

From Armed Struggle to Reform: A Textual Analysis of Arafat's Ramallah Address

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May 16, 2002

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Brief Analysis

Speaking to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in Ramallah yesterday, Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat offered a new political agenda to guide the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the aftermath of Israel's Operation Defensive Shield and U.S.-led diplomatic efforts to win his release from Israeli encirclement. The main headings of that agenda are armed struggle, guided reform, and preparation for elections. No mention was made of the prospects for renewed negotiations or the proposed regional peace conference.

Dual Politics: PA versus PLO

From the opening paragraph of his speech, Arafat reminded his audience of the fundamental division in Palestinian politics between "insiders" and "outsiders," that is, between West Bankers/Gazans on the one hand, and diaspora Palestinians and external refugees on the other. "It is the PLC that has carried, . . . alongside the Palestine National Council . . . heavy burden and historic responsibilities," he said. With this simple reference to the PNC, the appointed parliamentary body of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Arafat underscored his special role as the bridge and arbiter between the PA and the PLO, highlighting the fact that whatever the elected legislators may decide about Palestinian governance and reform, the decisions of the PLO and the PNC are no less important and determinative of actual Palestinian strategy.

Peace As Strategy, Armed Struggle As Tactics

In one of the lengthiest passages of his speech, Arafat affirmed, as he has many times before, that "peace" is his "strategic choice." Peace would be achieved, he said, through "independence, sovereignty, and freedom." This would, more concretely, take the form of an "independent State of Palestine, with Holy Jerusalem as its capital, on our land, occupied in 1967, as was decided by our PNC at the Declaration of Independence and establishment of the Independent State in its meeting in Algiers in 1988." Although Arafat paid homage to more recent international initiatives—including the 1991 Madrid conference, the negotiations at Camp David, Sharm al-Shaykh, and Taba, as well as Crown Prince Abdullah's recent proposals—his speech specifically reiterated the Palestinian position as it has been articulated since 1988.

Through this wording, Arafat effectively confirmed that there were no significant compromise formulations

accepted by Palestinian negotiators throughout the Camp David-to-Taba period. Moreover, he did not take the opportunity to offer new ideas, language, or proposals for future negotiations. Indeed, there is little hint in Arafat's speech about the prospect of diplomacy as a means of achieving Palestinian objectives in the current period. Although Arafat stated that he extends "his hand in peace," there was no substance to the peace he offered—whether on territory, security, or other items on the negotiating agenda. "The road to freedom, independence and dignity," said Arafat, in one of his more poetic moments, "was never paved or spread out with flowers and roses," but the chairman never hinted at how far Israeli negotiators had been willing to go to realize these Palestinian aspirations, nor how little his negotiators offered in return to make a deal possible.

Arafat did, however, address the issue of terrorism, without using the term. The critical paragraph follows:

"In this regard, we have lately declared, and we declare it today, that we reject the operations that target the Israeli civilians as well as what the Palestinian civilians are exposed to as has happened in Jenin or in 'Jeningrad.' Palestine and Arab public opinion have arrived to this conviction, that these operations do not serve our aims. Indeed they incite many and big segments of the international community against us, an international community that has created Israel and provided it with money, arms, and protection, which is controversial. I call upon your esteemed Council to stop at this dangerous issue [that] is controversial in our Palestinian and Arab arena. Let us remember the Hudaibiyya Conciliation Accord out of our concern for the national and pan-Arab interest of our people and nation, and out of our concern for strengthening international solidarity with your people and your cause."

This statement is important on three counts:

- 1) First, the fact that Arafat rejected only those "operations"—the local code word for suicide/homicide attacks—that target Israeli "civilians" suggests that noncivilians are legitimate targets. In Palestinian political parlance, that usually includes both armed personnel as well as Israelis resident in or traveling through the West Bank and Gaza.
- 2) Second, and more generally, the statement is at odds with Arafat's original pre-Oslo commitment to then-Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin renouncing violence and committing solely to diplomacy to achieve Palestinian aspirations. Violence (even in the form of "operations") now seems to be an acceptable policy tool, so long as it advances national "aims." (Indeed, Arafat even hinted at the acceptability of weapons smuggling on the order of the Karine-A affair when he noted, at another juncture in the speech, that the "road to freedom . . . is paved with . . . the capability to confront aggression and the aggressors.") Apparently, the measure of a violent act's acceptability is not whether it violates the rules of war or morality, but whether, as Arafat said, it incites "many and big segments of the international community against us." (It is important to note that while international law acknowledges the right of people under occupation to resist that occupation, Arafat specifically renounced that right in his exchange of letters with Rabin prior to the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993.)
- 3) Third, Arafat once again -- in a speech he knew would be watched closely by governments and analysts around the globe—referred specifically to the model of the Hudaibiyya treaty, by which the Prophet Muhammad made a time-limited ceasefire arrangement with local tribes in Arabia, only to conquer those tribes when his forces achieved adequate strength. That Arafat would take the occasion of this speech to highlight the Hudaibiyya model of "peacemaking" is a brazen show of confidence.

The Mea Culpa That Wasn't

After discussing strategy and response to Israeli "aggression," Arafat addressed the resolution of the Ramallah and Bethlehem sieges. The agreements reached with Israel and international parties—by which some Palestinians were incarcerated under international supervision in Jericho, others were transferred from the West Bank to Gaza, and still others were effectively deported to Europe—have been extremely controversial among many Palestinians

because they suggest that Arafat secured his own personal interest (ending encirclement of his compound) at the cost of "voluntarily deporting" Palestinians to Europe. In his speech, he took "full responsibility" for these agreements "in which I do not want to delve." In a sentence mistakenly described by some as an admission of personal error, Arafat said only that "[t]here is no march in which there are no mistakes"—never actually admitting his own. Instead, he said that he would "leave it to [the members of the PLC] to assess these developments in sincerity, honesty, and openness."

Reform and Elections

At the end of his speech, Arafat offered a nod to international, regional, and local demands for political, security, and administrative reform. Even this step, however, was made in the context of confrontation with Israel, not the building of a more open, accountable Palestinian government: "The Israeli aggression against our people is continuous and escalating. . . . In this [time of] bloody and ongoing steadfastness and persistence, we are in a great need to review our plans and policies in order to rectify and correct our march towards national independence."

Indeed, according to Arafat's account, the PA would have been thoroughly reformed at the end of the Oslo transitional period in 1999. But that was not possible, he said, because "ever since that time, [Israel] has waged this unjust war against us."

In principle, Arafat proposed three aspects of reform: "quick preparation of elections . . . on all official and popular levels," application of "the principle of separation of powers in the judicial, legislative, and executive branches," and the maintenance of "national unity and human rights." With these three principles in mind, he said, the PA had approached the "hour of change." Operationally, however, Arafat offered no details. While inviting the PLC to serve as a "workshop to review the whole march," Arafat kept to himself the prerogative of actually proposing specific reforms: "I insist on presenting a comprehensive and a new formula of our national situation and that of the Authority, its administration, ministries, and security apparatuses, in order to reconstruct on a more solid, firm, strong, and correct basis, and in a manner [that] realizes our national aspirations of independence, freedom, and the independent state of Palestine." In other words, the ra'is himself will be both the source and arbiter of the reform process.

Conclusion

Yesterday's speech is the latest example of a lifetime of effort by Arafat to capture and control the shifting dynamics within Palestinian politics. His objective is to maintain both his leadership of the Palestinian national movement and the unity of disparate elements within Palestinian politics by emphasizing cooptation rather than coercion, focusing national energies on the enemy without rather than the rot within, and attempting to portray himself as all things to all people—leader and reformist, general and peacemaker. Although many voices inside and outside the Palestinian world are arguing that "he can't pull it off this time," Arafat has weathered such storms before. As long as outside powers publicly declare his role as interlocutor secure and inviolable, reforms are likely to be cosmetic at most, and he will probably weather this one, too.

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