

# New Paradigms in Arab Politics and the Peace Process

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

## Background to the Current Violence

There are five "macro" factors that explain the collapse of the Oslo process as we have known it:

- 1) the complementarity of violence and diplomacy in Palestinian strategy;
- 2) the U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian collusion on sidestepping any serious focus on compliance with past agreements before pursuing new agreements;
- 3) the lack of substantive effort to promote people-to-people exchanges and to combat incitement;
- 4) the lost opportunity in failing to develop an open, accountable, responsible Palestinian state-in-the-making;
- 5) the papering over by Israelis, Palestinians and Americans of a fundamental divergence of views on the meaning of Oslo (i.e., for Israelis, the end of violence and a pathway to some undefined final resolution of the conflict; for Palestinians, the painful postponement of the inevitable creation of a state encompassing the 1967 borders with the right of return).

### "Micro" Reasons Date to the Camp David Summit

Whereas most observers think Camp David was a great leap forward, Yasser Arafat saw Camp David as leading to a dead end. Finally, he learned that Israel, even its most accommodating prime minister, would never withdraw to the 1967 borders. He opted to re-shuffle the deck by scuttling the diplomacy altogether. The key question is whether this move is tactical or strategic. In the wake of the Cairo Arab summit, it is clear that the al-Aqsa intifada is a strategic move, one designed to replace what went before it with a wholly new approach. But, as is usual with Arafat, there are multiple new paradigms in play, not just a single alternative paradigm.

### Option I: Intifada Plus Internationalization

If Israel has chosen a "timeout" from the Oslo diplomacy, than the Arab position is to opt for an entirely new alternative to Oslo. Analysis of four texts—Arafat's speech to the Arab summit, the summit communiqué itself, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa's provocative al-Safir interview this week, and Abu Alaa's Ramallah press conference—suggests that the new Palestinian strategy, endorsed and energized by wider Arab leadership is the following:

- intifada violence to continue in waves, providing the constant pulsating background music to any future diplomatic efforts;
- the absolute rejection of a return to the U.S.-led Oslo paradigm. Instead, the Arab side will seek an equalizing role for Europe, the United States and other international actors;
- the pursuit of a war crimes tribunal against Israel. In an especially inflammatory passage in his interview, Moussa said that Egypt has prepared "indictments against all those who committed crimes, caused crimes, or gave orders to carry out crimes, crimes that were no different that what happened in Yugoslavia and Rwanda" for the establishment of a UN-sanctioned, U.S.-led commission of inquiry into the current violence;
- unilateral declaration of independence as a prelude to seeking the deployment of a UN protection force.

#### Option II: Search for a New U.S. Role

The second new paradigm is the search for a new U.S. role, perhaps a return to the some idealized version of a Rogers Plan that calls for 1967 borders with minor border rectifications.

There is a belief spreading in some Arab circles, fed by some on the Israeli left, that President Clinton is looking forward to November 7 as a date when he is freed from election concerns to offer an "American plan"—a set of bridging proposals between the Israeli and Palestinian positions at Camp David. Moreover, there is the belief that Clinton would make these proposals palatable to the Palestinians by upgrading the PA to the status of full-fledged state actor in any post-Oslo bilateral negotiations under U.S.-leadership.

Some reach this conclusion because they harken back to presidential transitions in 1988 and 1992, when incumbents pursued initiatives opposed by Israel (e.g., U.S.-PLO dialogue in 1988; UN condemnation of Israel's Hamas deportations in 1992). But 2000 is unlikely to be a repeat of 1988 or 1992; if Palestinians and Israeli leftists think Clinton is just waiting for the election to reveal his true anti-Israel colors, then they don't understand Clinton. The key, as it has been from the beginning of this process, is the relationship between Clinton and the Labor prime minister in power. If Ehud Barak wants Clinton to issue an American set of bridging proposals, the President will do it; if he doesn't, Clinton won't. It defies credulity to believe that Barak today would want the U.S. president to offer a set of ideas that would require Israel to make even greater concessions to Arafat than were offered at Camp David, when even those Camp David concessions have been overtaken by events and are no longer practicable, at least not in the foreseeable future.

#### A Post-Summit Reality Check

Most observers have highlighted the victory of Arab moderates at the Cairo summit. In reality, however, the moderates are on the defensive, the radicals on the offensive, and those about whom we were unsure are tilting clearly toward the radical side. Egypt, for example, did not even try to get the summit to endorse the Sharm al-Shaykh ceasefire it helped negotiate in the week leading up to the summit. Instead, it applauded a summit communiqué that called for sustaining the intifada and then its foreign minister decalred Oslo to be dead and announced a state of virtual Arab-Israeli cold war. One Arab moderate in a particularly sensitive position is Jordan, which is trying to use a risky pro-Iraqi strategy to offset its alignment with the United States and to avoid getting stuck in the muck of the Palestinian issue.

Iraq, of course, is on the offensive but the real surprise is Syria. The current crisis is Bashar al-Asad's first test—will he chose moderation or brinkmanship? So far, he has supported confrontation, by extending full support to Hizbollah and enhancing cooperation with Iraq. Add to this a surprising display of weakness, evidenced by Syria's failure to engineer Lebanon's recent election as Damascus originally wanted, and this produces one of the region's worst possible combinations—a weak leader, tilting toward brinkmanship.

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