

# U.S. Should Get Ready to Break Ties with Arafat

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**Y**asser Arafat sits in Ramallah a virtual prisoner. The master of the half measure is now paying the price for failing to make a strategic choice for peace.

A year ago he could not say yes to the Clinton ideas -- ideas that would have given the Palestinians an independent state with the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem as its capital and nearly all of the West Bank and Gaza as its territory. He was incapable of saying yes to peace, but unfortunately only too capable of saying yes to violence.

In place of the Clinton ideas, what has Mr. Arafat produced for his people? I think it is safe to say a catastrophe: Over 850 dead, approximately 17,000 wounded, a destroyed economy, and no prospect any time soon of having their aspirations addressed. A year ago, the Palestinians were closer than they have ever been to achieving their hopes and dreams. Today, they are farther away than at any time since the beginning of the Oslo process.

Does Mr. Arafat offer any vision for the future? His speech on Dec. 16 gave his people some hope. His call for a ceasefire and insistence that there could not be multiple authorities in the Palestinian territories produced a surge of support for him. Palestinians crave leadership. They resent the corruption of the Palestinian Authority; they would like to see democracy emerge. But, at the same time, they want their leaders to lead.

Unfortunately, Mr. Arafat has succeeded as a symbol but failed as a leader. Even now he cannot make a choice. He makes symbolic arrests, but not meaningful ones. He cuts deals with Hamas and Islamic Jihad that will be jettisoned when it is convenient to do so. He calls for a ceasefire, while he seeks to smuggle in enormous quantities of weapons and explosives from Iran. The only choice Mr. Arafat consistently makes is to avoid making a choice.

Mr. Arafat's historic error is not only to fail to lead his own people but also to make Israelis doubt they have a partner for peace. He has succeeded in convincing the Israeli public that his aim is their destruction. In such circumstances, who will press the Israeli government not to inflict increasing pain and suffering on the Palestinian public?

In the past I have argued for giving Mr. Arafat an ultimatum: Make arrests, dismantle the infrastructure of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, collect illegal weapons, and speak the way Pakistan's Pervez Musharaff does to his public about terror and violence. Legitimize peace, not terror. Acknowledge that negotiations nearly produced for the Palestinians, while violence is destroying their prospects.

Knowing Mr. Arafat, the only possibility of ever getting him to take these steps is for him to understand that he is out of chances. Unfortunately, he may never believe that. He certainly does not believe it today. He still believes that he will survive this spot like so many tight spots before. He still believes that he is indispensable, so he can ride out any difficulty. Sooner or later he believes the Israelis will make a colossal mistake. One of their incursions into Palestinian cities will kill a large number of people and he will become the victim again. Then the pressure will be put on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Of course, he could be right. Maybe the Israelis will make a tragic mistake. But that won't change the fundamentals of a situation in which Israelis and Palestinians are now trapped in an escalating war fueled by anger and revenge.

It may be that the fundamentals cannot be transformed so long as Yasser Arafat remains as the leader of the Palestinians. But no one can pick a leader for the Palestinians except the Palestinians. Indeed, any effort from the outside to displace Mr. Arafat will only coalesce support for him.

Are we left with no options except to let the tragedy worsen? I would still impose an ultimatum on Mr. Arafat, requiring him to make the arrests, act against the infrastructure, collect illegal weapons, and speak differently to his public. If he does what is required of him, the Israeli government must respond by lifting the siege and carrying out their obligations under the Tenet and Mitchell plans. But I have no illusions. I doubt Mr. Arafat will do what is necessary. Not only is he incapable of ending the conflict, I doubt now that he is up to the task of even more limited, if difficult, measures needed to produce stability and negotiations.

In light of that, I believe the Bush administration should prepare to suspend relations with him. It must do so publicly, not silently. It must explain certain truths to the Palestinian public: that only the Palestinians can determine their own leadership; that Palestinian aspirations must be addressed; that there is no military solution to this conflict; that neither Palestinian violence nor Israeli force will produce a lasting settlement; that we will deal with any Palestinian leadership, including the current one, if it assumes the responsibilities of making peace. But to date, their leader has failed to fulfill his responsibilities, making commitments but never fulfilling them, speaking of peace in the daylight while supporting terror in the shadows. We cannot pick the Palestinian leader, but we can choose not to deal with a leader who is irresponsible.

Under such circumstances, Mr. Arafat might finally see he is out of chances. Failing that, at least the Palestinian public and our Arab friends will understand what will be required before Palestinian aspirations can be addressed. ❖

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