

Diplomacy or Descent into Disaster:

The Decision is Arafat's

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By Saturday, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will determine whether the Middle East inches closer to, or further from, the brink of regional conflict. This time period is critical because it comes between the two major summit meetings hosted in Egypt this week.

On Tuesday, President Clinton announced an Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire after bringing together Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Barak in Sharm el Sheik. Saturday, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak will convene an Arab heads-of-state summit in Cairo, the first to which Saddam Hussein has been invited in more than a decade.

One of these events merely will be a footnote in history; the other will reverberate long after the summiteers return home. If the Sharm el Sheik declaration is implemented fully and calm restored to the Israeli-Palestinian arena, then Arab moderates who have invested in with Israel over the years will lobby for an Arab summit communique that may be long on rhetoric but short on operational details. But if Sharm el Sheik proves to be just another failed effort at diplomacy, then the region's troublemakers--Syria, Libya and Iraq--will press the moderates to cut off all Arab ties with Israel and maybe even worse.

So far, the signs are mixed at best. Immediately upon leaving Sharm el Sheik, Barak issued a clear declaration fulfilling his pledge to President Clinton for an "unequivocal call for an end of violence." Since then, Israeli tanks have redeployed away from flash points, the closure on the West Bank has been lifted and the Gaza airport has been reopened. But for his part, Arafat himself remained silent while he his office on Wednesday issue a statement in which the 82-word operative sentence, replete with four subordinate clauses, conditioned any Palestinian restraint on prior Israeli action and never actually calls on Palestinians to stop rioting, rock-throwing and shooting. Perhaps that is because, as a leader of Arafat's Fatah street organization was quoted in the Jerusalem Post saying, "this is an Israeli agreement. We do not accept it. . . . We will accelerate the intifada, not stop it." Thursday's shooting of Israelis near Nablus makes that prophesy all too real.

Many observers still question whether Arafat has enough sway over the volatile Palestinian streets to implement a call to stop the violence. Three weeks into these clashes, the more important issue is why this is still a hypothetical question. Given that the dozen Palestinian security forces loyal to Arafat have more than 30,000 armed men--a

number that is at least seven times more than all armed Hamas, Islamic Jihad and even civilian militia members combined--it is clear that Arafat has from using the force at his disposal to put an end to the violence.

If Arafat has the ability to clamp down on violence--certainly of it, if not all--then he must lack the will to do so.

Why? After all, just three months ago at Camp David, he received offers from Barak for a final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute that would have provided the Palestinians with an internationally recognized sovereign state that covered 90% of the West Bank, all of Gaza, and even parts of the city of Jerusalem that Israel has, for 33 years, declared its "eternal, undivided" capital. And just three weeks ago, he and Barak supped together in the latter's home as a prelude to further diplomatic give-and-take. Why would Arafat, as now seems to be the case, have chosen to take advantage of the pretext provided by Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount three days after that dinner to launch an armed uprising against Israel?

All explanations proceed from an assessment that Arafat believed Camp David to be harmful, not helpful, to the Palestinian cause. For Arafat, the process of negotiating solutions to such core issues as Jerusalem, territory, settlements and refugees was ineluctably leading the Palestinians to confront U.S. and Israeli compromises that the world considered as reasonable but that he was unwilling to swallow. To make matters worse, Arafat's tour of world capitals after Camp David highlighted the fact that, for the first time in years, international sympathies were on the side of a generous Israel, not with the aggrieved Palestinians. All this evidently convinced Arafat that he needed to break out of the Camp David straitjacket.

What is unclear is whether Arafat's gambit is tactical or strategic. Did he unleash the "al Aqsa intifada" to regain international sympathy and gather political chits in order to return to the bargaining table from a position of greater strength? Or did he jettison diplomacy after concluding that the 7-year-old Oslo process had provided enormous benefits but would never lead to full Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, borders and therefore had now run its course?

Sadly, there are no good answers, only bad and worse. Both options mean that the core idea of Oslo--a commitment to embrace diplomacy, not violence, as the sole path to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute--has died on the streets of Ramallah, Gaza and Nablus.

At best, if the Sharm el Sheik understandings are implemented and calm is restored, then Palestinians and Israelis may eventually implement a messy and unsatisfying policy of separation, without any pretense to the cooperative spirit that laced the original Oslo accords. At worst, the Middle East may revert to the dark days of lowest common denominator politics, when the extremist voices of Moammar Kadafi and Saddam Hussein actually find a hearing.

The decision is Arafat's.

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