Israelis have killed more than 2,000 Palestinians. While some people hold up Israel's war on terrorism as a model for the United States, more Israelis have been killed by terrorists since Ariel Sharon became prime minister in 2001 than had been killed in the 1967 Six-Day War.

In the years immediately prior to the 1967 war, Israelis suffered few attacks from terrorists. Martin van Creveld, Israel's best-known military historian, observed, "Between 1957 and 1967 the number of Israelis who lost their lives as a result of enemy action was just thirty-five." However, after Israel in 1967 seized the Gaza Strip and the West Bank — and sought to directly subjugate masses of Palestinians — deadly conflicts skyrocketed.

The Israeli experience in the occupied territories illustrates that force and restraints cannot quell long-term opposition. As Iraqis appear to be increasingly viewing Americans as a foreign occupation force, more sophisticated tactics by the U.S. military will not be enough to protect either American soldiers or peaceful Iraqi civilians.

*James Bovard is author of **Lost Rights** (1994) and [**Terrorism and Tyranny: How Bush's Crusade is Sabotaging Peace, Justice, and Freedom**](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.*

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