

Inside the Palestinian Authority:

A Situation Report

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Brief Analysis

Since the beginning of the Oslo process, Israel and the United States have consistently underestimated Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasser Arafat. Arafat is a historic figure who deserves respect. In his many years as leader of the Palestinians he has learned to employ a wide range of personas and emotions to achieve his ends: he will whine in front of lesser people, he will play the 'clown,' and he will suffer being scolded by junior Israeli generals, if their positions serve his larger purposes. The image of Arafat as a sad old man waiting for a mini-state to crown his career must be replaced with the reality of a vigorous politician who will not even discuss his succession. Arafat said that the Oslo accords can be a repeat of the 1969 Cairo agreement between him and General Boustany, the chief of staff of the Lebanese Army, which allowed Arafat to maintain a small number of guerrillas on the slopes of Mt. Hermon. Arafat used this crack to pry the doors of Lebanon open, and by the late 1980s, the PLO presence in Lebanon was so great that Arafat considered himself—in his own words—"governor-general of Lebanon." Arafat views Oslo as another crack: a corridor through which he can incrementally obtain his strategic goal.

The Oslo agreement also served to revive the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The intifada had marginalized Arafat and the PLO. However, to end the turmoil, Israel had to find a source of authority that could control the Palestinian stone-throwers and was forced to turn to Arafat as the only realistic alternative. Thus, the "runaway autonomy" of the intifada was replaced by the "disorderly government" of the PA. Israel gave Arafat control of the purse strings and guns in the territories in the hope that he would establish a closer alliance with the "insiders"—Palestinians who actually reside in the West Bank and Gaza—and establish a more representative, less PLO-controlled Palestinian leadership. But the PLO executive committee, composed of diaspora Palestinians, still effectively controls the PA. Contrary to Israeli hopes, Palestinian insiders have been relegated to second-class status once again.

The Spillover Theory

In its early years, Arafat's movement, Fatah, attempted to trigger a military conflict between the Arab states and Israel. To achieve this, Fatah devised the "entanglement" theory in the 1960s—launching guerrilla attacks from Arab land into Israel to provoke Israeli retaliation which would then escalate to war. The tunnel riots of September 1996

were Fatah's first test of a 1990s version of this 1960s approach, the "spillover" theory, which proposes that if there is a sufficient amount of violence in the territories, the crisis will spill over into the rest of the Arab world. Arafat's willingness to trigger "spillover" violence could make it more difficult for Israel to contain future Palestinian outbursts.

Arafat's Manipulation of Palestinian Violence and the Transformation of the Oslo Process

The Oslo agreement has become a greater asset for the Palestinians than the Israelis. Palestinians who vehemently condemned Oslo when it was signed—for example, Faruq Kaddumi, who still refuses to enter the territories in protest of the "reprehensible" Oslo accord—now cling to the agreement. Arafat has managed to prove to the Palestinian public that Oslo is not "an agreement of submission," as it was initially branded in Arabic, but a positive force in the struggle for the Palestinian cause. Palestinian police are no longer accused of collaborating with Israeli security, but are now considered protectors against Israeli oppression. Similarly, Israelis who originally supported the agreement are now questioning their own wisdom. In part this is because there is no longer a mutually acceptable interpretation of the Oslo agreement. The main issues of the Declaration of Principles and Oslo II—further redeployments (FRDs), status of displaced persons from 1967, safe passage from the West Bank to Gaza, the Dahaniya airport, and a Gaza port—are now being contested by both the Palestinians and the Israelis.

The spirit of cooperation launched by Oslo has been transformed into a mood of confrontation. After three and a half years, Israeli-Palestinian relations are hardly synonymous with security, stability, reconciliation, or prosperity. Not coincidentally, the "cold peace" between Egypt and Israel now more closely resembles a "cold war," and Israeli-Syrian relations have degenerated from being on the verge of an agreement to the brink of a crisis. This has led many wary Israelis to question whether the Oslo process will actually achieve its main objective—the termination of hostility—or will merely reshape the conflict.

Contributing to this mood is the fact that Arafat is trying to maintain a situation where he has control over a fluctuating degree of instability in the territories. His strategy is to sustain friction between Israel and the Palestinians, which also means sustaining a certain amount of terrorism. Despite Israeli demands for 100 percent effort on terrorism, the PA has operated a 'revolving-door' prison, it has refused to arrest local terrorist leaders, and it has even orchestrated violent street demonstrations and rioting against Israel. Arafat has demonstrated an impressive amount of control over this violence. Indeed, Arafat must keep the amount of violence he employs within limits as long as he himself is present in the territories, to demonstrate that he can control the level of violence. On the other hand, Israel must fear that Arafat might move out of the territories in response to a serious deadlock in negotiations and unleash a new intifada. Once he leaves the territories he has no incentive to keep the terrorists in check, and every incentive to foment violence to force Israel to cave in to his demands in return for reining in the troublemakers. In short, Arafat is concerned about the Palestinian cause—more than about the Palestinian people.

Moving to 'Final Status'

Final status negotiations will inevitably require the Palestinians to trade their more grandiose ambitions for the attainable goal of some kind of limited sovereignty in most areas of the West Bank and Gaza. Therefore, Arafat will have to tell portions of his own constituency—1 million Palestinians in Israel and 2.6 million in Jordan—that they are doomed to stay under foreign domination forever. This is not going to be a popular statement, and we can expect many Palestinians vehemently to oppose it. Consequently, Arafat has no intention of taking this step and formally terminating all Palestinian claims on Israel, unless he is forced to do so, and Israel's "embrace of friendship" has so far not been strong enough to make Arafat agree to take this unpalatable step.

Israel would have a greater advantage in the Palestinian track if it negotiated peace with Syria before concluding final status talks. But Syrian President Hafez al-Asad is in no hurry to weaken his position in Lebanon or become a

"middle level" state, which are likely results of an Israeli-Syrian peace treaty. Moreover, the United States does not seem intent on imposing its own agenda by pressing Israel and Syria to resume negotiations. Without the leverage of a Syrian deal in hand, Netanyahu must consider a package deal centered on the two remaining FRDs as one of the few cards he can play that would genuinely interest the Palestinians.

Other features of a realistic final status agreement are becoming clearer, but many Israelis have not given any indication that they recognize them or are prepared to accept them. For example, Israelis must realize that they may eventually have to choose between the Jordan Valley and some official Palestinian presence in East Jerusalem. The security problems Israel would face by turning over control of the Jordan Valley-and allowing a border between the Palestinian entity and Jordan-cannot be underestimated. One potential solution would be a loose trilateral configuration-not a confederation-between Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians. Such a political superstructure could blunt the appeal Arafat could make to Israeli Arabs or Palestinian Jordanians.

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