HOME
CLASSIFIEDS
Automobiles
Job Market
Real Estate
All Classifieds
NEWS
Quick News
NYT Front Page
Arts
Business
Health
International
National
New York Region
Obituaries
Politics
Science
Sports
Technology
Weather
Corrections
OPINION
Editorials / Op-Ed
Readers' Opinions
FEATURES
Automobiles
Books
Cartoons
Crossword/Games
Job Market
Living
Magazine
Movies
Photos
Real Estate
Travel
Week in Review
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Shopping
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Screensavers
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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The New Mideast Paradigm

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

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The past six months of warfare between Israelis and Palestinians constitute a fundamental turning point in their struggle - one as important as the 1948 and 1967 wars, and one that demands that we look at their conflict in a new way.

The paradigm, the superstory, through which much of the world first looked at the Arab-Israeli conflict after the 1948 war, was David versus Goliath - a tiny Jewish state standing up against seven Arab armies seeking to destroy it. That paradigm lasted until the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai and the Golan Heights, and a new paradigm took hold: Israel as colonizer, with Israeli policies in the territories compared to South Africa under apartheid or France in Algeria.

The 2000-2001 Israeli-Palestinian war shifts the paradigm once again. Why? Because when Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel and the U.S. president put forth a peace plan that, while not entirely acceptable to the Palestinians, contains for the first time all the elements of a deal that they were seeking - a Palestinian state in virtually all the West Bank and Gaza, territorial compensation for land Israel would retain for settlements, a redivided Jerusalem and restitution for the Palestinians - and the Palestinian leadership rejects this offer and the Palestinian street reacts to Ariel Sharon's silly provocation on the Temple Mount rather than to the Clinton-Barak proposals on the table, then you have to admit that another paradigm is at work today.

To say that Israel's idiotic, rapacious settlements in places like Gaza, its trigger-happy soldiers and roadblocks throughout the West Bank do not prolong the conflict is to deny reality. But to say that those are the whole story is utter nonsense, since it was precisely such settlements that Mr. Barak was offering to withdraw.

The conflict today between Israelis and Palestinians is not just about territory, politics or religion. It is about modernity - for both Arab leaders and the Arab street. It is about the tension between a developed society that is succeeding at modernization and an underdeveloped one that is failing at it and looking for others to blame.

Why is Israel's most dovish leader, Shimon Peres, who aspired to forge a "New Middle East," disliked by Arab leaders more than any other Israeli official? It is because a new Middle East is a problem for certain Arab leaders (but by no means all), because they feel that in a region focused on trade, development and democratization they cannot succeed - without fundamental change - nor could they blame Israel for their failures. When the only issue on the agenda is liberating Palestine, then Ariel Sharon is the problem. But when the only issue on the agenda is modernizing the Arab world, then certain Arab leaders are the problem. And they don't want to be seen as the problem, so they keep their people focused on Israel and the old Middle East.

It's not that the Palestinians are anti-modern. It's that their young people are not being given a real choice by their leaders to move in that direction. They are constantly being told by their leaders and fellow Arabs to stay in the old definition of struggle, to stay in a permanent revolution against colonization, to build their society and dignity through conflict against Israel, not through success at modernization.

All of these messages are now wrapped together in this Intifada II. Intifada II is Palestinian youths trying to emulate the Hezbollah in Lebanon, and playing out some heroic 1960's Che Guevara struggle against the "Israeli imperialist"; it's Palestinian youths lashing out at the symbol of their failure to build a modern society - Israel; and it's Palestinian youths lashing out at the instruments of their decline - their own leaders. Their message to Israelis is: "We are somebody. We may not be able to make microchips, but we can make you miserable and we will do that even if it is making us destitute."

I have argued from the start that such an approach will achieve nothing good for the Palestinians. At least some Palestinians are starting to question it as well. Read the respected Palestinian journalist Daoud Kuttab's op-ed piece last Thursday in The Jerusalem Post: "Some voices in Palestine are starting to say for the first time that, looking beyond emotions, where exactly are we now? Barak and Clinton, as well as their ideas, are no longer around. . . . Shouldn't we have accepted the Clinton ideas? Where is the return, in Palestine and the Arab world, of the 1970's and 1980's rhetoric going to lead us?"

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