

The Middle East continues to be in the grip of violence, assassinations and political unrest. The Palestinian Prime Minister, Mahmoud Abbas, who was an important actor in the peace process, has resigned from his office. This is an indication of the complexity of situation in a volatile region. Violence continues in the Middle East with little sign of any effort to restore the tattered road map peace plan.

An official report criticizing the Israeli government and police over Arab deaths in riots in 2000 seems unlikely to satisfy Palestinian calls for justice. Denouncing Israeli policy of targeted assassinations, US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, said on Sunday that he was opposed to the idea of exiling Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, as suggested by Israeli Prime Minister and other Israeli leaders. On the other hand, Yasser Arafat has asked parliament speaker, Ahmad Qorei, to become his new prime minister and the US has also urged on Qorei to deal with the militants with an iron hand. Political pundits are of the view that Ahmed too will not be able to pacify the situation.

Israel has resumed its assassinations of Palestinian militant leaders with a vengeance since last month's suicide bombing of a bus packed with Jewish families in Jerusalem, which killed 21 people, including several children. In the latest such assassination, on 1 September, missiles from Israeli helicopters blew up Khader al-Husari, a leader of Hamas's military wing. Israeli strikes killed 11 militants (and five bystanders) since the bus bombing. In strictly military terms, the

policy is proving successful in eliminating those Israel accuses of organizing terrorist attacks. But it makes any return to a ceasefire and any hopes of progress on the internationally backed road map to peace seem ever more remote prospects.

An inquiry into the deaths of 13 Israeli Arabs and the wounding of dozens more in riots in October 2000 severely criticized the Israeli government, its then prime minister, Ehud Barak, and the police. The inquiry, led by an Israeli Supreme Court judge, called for a number of police chiefs to be banned from senior positions; it condemned an ingrained anti-Arab prejudice among police officers and a culture of filing false reports on fatal incidents; it flayed the government for its failure to respond to the deep resentment among Israeli Arabs; and it referred some shooting incidents for further investigation, possibly leading to criminal charges. But it made no recommendation against Barak, who is considering a comeback to national politics.

The inquiry's report has attracted much public debate in Israel, especially because of its sweeping condemnation of government policies towards the Arab minority and its grim warnings that discrimination could push communal relations to the point of no return. The report also faulted some Arab politicians for helping to foment the tensions that led to the violence three years ago. It is unlikely to satisfy Arabs, either the one million or so in Israel itself, or the 3.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank

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and Gaza strip, areas which have both been under Israeli control since the 1967 war.

The rioting came shortly after Palestinian militants had declared their second intifada (uprising) against the occupation. It was triggered by a visit by Ariel Sharon, then the main opposition leader, to the rocky outcrop in Jerusalem that Jews call Temple Mount. Muslims call Haram al-Sharif and both regard as among the holiest of places on earth. In 2002, the year after he came to office, Sharon sent Israeli troops into the West Bank and Gaza, arguing that the Palestinian Authority was doing nothing to stop militants' attacks. In April this year, under international pressure, Mr Arafat appointed the more moderate Abbas as prime minister and, in June, President George Bush got Sharon and Abbas to shake hands on the road map, a peace plan drawn up by America, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations, which envisages an independent Palestinian state by 2005. During a fragile truce agreed shortly afterwards, Israel withdrew troops from most of Gaza and had begun pulling back

from parts of the West Bank when the ceasefire was shattered by last month's bus bombing and Israeli assassinations of militant leaders.

Palestinian leaders say the assassinations make it impossible, in the court of Palestinian opinion, to act against Hamas and other hard-line groups. The result is reluctant, half-hearted gestures that satisfy no one: shovelling earth into tunnels under Gaza's frontier with Egypt, which are allegedly used to smuggle weapons; freezing the accounts of Islamic charities because they may be used to fund Hamas's military wing; and dispatching PA police to try to stop mortars being fired at Jewish settlements.

While the Israeli assault shows no sign of letting up, Palestinians see their leadership imploding. In line with the road map—and under American pressure—Abbas was trying to bring the PA's security forces under the control of his security chief, Muhammad Dahlan. Arafat, backed by most of his Fatah movement comrades, insists the forces must remain answerable to him. The two leaders developed differences that ultimately led to the Abbas' ouster. Senior Palestinian leaders and other mediators were trying to rebuild relations between the squabbling leaders ahead of a meeting of the parliament to assess Mr Abbas's first 100 days in office when the situation changed suddenly and Abbas resigned from office.

Yasser Arafat, meanwhile, had been warned that, should he topple Abbas by means of a confidence vote, he would lose what little engagement

America had in the road map. Though efforts were being made to reach a compromise that keeps Abbas in office, it was hard to imagine one that would have given him all the authority he needed to crack down on the militants. We shall have to see how new set-up in Palestine works to minimize differences on key issues related to the control of violence.

Unless that happens, Israel would continue tackling the threat from Palestinian terrorism in its own way. It may even consider expelling Yasser Arafat, who is currently holed up in his shell-damaged headquarters in the West Bank town of Ramallah. The hawkish Israeli defense minister, Shaul Mofaz, this week repeated his call for Mr Arafat's expulsion, arguing that the government had made an historic mistake in not kicking him out after it came to power two years ago. So far, Sharon has overruled Mofaz's demands.

The Americans who want to see peace and tranquility in the region for their own motives are unhappy at the turn of the events. There is no denying the fact that they themselves are responsible for the worsening of situation. Their unconditional support to Israel leads to anarchy and instability. If Israel continues its repressive policies with the assistance of America, there would not be any probability of peace in the Middle East. It is hard to say anything at this point of time about the future of peaceful coexistence of two nations that hate each other so dearly.

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