

Understanding Arafat's Intifada Exit Strategy

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Brief Analysis

The current Palestinian-Israeli truce—certified by the meeting between Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat at Rafah Airport on November 26—has a greater chance of taking hold than any of the five previous ceasefire agreements announced since the outbreak of the intifada exactly one year ago. The potential of this effort to achieve a relative calm stems not only from the changed international circumstances following the terrorist attacks on America on September 11, but also from a growing sense among Palestinians that the intifada has lost its way and is failing to produce any tangible gains.

Understanding Arafat

The Palestinian leader has been looking quite some time for a dignified exit strategy from an intifada that has won him few victories in recent months. This is in part a realization that the alternative strategy—investing much more than he has been doing so far in order to fuel a substantial escalation in intifada violence—would produce risks that were perceived by almost all of the chairman's lieutenants as far too high. Virtually all agreed that such a policy would easily lead to an open confrontation between the Israel Defense Forces and the Palestinian regular security forces, thus robbing Arafat of his favored argument that it was not the PA per se which was engaged in battle with Israel, but "irregular" forces such as the Fatah Tanzim and its partners from Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), etc.

Washington's declaration of war against terrorism helped solve Arafat's dilemma. Instead of continuing to weigh the pros and cons of accelerating the attacks on Israel (including the use of heavier arms, such as katyushas, and adopting different tactics, such as assaults on isolated settlements), he immediately decided to make sure that this time—in contrast to 1990–1991—he lands on the right side of the political fence. Arafat realized that applying for membership in the antiterrorism coalition—whatever the "coalition" means in practice—cannot be simultaneous with the ongoing intifada attacks.

By declaring a ceasefire, Arafat has indicated that he may be willing to accept the gradual termination of the intifada. Neither he nor any other PA spokesman would openly call off the intifada, but privately they admit that it would be impossible to sustain a purely "demilitarized" intifada. Their political objective now is therefore directed at ensuring the widest possible margins for continued action within the parameters of the ceasefire—or, in other words, assuring that a certain degree of intifada can be incorporated within the framework of a formal ceasefire.

Operationally, this means that Arafat's preference is to switch from a consistent and continuous mode of clashes and incidents to intermittent attacks: instead of mortar shelling, the occasional roadside bomb; instead of suicide bombings, the occasional drive-by shooting; instead of his own Tanzim carrying out operations, leaving the task to non-Fatah factions. He clearly has no intention at present of moving toward disarmament of illegal militias, or taking action to dismantle the terrorist network reestablished by Hamas over the past few months. As understood by Arafat, the ceasefire must maintain constant tension and the threat of an immediate, full-scale flareup at moment's notice. It is certainly not going to lead to a crackdown on terrorist operatives, and it will not end up in a split between Fatah and its anti-Oslo allies in the consortium of Palestinian military organizations known as the "Alliance of Nationalist and Islamic Forces."

What is on the agenda is a sort of ceasefire regime that tolerates a fluctuating amount of "violation." Here, U.S. pressure and Israeli determination are essential as they may be able to influence the scope of these "violations." Indeed, any sign by Israel or the international community that "some" attacks may be acceptable will only contribute to a higher amount of bloodshed within a precarious ceasefire.

Exercising Authority

So far Arafat has managed to impose his modified strategy on most players: the Tanzim leaders headed by Marwan Barghouti have declared themselves willing to "assist" the chairman, and in most sectors Tanzim riflemen have suspended operations. The Hamas leadership has decided to abide by Arafat's request to defer further suicide bombings within Israel proper. The Islamic Jihad—under Iranian influence—seems reluctant to make a similar commitment. The PFLP is also hesitant about whether to accept the ceasefire, but so far does not challenge the order. In itself, the suspension of Tanzim operations will reduce the number of daily incidents by more than half, and by slowing down the pace of incidents triggered by other factions, Arafat has managed to produce "90 percent" of a ceasefire within days.

As was expected, once Arafat made up his mind, he was able to impose his authority on the ground. This is just the latest piece of evidence that should put an end to the old popular and superfluous debate on whether the chairman is "in control." The answer remains as it was during a whole year of intifada: Arafat is in charge to the extent that he wants to exercise his power—whenever and wherever he wants to. He is now actively reasserting control because he sees a greater prospect of achieving gains in the diplomatic arena. From his point of view, the intifada has reached its first anniversary without providing the expected dividends: the Arab states are unwilling to be dragged into the turmoil; Israel's containment policy is slowly eroding Palestinian staying power; the United States and even the European Union were growing increasingly impatient with his tactics; and, most important, he could hear loud and clear—both from those in his closest entourage and among the general public—advice to turn the intifada page before it is too late. His next step is to wait and see how the subsequent phase of diplomacy evolves—i.e., whether the United States presses on with implementation of the next steps of the Mitchell Plan, including its call for a total freeze on Israeli settlement activity, and what Ariel Sharon's response will be.

Conclusion

Arafat will probably have to wait some time before he sees clear answers to those questions. In the meantime, Intifada II is transforming itself into a less than complete ceasefire. Just as the first intifada slowly subsided after Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and the approach of the Gulf War a decade ago, so too is the present intifada slowing down as the trumpets of war are heard over Afghanistan.

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