

# How Terrorist Infrastructure “Dismantles”

**Spring 2004**

Jerome M. Segal

The acceptance, last year, by both Israel and the Palestinians of President Bush's multi-phased "Roadmap" for achieving an end to the conflict, re-opened the possibility of negotiations on the key issues in the conflict. The negotiations were scheduled for Phase III of the plan. Before they would occur, however, the pre-conditions of Phase I had to be met. This never happened, and in the United States and Israel, the failure of the Palestinian Authority to "dismantle terrorist infrastructure" is widely viewed as the single biggest reason that the Roadmap has made no progress.

In explicating what is expected of the Palestinian Authority, an historical reference is often cited: David Ben Gurion's order to attack the Altalena, a ship bringing weapons to supply Menachem Begin's Irgun. We can indeed learn from reflection on the Altalena incident, but the lesson may be surprising. The history of the Altalena incident is complex and often misunderstood. A more accurate reading of the history suggests that the Roadmap itself may have become an obstacle to achieving Middle East peace.

In the 1930's and 40's the Zionist movement, like the Palestinians today, were divided into numerous factions. They differed in their maximal and minimal objectives and had differing conceptions of what kind of tactics were legitimate, both against the British and against the Palestinians. Some of these groups, such as the Irgun, led by Menachem Begin, were widely viewed as terrorist organizations. In 1948 David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, entered into a decisive showdown with Begin. The occasion was the arrival off the coast of Tel Aviv of the Altalena, a ship that was carrying weapons and fighters to supply Begin's Irgun. What is generally remembered about the incident is that Ben Gurion ordered his forces to prevent the Altalena from unloading its weapons cargo. The young Yitzhak Rabin commanded forces on the beach, and Begin himself was aboard the ship when it was shelled. Ultimately it was set ablaze, and when the smoke cleared some twenty Irgun fighters had been killed and some eighty wounded. The incident was a decisive turning point in ending the multiplicity of independent "fighting organizations."

In applying this as an example for the Palestinians, care must be taken. First, it should be remembered that the Altalena incident occurred in June of 1948; that is, it occurred after the State of Israel had been established and recognized by the world powers. Thus, what Ben Gurion was asserting was not the dominance of his faction, but rather the standard attribute of statehood: the monopoly of power of a State within the area of its claimed sovereignty.

Secondly, it should be noted that once the State of Israel was established, Begin himself accepted the need for, at least, a partial transformation of the Irgun away from its identity as a non-state military actor. Thus, on May 15, 1948, the day the State of Israel was proclaimed, Begin went on

the radio saying:

"The Irgun is leaving the underground within the boundaries of the Hebrew independent state.... Now we have Hebrew rule in part of our Homeland. In this part there is no need for a Hebrew underground. In the state of Israel, we shall be soldiers and builders. We shall respect its Government, for it is our Government."

Here Begin was not calling for the complete dismantling of the Irgun. He made a distinction between inside and outside, between those territories under and those not under the rule of the Israeli state. Within the areas of the Israeli rule, he accepted the sovereignty of the government.

Third, though the Altalena incident was a decisive turning point, the Altalena was a single incident. It did not open an extended civil war. The Israeli army did not physically crush the Irgun fighters, who numbered several thousand. Rather, Irgun fighters were integrated into the army, though in some instances they retained their separate identity until the end of the 1948-49 war, after which they either disbanded or were absorbed into the forces of the State.

What all of this should make clear is that the issue of achieving a monopoly of force is radically different in the context of the emergence of a new state. When the new state emerges, non-state actors may well understand and accept the need for a transformation in their organizations. The term "dismantling the terrorist infrastructure" rather than implying sustained military confrontation or civil war, can mean the integration of non-state fighters into the army of the state.

For Palestinian society, such an evolution will ultimately occur. If Palestinian history follows the Israeli example, then the key to dismantling terrorist organizations is the prior establishment of a Palestinian state. To make dismantling a pre-condition for movement towards a state, especially when some of those organizations oppose any negotiations with Israel in the first place, is to block the very process that provides the solution. Far better to adopt the wisdom of Prime Minister Rabin, to "negotiate as if there is no terrorism, and to fight terrorism as if there is no negotiation.