

## On the Brink:

### The Oslo Process and the Washington Summit

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#### Brief Analysis

“I want to repeat here once again our commitment to security cooperation with Israel and our commitment to cooperate with Israel in all aspects in accordance with the agreement signed. This cooperation with Israel in all fields will continue irrespective of our political differences.” —Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, September 4, 1996, in his meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu

“Our position is not only to move on the peace process but also improve the prosperity and economic conditions of the Palestinian population. We think that prosperity and peace go hand in hand. . . . We met here in order to move the peace process forward. . . . We are interested that it will not be delayed.” —Prime Minister Netanyahu, September 4, 1996, in his meeting with Chairman Arafat

More quickly than nearly all observers thought possible, the Oslo process today stands on the precipice of collapse. At its core, Oslo was a simple bargain: in exchange for the irrevocable end to the “armed struggle,” the Palestinian people received recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization as its legitimate representative and an entry ticket into a process which could earn them - through cooperation and performance incrementally more territory and authority in the West Bank and Gaza and the prospect of a “final status” agreement that fulfills minimum political goals. That compact, summarized in the two quotations cited above, has broken down, with Palestinians (including the armed personnel of the Palestinian Authority) resorting to violence to protest what they perceived as Israel's slowdown (or, to some Palestinian leaders, Israel's tacit repudiation) of Oslo's core understanding. Given that this bargain represents the only agreed-upon formula for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, its collapse would be disastrous. For Israelis, Palestinians and Americans, this week's Washington summit is a high-risk gambit to avert that disaster.

From Tunnel to Riots: Ostensibly, last week's rioting erupted over Palestinian outrage at the completion of a decade-old archaeological project to open the last few feet of the Hasmonean Tunnel. Here, there can be little quarrel with Israel's legal right to complete the tunnel, which neither touches, connects nor crosses territory on which any Muslim holy shrines are located; it “is hardly the terrible desecration of Islamic holies that the Palestinian charged,” noted the New York Times' Jerusalem correspondent. While this Israeli government has gone to great lengths to

insist that it will not accept infringement of its sovereignty in Jerusalem, no Israeli government would interpret the Oslo Accords as denying it the right to complete the project. Indeed, previous governments have worked quietly with the Islamic waqf authorities to negotiate a bargain, linking the completion of the tunnel to the opening of Solomon's Stables for Muslim prayers. That the waqf had at one point agreed in principle to this deal underscored the fact that the tunnel was itself a "bargainable issue," not a prima facie slap in the face to the world's billion Muslims.

Equally clear, in a political sense, is the fact that the decision to open the tunnel did not come at the most propitious time (i.e., when Israeli-Palestinian tensions are already high) or in the most solicitous manner (i.e., with the Mayor of Jerusalem, surrounded by security forces, wielding a pick-ax to underscore the political significance of the archaeological move). Moreover, there was surely a lapse in either intelligence or judgment or both. (Either no one foresaw that it would be seized upon as a cause celebre or no one judged the likelihood of negative reaction as outweighing the benefits of the move; indeed, Israel Radio reported that the Shin Bet chief admitted an intelligence mistake in private Knesset testimony yesterday.) In their assessment of the Israeli Government's decision to open the tunnel, virtually all Israeli newspapers -- even pro-Likud journals like the Jerusalem Post -- have criticized the move, drawing a sharp distinction between (in the words of the Ma'ariv editorialist) "what's right" and "what's smart."

But viewed against the backdrop of the statements of recent weeks by senior leaders of the Palestinian Authority (both passive and active) the tunnel issue was mainly pretext, not explanation. Over the course of Netanyahu's first 100 days, there has been a steady chorus from numerous PA officials either calling for or approvingly prophesying a return to armed confrontation with Israel. "I'm not expecting an intifada," PLO Executive Committee member Faisal Husseini told al-Ahram in July. "What will come is something that is bigger, more effective and stronger than the intifada." And as Palestinian Council speaker Ahmad Quray (the legally designated successor to Yasser Arafat) told the al-Ittihad newspaper two months ago: "Our options are clear. We can always go back to the previous situation. This means we can go back to the intifada, to fighting, to struggle."

To be sure, as the shift from Labor to Likud brought with it a shift in both substance and style of negotiation, Palestinian frustration deepened. What the new Israeli prime minister may have believed was a nimble handling of different constituencies within his fractious coalition -- for example, balancing the historic decision for a Likud prime minister to meet with the head of the PLO with approval of some relatively modest expansion of existing Israeli settlements -- was viewed with disdain and growing rage among Palestinians. For them, Netanyahu's first 100 days witnessed embarrassments (e.g., the demolition of the Jerusalem building two days after Arafat acceded to Israel's request to close two illegal offices in Jerusalem), lengthy procedural haggling just to convene high-level meetings, and little of the economic relief promised as Likud's first-order-of-business toward the territories. Until last week, Arafat's finger was the only one in the dike; among popular Palestinian leaders, he alone was arguing for caution. Then, at a time when editors from Cairo to Damascus were painting a composite of Netanyahu as a deranged, satanic racist reminiscent of Adolf Hitler [see last week's al-Ahram (Egypt), al-Gumhuriya, (Egypt) and al-Baath (Syria) newspapers], Arafat called for street protests and demonstrations against the tunnel opening. In effect, he pulled his finger from the dike at high tide.

The confrontations that erupted in numerous points of contact between Israel and the PA - checkpoints, roadblocks, settlements and religious sites - pitted PA policeman, Fatah supporters and pro-Fatah shabiba youth against Israel Defense Forces soldiers and Israeli settlers. This was no intifada, the term applied to the mass, largely spontaneous uprising in December 1987 which the PLO leadership, then in Tunis, hurriedly tried to capture as its own; on the contrary, with thousands of Palestinians rallied to action by official Palestinian television and radio as well as by actions (and inactions) of PA security officials and political leaders, this was largely the use of violence for political goals. The array of Israeli political and military officials who addressed an extraordinary press conference Friday

morning differed as to the role that frustrated expectations and sour economic realities played in the build up to the rioting, but there was across-the-board agreement on the profoundly serious charge of "incitement."

There are only two explanations for what happened once the protests took shape -- either Arafat and his senior officers condoned (or even encouraged) the participation of PA troops in clashes with Israel or they lost control of their men. It is difficult to decide which explanation is worse. That is because beyond the human tragedy of dead and wounded, the most grievous aspect of last week's confrontation in tactical terms was the collapse of the glue that has held the Oslo process together --i.e., security cooperation between the PA and the IDF. Joint patrols that teamed IDF and PA personnel were a regular sight; since March, when Arafat finally gave clear orders for strong counter-terrorism measures by his troops, senior IDF officials had been praising their Palestinian counterparts in words that Israeli and Egyptian officers have never applied to each other after 17 years of peace. Today, those relationships are in tatters. That firearms wielded by PA policemen to maintain public order and prevent terrorism were used against Israelis regardless of any real, imagined or fabricated pretext -- is a violation of the Oslo Accords of such magnitude that it cannot but challenge the bases of the Oslo compact. To many Israelis, especially those in the floating middle that tipped the balance for Netanyahu in May, the end of the "armed struggle" promised in 1993 has become conditional, not irrevocable; for them, that is unacceptable.

U.S. Policy and the Summit: For the United States, the success of the Oslo process is an important national interest. Oslo is not just a creation of the Clinton Administration; it represents the culmination of both an approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking (direct negotiations) and an idea about how to make Israeli-Palestinian progress (through interim self-government arrangements) that harkens back to the "mother of all agreements," the Camp David Accords. Reasonable people can disagree with the wisdom of particular aspects of the three Oslo accords (September 1993, May 1994, September 1995) and with the vigor with which the parties have implemented them, but one thing is for certain: if Oslo is broken, it should be fixed, not discarded, because there is no alternative path to making peace between Israelis and Palestinians in the foreseeable future. Fixing Oslo goes far beyond the tunnel issue. It requires:

- Renewal of its most basic elements. From the Palestinian leadership, this requires an irrevocable commitment never to resort (or threat to resort) to "armed struggle" against Israel and to work vigorously to prevent terrorism, violence, and incitement from within its ranks and territory; from the Israelis, a reaffirmation of the notion of "self-government" that has a political and economic vitality and a clear path to meaningful "final status" negotiations.
- Restoration of confidence in security cooperation. This is an exceedingly difficult task, given the role of PA police in the rioting and the across-the-board condemnation of PA incitement by Israel's military/security establishment. Confidence can only be re-built one day at a time, among officers and troops on the ground. Until it is restored, the implementation of Israel's redeployment from Hebron is likely to be postponed and even then, some aspects -- such as the use of automatic weapons by PA police within city limits -- are likely to be modified. (This, of course, does not mean that negotiations should be postponed or an agreement precluded as to the timing and modalities for the eventual redeployment.) One signal of the PA's seriousness in this regard would be the types of disciplinary actions -- if any -- taken against policemen that participated in rioting, ostensibly against the direct orders of their political and military superiors.
- Full implementation of outstanding commitments from Oslo II. Both parties - Israel and the PA - remain to fulfill major commitments to each other. For the Palestinians, these include undertaking no official activities outside PA areas (i.e., not in Jerusalem), either extraditing or incarcerating all criminal suspects wanted by Israel, and confiscating all unregistered firearms in areas under its control. For Israelis, these include redeploying troops in Hebron and still-to-be-determined areas of Zone C, releasing security prisoners, and creating a key land passage between Gaza and the West Bank.

- Concerted efforts to bolster the Palestinian economy. Given current political realities, "job one" must be rapid improvement of the economic situation inside the West Bank and Gaza. That is because the other two headline issues - the tunnel and the Hebron re-deployment - are too sensitive to tackle this week (the tunnel, for political reasons; Hebron, for security reasons); because improving the economic situation will affect 100 percent of the Palestinians, not just the 7 percent who live in Hebron; because a stronger Palestinian economy is a "win-win" situation for both Israelis and Palestinians; and because taking decisive measures on this account are well within Netanyahu's power, his pro-growth ideology and the Israeli political consensus. Building on this foundation, Israel should be encouraged to lower or abolish all barriers on Palestinian exports; hasten the deportation of illegal foreign workers to make room for the increased flow of Palestinian laborers promised in recent weeks; seek creative solutions to enable the flow of goods and people between the West Bank and Gaza; and expedite the opening of industrial parks along the Green Line. For its part, Washington should loosen the reins on our own OPIC guarantees for West Bank and Gaza investment, which cost the American taxpayer little yet have so far allowed only a trickle of allotted monies to be disbursed to deserving projects, and we should insist that our partners in peacemaking - especially in the Arab world - take emergency measures both to assist the Palestinian economy directly and, if possible, to absorb excess Palestinian labor.

President Clinton has taken a bold gamble by inviting Netanyahu and Arafat to Washington. The risk is less in electoral terms than in the perception -- among allies and adversaries alike -- of the Administration's handling of a key foreign policy issue. Though the Oslo agreements were primarily the work of Israelis and Palestinians, the White House took a great measure of credit; if they fall apart, the White House will reap a considerable amount of blame. So far, unlike most summits with scripted outcomes, no pre-summit deals have been "cooked." Yet the agenda should be clear: negotiating a package that starts with the reaffirmation of the basic Oslo compact and then proceeds with commitments on the expedited implementation of its major outstanding components. Success is by no means assured and the risk of failure -- and descent into further bloodshed remains very real. At the heart of the issue for Arafat, Netanyahu and Clinton is whether they still consider themselves partners in peacemaking; their common interests - as well as their interest in the future of direct negotiations, interim self-government and America's role as honest broker - should outweigh any specific issue that divides them.

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