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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

5 January 1988

Implications of Renewed Violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip [redacted]

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Summary

Tel Aviv's tough military response to the violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in December suggests it has misjudged the nature of the locally-inspired unrest-- particularly its galvanizing impact on younger and more radical Palestinians--and the likelihood of more violence in the future. The wave of protests indicate that the leadership of the Palestinian movement may be shifting from the exiled leaders of the PLO to younger Palestinians resident in the Israeli-occupied territories. Tel Aviv will not be able to maintain its security crackdown indefinitely, and Palestinian youth most likely will take to the streets again when Israel's security presence is relaxed. Despite the spread of rioting to the Israeli Arab sector, we do not believe that Israel's Arab citizenry has been radicalized by the recent unrest, though they probably will again stage sympathy demonstrations in the event of new unrest in the territories. Most Arab leaders have been forced by the Palestinian disturbances to refocus some attention on Arab-Israeli issues even though they regard the Gulf war as the most immediate threat to their security. [redacted]

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The two-weeks of violence in the West Bank and Gaza, during which 21 Palestinians were killed and more than 150 were wounded, subsided just before Christmas almost as quickly as it had erupted. Calm had been restored by Israeli security forces even before the arrest of about 800 Palestinian activists after Christmas. The reinforcement of Israeli forces, greater reliance on non-lethal crowd control measures to reduce violent Israeli-Palestinian

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Arab-Israeli Division, and [redacted] Issues and Applications Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, [redacted]

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confrontations, and the onset of cold, wet weather helped to defuse tensions. [redacted]

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In addition, most demonstrators probably wanted calm restored for economic reasons. [redacted] the disturbances and general strikes depleted the cash reserves of many Palestinian workers. Most of the 48 labor unions in the West Bank registered with the Jordanian Government ran out of money to compensate members idled by strikes and riots and have since appealed to Amman for financial assistance. [redacted] many West Bankers were forced to stop their strikes and return to work in order to buy food. [redacted]

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The Palestinian Dimension

The wave of unrest marks the coming of age of West Bank and Gazan youth, in our view, as they have begun to assume the mantle of leadership of the Palestinian movement from the far-off leaders of the PLO. The protests were confined largely to Palestinians below the age of 25 and most were spontaneous and self-generated--not organized or controlled by Palestinian groups outside the occupied territories. Yasir Arafat's Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine tried to exploit the situation and prolong the unrest but without apparent success. A source of the US Embassy in Amman says that Arafat appeared genuinely surprised by the intensity of the disturbances. The source comments that while watching television coverage of the rioting, Arafat exclaimed at one point, "Look--girls!" [redacted]

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Although media accounts of the violence have emphasized the hopelessness and frustration of Palestinians with the Israeli occupation, we believe their actions also demonstrate growing frustration with the PLO leadership. The PLO still is the single strongest focus of political allegiances in the occupied territories, particularly among the young and the refugees. Their loyalty is reinforced by the degree to which the PLO provides financial support directly to them or to relatives living outside the occupied territories who are on the PLO payroll. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, US officials in Tel Aviv have noted that many young West Bankers and Gazans are frustrated with the exiled PLO leadership, which is seen as out of touch with the problems of daily life under the Israeli military occupation. They consider the PLO to be neither responsive to nor representative of their needs and aspirations. Moreover, many residents of the territories differ with PLO leaders over the organization's tactics and strategies--particularly whether the PLO should focus on establishing a Palestinian state in the occupied territories alongside Israel as its ultimate goal or only as an interim measure toward a state in all of Palestine. [redacted]

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We do not know who the leaders of the younger Palestinian generation are, but, on the basis of the recent protests, they probably are organized only at local street levels. [redacted]

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The PLO is alarmed by the recent events in the West Bank and Gaza, in our judgment, particularly the spectre of its declining influence there. As a result, Arafat and his deputies have taken steps in recent weeks to reaffirm the PLO's leadership. At an emergency meeting of the PLO Executive Committee in Tunis in late December, members discussed--though took no action on--establishing a Palestinian government-in-exile. The idea is not new, but disagreements among Palestinian factions and opposition from Syria have deterred the PLO from going ahead in the past. We believe the the PLO leaders' fear of losing their claim to speak for the residents of the occupied territories has prompted them to reconsider the proposal at this time, and further discussions are likely in the months ahead. [REDACTED]

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We believe Arafat also approved the ill-fated, 25 December terrorist infiltration into Israel, evidently mounted from Iraq through Jordan unknowingly, to reaffirm his and the PLO's revolutionary credentials. The Palestine Liberation Front, headed by Arafat's close associate, Muhammad Abbas--Abu Abbas--claimed responsibility for the infiltration. Abu Abbas was also responsible for the hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship in 1985. [REDACTED]

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The Impact in Israel

Israeli leaders have traditionally regarded the occupied territories as a two-dimensional problem--what to do with the territories in the event of a peace settlement and controlling Palestinian unrest until peace arrives. Israeli officials have said publicly they do not view the latest wave of Palestinian violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a benchmark in the 20-year occupation. Despite the unusual length and intensity of the protests, they do not believe that the territories have become uncontrollable. Israeli officials concede that the poorly-prepared Israeli troops who overreacted and fired into threatening crowds helped to fan tensions and prolong the cycle of violence, and they were particularly stung by the international--and US--outcry at the heavy-handed Israeli response. They believe that more effective use of riot control techniques and better trained security forces will enable them to manage future unrest. [REDACTED]

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The current Israeli security crackdown has the overwhelming approval of the Israeli public. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] 69 percent of the Israeli public supports the tough security measures ordered by Defense Minister Rabin as necessary to ensure security in the occupied territories. [REDACTED]

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The disturbances in the territories have not prompted many Israelis to reassess the urgency of moving on the peace process in

order to address underlying Palestinian grievances. [redacted]

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[redacted] Israeli pollsters have often pointed out, however, that Israeli public opinion on peace-related issues is very sensitive to external developments--the Israeli public becomes less willing to make concessions for peace as the prospects for peace appear more remote. [redacted]

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Israeli hardliners associated with Prime Minister Shamir's Likud and other right-wing parties point to Palestinian violence as evidence of the intolerable security threat Israel would face if it were to withdraw from the territories. In their view, Israel must remain permanently in the West Bank and Gaza to prevent radical Palestinians from taking control of the territories. [redacted]

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For Labor and the supporters of territorial compromise, the violence highlights the demographic problem Israel faces if it does not disengage from the territories. In the absence of a viable peace process, however, territorial compromise is seen by Labor leader Peres as a negative political issue. Consequently, he focuses on the arrangements for negotiations--direct Arab-Israeli talks within the loose framework of an international conference--rather than the end result of negotiations. Moreover, until peace is achieved, Peres supports using tough measures, if necessary, to maintain order in the occupied territories. [redacted]

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Israelis across the political spectrum were disturbed by the spread of rioting to the Israeli Arab sector on 21 December. The Israeli Arab disturbances seemed to confirm the worst fears of many Israelis that Israeli Arabs would become increasingly radicalized by the growing nationalism of Palestinians in the occupied territories. Some Israeli leaders have tried to downplay the significance of the rioting, describing it as a passing phenomenon. In a conversation with US officials, Defense Minister Rabin attributed the violence in the Israeli Arab sector to the Israeli communist party, Rakah, which allegedly instigated the demonstrations and could not keep them under control. We do not believe Israel's Arab citizenry has been radicalized by the recent unrest, but Israeli Arabs probably will again stage sympathy demonstrations in the event of new unrest in the territories. [redacted]

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Regional Reaction

Middle Eastern leaders had focused almost exclusively on the Persian Gulf until the unrest in the West Bank and Gaza Strip erupted. The scant attention given Arab-Israeli issues at November's Arab League summit, for example, reflected a consensus that Iran, not Israel, posed the principal threat to Arab interests. [redacted]

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The Palestinian demonstrations and Israel's heavy-handed reaction, however, have rekindled anti-Israeli sentiment and

demonstrated the explosive potential of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The violence also has probably underscored to Arab leaders that a resolution of the Palestinian problem requires the active support and participation of the inhabitants of the occupied territories and that the PLO alone is not capable of pressing Israel to accept a settlement acceptable to the Arabs. Most Arab leaders believe that Tel Aviv will not participate in negotiations that call for an exchange of land for peace as long as the Palestinian problem does not pose a serious domestic security problem for Israel or elicit greater international attention.

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Radical states in the region will try to exploit Palestinian-Israeli tension for their own gain, and Syria and Iran almost certainly see a revival of the Palestinian issue as a timely distraction from developments in the Persian Gulf. In the past several months, Tehran and Damascus have had to make tactical political shifts to accommodate growing Arab and international pressure, and Palestinian-Israeli clashes present a convenient vehicle to help ease their regional isolation. Syria, Iran, and Libya probably will try to use their surrogates to fan the fires of Palestinian-Israeli tensions.

- Tehran will try to show common cause with the Arabs against Israel to weaken growing Arab steadfastness against Iran. It will try to provide more aid to fledgling fundamentalist groups in the occupied territories and may extend support to radical Palestinian groups such as the Abu Nidal Organization.
- Syria may encourage Palestinian operations against Israel but will seek to conceal its hand for fear of Israeli retaliation, particularly after the recent hang-glider incident in northern Israel.

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Moderate Arab leaders, such as Jordan's King Hussein and Egypt's President Mubarak, hope that the recent violence will lead to broader recognition in Israel that the absence of Arab-Israeli peace and the desperate living conditions of Palestinians living under Israeli control will lead only to more bloodshed. They almost certainly still believe, however, that Israel will not moderate its terms for a negotiating process or a settlement unless the United States applies strong political pressure on Tel Aviv.

- Hussein will try to convince Israeli leaders and Palestinian notables in the occupied territories that they are losing influence and control over events in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to young Palestinian firebrands. He will encourage both sides to move boldly on the peace-seeking process to preserve their interests while there is still an opportunity.
- Hussein will also forge ahead with the West Bank development program in hopes of rebuilding Amman's influence among Palestinians, which he probably believes has been undermined by the recent unrest.

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[redacted]

-- Mubarak will place peace issues and the need for US involvement high on his agenda when he visits Washington in late January. [redacted]

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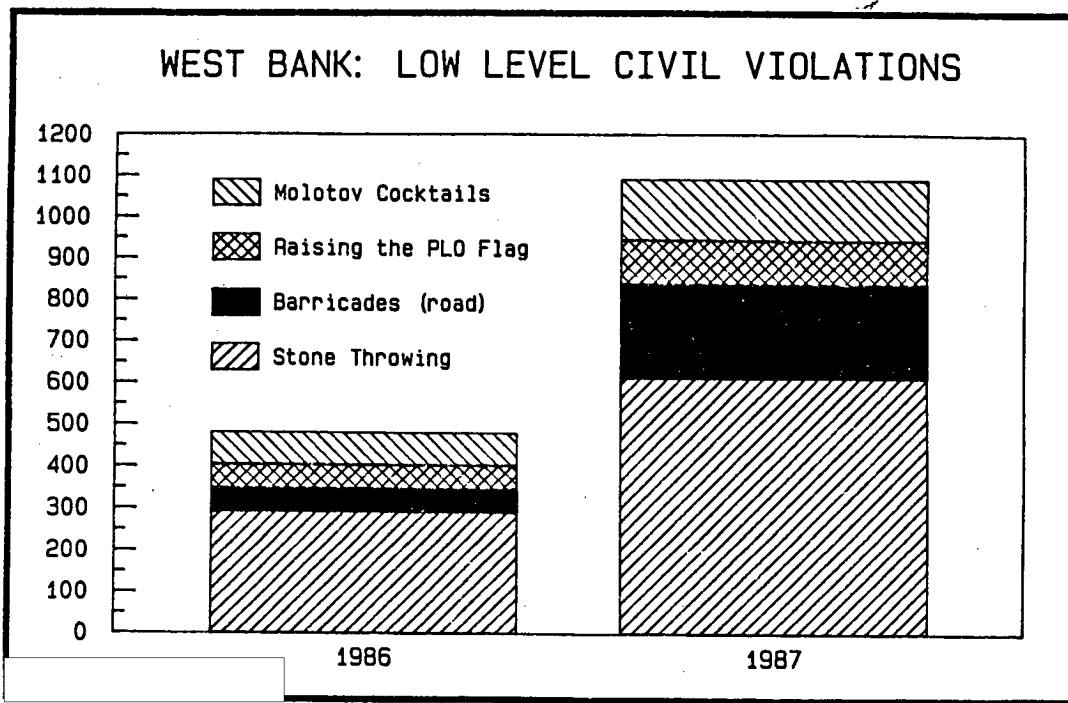
Outlook

Reliance on an "iron fist" policy against Palestinian unrest suggests Tel Aviv has misjudged the spontaneous nature of the recent disturbances and their galvanizing impact on younger, more radical Palestinians. It also misreads the changing nature of Palestinian attitudes in the territories--particularly among the younger extremists who appear increasingly willing to engage in confrontations with Israeli soldiers. Tel Aviv will not be able to maintain the security crackdown indefinitely, and Palestinian youth most likely will take to the streets again when Israel's security presence is relaxed. Although Israeli security officials have said they are determined to use more effective and non-lethal means to bring the next bout of Palestinian violence under control, Rabin has warned publicly that Israel will use "massive force" if necessary. [redacted]

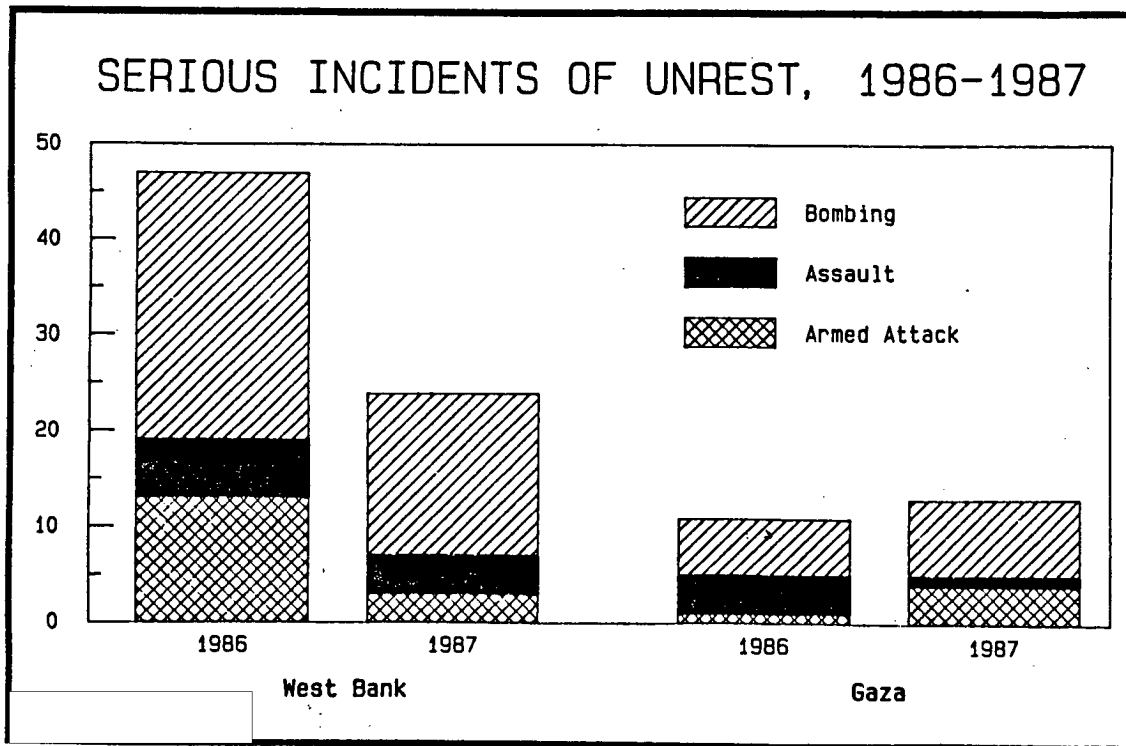
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In the nearterm, Arab-Israeli issues are likely to be treated with more prominence by Middle Eastern leaders. The radical states are likely to fuel the fires, and the moderates will continue pressing their ideas for an acceptable negotiating framework. Most Arab leaders are probably uncertain if this latest round of violence is a turning point in the Palestinian movement, and they will wait to see if Palestinian activism in the occupied territories endures before making any major policy adjustments. [redacted]

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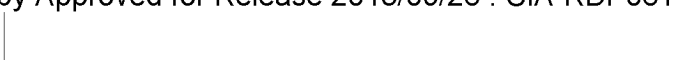


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Statistics indicate a sharp increase in low-level violence, but a decrease in more serious and terrorist incidents in 1987 from 1986. The number of low-level incidents has been twice as great on the West Bank in 1987 than in 1986. Conversely, the number of serious incidents have decreased in 1987, with the number armed attacks and bombings cut in half.

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