

Arafat's Vision of Peace:

A Textual Analysis

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Brief Analysis

On February 3, the New York Times published an op-ed by Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat titled "The Palestinian Vision of Peace." The timing of this op-ed is not coincidental. It appeared after several weeks of worsening U.S.-Palestinian ties, during which President George W. Bush registered his deep "disappointment" with the Palestinian leadership and U.S. officials contemplated cutting diplomatic ties with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Coming just days before visits to Washington by Israel's prime minister and defense minister, and just days after those Israeli leaders met with Palestinian interlocutors frequently cited as political successors to Arafat, this op-ed clearly sought to achieve several objectives: (1) to begin the process of repairing bilateral U.S.-Palestinian relations by spotlighting Arafat's peacemaking credentials; (2) to remind American audiences that Arafat—and not his subordinates and would-be successors—determines Palestinian strategy; and (3) to reorder the U.S.-Israel agenda this week to focus more on diplomacy and less on pressuring Arafat on terrorism and the investigation of the Karine-A weapons-smuggling effort.

Given its timing, placement, and implicit objectives, the op-ed stands out as an important statement of Arafat's intentions and policy. Although clearly the work of a ghostwriter—neither the vocabulary nor the syntax reflected usual Arafat language, spoken or written—its appearance in America's "newspaper of record" merits close scrutiny of the text.

However, it would be wrong for U.S. officials to consider this text outside the context of the full range of Arafat speeches and writings, especially in Arabic to his own people. In just the past week, for example, Arafat has exhorted supporters to "Jihad! Jihad! Jihad!" as the route to martyrdom for the sake of Jerusalem; promised a Ramallah crowd that together "we will make the lives of the infidels Hell" with "millions of martyrs marching to Jerusalem"; and, in an official Palestine News Agency dispatch, denied that the Palestinian Authority "had anything to do with" the Karine-A episode. Even so, taking the op-ed at face value reveals much about the current stance of the Palestinian leader.

Textual Analysis

On one issue, refugees, the op-ed makes a nod to Israel's demographic concerns but still presents a robust defense of the "right of return." On territory, the text provides a clear statement that Palestinian aims do not extend beyond the

1967 borders but offers no hint of territorial compromise. On the key issue of terrorism and violence, there is manifest regression from past commitments.

Terrorism

"I condemn the attacks carried out by terrorist groups against Israeli civilians. These groups do not represent the Palestinian people or their legitimate aspirations for freedom. They are terrorist organizations, and I am determined to put an end to their activities." This is an important statement, given that it labels certain (though unnamed) Palestinian groups as "terrorist organizations." However, the commitment against them is limited in both scope and implication:

- Arafat does not renounce violence, only terrorism against civilians. Specifically, he does not reaffirm the September 9, 1993, commitment to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to resolve disputes solely through peaceful means.
- By condemning only attacks against "civilians," Arafat implicitly condones attacks against Israeli soldiers, unprovoked or not. Moreover, in Palestinian parlance, the definition of "civilian" usually excludes the hundreds of thousands of Israeli residents in the West Bank, Gaza, or formerly Jordan-held Jerusalem.
- Left ambiguous is whether "civilian" refers to civilian officials, like the elected cabinet minister whom the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine assassinated in a hotel in formerly Jordan-held Jerusalem.
- The commitment to "put an end to their activities" is vague and ambiguous. It suggests effort that falls far short of "dismantling the infrastructure" of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other groups. It says nothing about arrests, weapons collection, and other steps on the U.S. list of requirements necessary to prevent further attacks. In fact, this commitment is reminiscent of past efforts at reaching an "understanding" with such organizations by which they suspend attacks, for a time, so that diplomacy can resume. Given that these organizations currently sit with Fatah and other PLO groups in the Higher Council of National and Islamic Forces, the latter possibility is the most likely.

Territory

"The Palestinian vision of peace is an independent and viable Palestinian state on the territories occupied by Israel in 1967. . . . The Palestinians recognized Israel's right to exist on 78 percent of historical Palestine with the understanding that we would be allowed to live in freedom on the remaining 22 percent, which has been under Israeli occupation since 1967." On the positive side, Arafat here provides an explicit statement recognizing Israel's right to exist and limiting Palestinian territorial demands to the land occupied in the 1967 war. In so doing, he counters allegations that the PLO is seeking either the destruction of Israel or the more expansive borders of a Palestinian state allotted in the original partition plan, UN General Assembly Resolution 181. (Whether one believes that his actions belie his stated acceptance of Israel's right to exist is a different issue.)

On the negative side, the demand for full Israeli withdrawal from all territories occupied in the 1967 war suggests none of the flexibility and creativity that animated the discussions from Camp David to Taba. Also, Arafat's statement appears to retract the one unabashed concession that his negotiators made in those talks: ceding to Israel all the Jewish neighborhoods of eastern Jerusalem.

Refugees

"We seek a fair and just solution to the plight of Palestinian refugees. . . . We understand Israel's demographic concerns and understand that the right of return . . . must be implemented in a way that takes into account such concerns. However, just as we Palestinians must be realistic with respect to Israel's demographic desires, Israelis too must be realistic in understanding that there can be no solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict if the legitimate rights of these innocent civilians continue to be ignored." On the positive side, this statement apparently constitutes

the first public recognition by Arafat himself that Israel has legitimate demographic concerns about which "Palestinians must be realistic." On the negative side, the statement only says that Arafat "understands" the problem and offers no commitment to any specific and reasonable solution. It is noteworthy that Arafat opted not to take this opportunity specifically to recognize Israel as a Jewish state and to declare his acceptance of the principle that any Palestinian "right of return" can only be implemented in a way that does not threaten Israel's Jewish majority. Perhaps most importantly, he did not endorse the ideas expounded by Sari Nusseibah, the PLO representative in Jerusalem, to the effect that Palestinians should focus their national energies on building one state, not populating two.

Jerusalem

"The Palestinians have a vision of peace . . . based on the . . . sharing of all Jerusalem as one open city and as the capital of two states, Palestine and Israel." In the only reference to Jerusalem in the op-ed, Arafat implies a Palestinian role throughout the entire city of Jerusalem—i.e., sharing of all Jerusalem—a position that goes beyond the oft-stated demand for control over the part of the city that was in Arab hands before the 1967 war. Indeed, Arafat seems to resurrect an old claim, periodically aired by the late Faisal al-Husseini, for Palestinian rights even in western Jerusalem. Also, it is interesting to note that Arafat did not take the opportunity to recognize any Jewish claims to Jerusalem. At the same time, it is noteworthy that he made no reference to one of the thorniest issues of past negotiations—the demand for sovereignty over the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.

Conclusion

In this op-ed, the Palestinian leader had the potential for setting a new strategic course for Palestinians, in their relations with the United States and, potentially, with Israel. However, despite some positive elements, Arafat's manifesto constitutes, on balance, a step backward. Regression from the 1993 commitment renouncing all violence and armed struggle in favor of diplomacy is the most important element. On territorial and sovereignty issues related to the "permanent-status negotiations," there is little in this 2002 op-ed that differs from what Arafat has been saying since the original "declaration of independence" in 1988. On refugees, there is a whiff of newfound flexibility, but nothing more. Although there appears to be much ferment in Palestinian policy circles on critical issues like "the right of return" and the utility of violence as a tool of conflict against Israel, little of that was reflected in this op-ed. For an effort designed to put the best face on the Palestinian "vision of peace," this op-ed regrettably stands as a lost opportunity.

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