

# Dealing with Arafat: Mideast Needs a Soft Landing

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**W**hen Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat meets with President Clinton tomorrow, his message will be, "The Oslo accords are dead long live the Arab-Israeli peace process!" For Clinton, the priority should be to reject a new form of "peace process" that could make a bad situation even worse.

That Oslo is dead is sad reality. The original Oslo accords offered a dual and somewhat contradictory vision of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation and separation, both a marriage and divorce. Just as the two parties were starting to repartition Palestine, they were also supposed to work together in joint economic enterprises, security coordination and people-to-people reconciliation.

Those cooperative efforts have died on the streets of Gaza and Ramallah.

Americans, Palestinians and Israelis all share responsibility for Oslo's death. The main culprit was Arafat, who repeatedly broke the pledge he made to the late Yitzhak Rabin seven years ago to choose diplomacy as the alternative, not complement, to violence. But Arafat doesn't carry the blame alone.

The United States, working closely with both Labor and Likud leaders in Israel, made short-sighted choices every step of the way. The U.S. invested too much in Palestinian security forces and not enough in Palestinian democracy. We Americans never much cared for implementing the details of the last agreement when the siren call of the next accord called. And we talked frequently about the need to fight hatred and incitement, but spent little time, effort or money in doing the job.

But diplomacy has not run its course, only Oslo diplomacy.

In tomorrow's meeting, Arafat is expected to propose an alternative path, one endorsed by last month's Arab League summit meeting: to internationalize the peace process by shrinking the honest broker role played for 33 years by the U.S. and bring in Europe, Russia, Arab states and the United Nations to level, as Arafat sees it, the playing field.

His objective is to persuade global actors to dispatch a UN protection force to the West Bank and Gaza to protect stone throwers from Israeli soldiers.

Remarkably, U.S. officials have listened politely to Palestinian calls for international protection in recent days and

have even quietly raised the idea with Israel. That the Clinton administration has not rejected the concept out of hand is itself newsworthy, given the sordid experience of past United Nations forces sent to separate Arabs and Israelis in the Sinai peninsula and across the Lebanon-Israeli frontier.

Clinton needs to quash this idea. In his final 10 weeks in office, the President may no longer have the opportunity to supervise the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but he can help engineer a soft landing to the current crisis that would permit his successor to take a fresh look at diplomatic options.

That limited goal won't be aided by a form of separation that holds Palestinians blameless for a month-long spasm of violence and is sure to complicate future talks through the presence of thousands of international monitors.

When Palestinian-Israeli fighting finally comes to an end, some form of renewed negotiations will emerge. After all, these two peoples are condemned by demography and geography to share the small slice of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

In preserving options for future diplomacy, Clinton needs to make sure he heeds the first principle of policymaking: Do no harm.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

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