Sharm el-Sheikh: Fact-finding committee report  
(Also known as the Mitchel Report)

On Oct. 17, 2000, the Middle East Peace Summit at Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, was concluded. Participants included the Government of Israel (GOI), the Palestinian Authority (PA), the governments of Egypt, Jordan, and the United States, as well as representatives from the United Nations and the European Union. Subsequently, Pres. Clinton put together a fact-finding committee to determine the causes of the violence that led to the Summit and how to avoid a recurrence in the future. The committee’s charge, as outlined by Clinton, was to find a path back to the peace process and at the same time “steer clear of any step that will intensify mutual blame and finger-pointing between the parties.”

Following are excerpts from the committee report submitted to Pres. Bush on April 30, 2001, and signed by George J. Mitchell, Chairman; Suleyman Demirel, 9th President of the Republic of Turkey; Thorboiern Jagland, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway; Warren B. Rudman, former Member of the United States Senate; and Javier Solana, High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, European Union.

In late September 2000, Israeli, Palestinian, and other officials received reports that Member of the Knesset (now Prime Minister) Ariel Sharon was planning a visit to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Palestinian and U.S. officials urged then Prime Minister Ehud Barak to prohibit the visit. Mr. Barak told us that he believed the visit was intended to be an internal political act directed against him by a political opponent, and he declined to prohibit it.

Mr. Sharon made the visit on September 28 accompanied by over 1,000 Israeli police officers. Although Israelis viewed the visit in an internal political context, Palestinians saw it as highly provocative to them. On the following day, in the same place, a large number of unarmed Palestinian demonstrators and a large Israeli police contingent confronted each other.

Similar demonstrations took place over the following several days. Thus began what has become known as the "Al-Aqsa Intifada" (Al-Aqsa being a mosque at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount). From the perspective of the PLO, Israel responded to the disturbances with excessive and illegal use of deadly force against demonstrators. From the perspective of the GOI, the demonstrations were organized and directed by the Palestinian leadership to create sympathy for their cause around the world by provoking Israeli security forces to fire upon demonstrators, especially young people.

We have no basis on which to conclude that there was a deliberate plan by the PA to initiate a campaign of violence at the first opportunity; or to conclude that there was a deliberate plan by the GOI to respond with lethal force. . . . Amid rising anger, fear, and mistrust, each side assumed the worst about the other and acted accordingly.

Despite their long history and close proximity, some Israelis and Palestinians seem not to fully appreciate each other's problems and concerns. Some Israelis appear not to comprehend the humiliation and frustration that Palestinians must endure every day as a result of living with the continuing effects of occupation, sustained by the presence of Israeli military forces and settlements in their midst, or the determination of the Palestinians to achieve independence and genuine self-determination. Some Palestinians appear not to comprehend the extent to which terrorism creates fear among the Israeli people and undermines their belief in the possibility of coexistence, or the determination of the GOI to do whatever is necessary to protect its people.

Two proud peoples share a land and a destiny. Their competing claims and religious differences have led to a grinding, demoralizing, dehumanizing conflict. They can continue in conflict or they can negotiate to find a way to live side-by-side in peace.
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Among the committee's recommendations:

- The PA should make clear through concrete action to Palestinians and Israelis alike that terrorism is reprehensible and unacceptable, and that the PA will make a 100 percent effort to prevent terrorist operations and to punish perpetrators.
- The GOI should freeze all settlement activity, including the "natural growth" of existing settlements.
- The GOI and PA should immediately resume security cooperation.

In the spirit of the Sharm el-Sheikh agreements and understandings of 1999 and 2000, we recommend that the parties meet to reaffirm their commitment to signed agreements and mutual understandings, and take corresponding action. This should be the basis for resuming full and meaningful negotiations.