Arafat Sows Blame, Reaps Nothing

by David Makovsky **(/experts/david-makovsky)**

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The modern Ittihadiyah Palace in the Cairo suburb of Heliopolis has Arabesque arches, marble floors and stylish conference rooms. There is also another fixture: Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat. Egyptian media always carries the picture of Arafat conferring with his host, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at the Ittihadiyah. Mubarak, who is currently visiting Washington, is widely viewed as Arafat's patron, regularly dispensing advice to him. Arafat visits the Ittihadiyah before and after virtually every key meeting with major foreign dignitaries.

Mubarak's influence matters. Once, in a pique, Arafat held up a signing ceremony with Israel during the early days of the Oslo peace process. Mubarak, who was hosting the ceremony as it was beamed live on CNN, was patently embarrassed. He reportedly took Arafat aside, and said in no uncertain terms that the Palestinian leader would no longer be invited to Cairo if he continued with such behavior. Arafat went ahead.

Yet now, there are indications that Arafat believes he has more leverage with Mubarak than the other way around. The longer the violence continues in the West Bank, the more Egypt is put on the defensive regarding its, albeit frosty, peace with Israel.

This pressure has been made possible by, among other factors, the advent of Arab satellite television. While recently closed by the Palestinian Authority, the popular Al-Jazeera satellite television had regularly broadcast clips of the violence into Egyptian living rooms. Indeed, there have been demonstrations against Israel in Cairo as there have been in several Arab capitals.

Mubarak — who as Egyptian leader has never visited Israel except to attend Yitzhak Rabin's funeral and has not, in his twenty-year rule, attempted to warm Egypt's peace with Israel — is feeling the heat. He recalled his ambassador from Israel, participated in Arab League condemnations of Israel, and the state-run media has been more vituperative against Israel than its usual vituperative self.

Yet, Mubarak knows there are limits. When pressed by Egyptian reporters whether Egypt is heading for war with Israel, Mubarak said that Egypt has sacrificed enough blood for the Palestinian cause. Arab authoritarian regimes rarely permit popular protest. So while demonstrations against Israel are allowed, Arab leaders become jittery and wonder whether they are shorthand for dissatisfaction with the regime. There are now some indications that Arab

countries are not comfortable with all of this domestic rage. More broadly, they dislike the fact that Arafat feels that he has turned the tables on them in order to hold their feet to the fire in support of the intifada.

Arafat's self-image may be that of the Che Guevera of the Palestinians, but Arab leaders fear the prospects of wider regional instability. Indeed, Mubarak has much at stake when it comes to stability, and thus he would deny that he is playing a double-game as he confers with Arafat.

However, it does seem that Mubarak needs to tell Arafat what lessons he can and cannot learn from Egypt's peacemaking experience with Israel. The first one is obvious. Years ago, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat told the Israelis "no more war, no more bloodshed" at the outset and received 100 percent of the Sinai that he demanded. Unlike Arafat, Sadat did not use violence as a tool of negotiations and obtained all that he sought.

The second lesson is to realize that despite similarities, there are still key differences between the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty and the Israel-Palestinian peace. Given the hundreds of miles of Sinai buffer expanse, it has been sufficient for the two countries to draw a line in the sand and each go their separate ways. Yet, when it comes to Israel-Palestinian conflict, there is too much history, and too little geography. The two parties must either co-exist or keep fighting, given the shortages of water, need to share infrastructure and the competing claims to Jerusalem. As such, the peace agreement is only the beginning of the relationship, rather than the proverbial end.

This changes everything. In the case of the Palestinians and the Israelis, a cold peace can easily become a hot war. What is happening in the West Bank is a Kosovo-like situation in the making. Thus, Arafat needs to see beyond his own grievance, and realize that his aspirations cannot be fulfilled, unless intertwined with Israel's desire for peace security. Familiar efforts by the Palestinians to go to the United Nations, as they did last week, have produced mounds of paper but have never won the Palestinians an inch of territory. Only direct negotiation with Israel achieved that result.

During the last months of the Clinton administration, the Palestinians stood on the threshold of gaining their dreams: statehood, virtually all the West Bank and control of much of Jerusalem. All this seems lost now in the wake of the current violence. Arafat has never had a moment of soul-searching, finding it easier to have his state-run media relentlessly blame Israel for all the Palestinian woes. This has been the all-too familiar pattern. A leading Egyptian analyst, Abdel Munem Said Aly, has declared that this endless exporting of blame to others has been a dead end over the years for the Arabs: "When we blame others for all our problems, we never have to look at ourselves."

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