

# Assessing the Arab 'Yellow Light' on a Palestinian Unilateral Declaration of Independence

Sep 5, 2000



## Brief Analysis

**P**resident Clinton will again meet his two Camp David partners--though not yet in scheduled three-way talks during this week's Millennium Summit, six weeks after the conclusion of their inconclusive Camp David negotiations. In the August interval, each side sent leaders and diplomats jetting about Europe, Asia, and the Middle East offering their spin on what was offered at the summit, what went wrong, and what needed to be done next. In stark contrast to the effective news black-out that governed Camp David, world leaders have, over the past month, been pitched one, two, or even three sets of briefings about each side's views and where the negotiations should go from here.

The most important development to emerge from this flurry of activity was the unenthusiastic response given to Yasir Arafat's proposal to declare a state unilaterally on or before September 13, 2000. That date coincides with the seven-year anniversary of the original signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords and was the target date for the conclusion of a "permanent status agreement" to which Israel and the Palestinian Authority committed themselves in the Sharm el-Shaykh accord of September 1999. In meeting after meeting--from Paris to Ankara to Tokyo--the Palestinian leader was politely but firmly urged to continue the negotiating process and was reminded that statehood achieved via negotiation was likely to rest on a stronger foundation than one declared unilaterally.

Particularly noteworthy was that this message was generally echoed throughout the Arab world as well. Nowhere did Arab leaders issue a public call for Arafat to abide by his longstanding promise to declare the Palestinian state on September 13, 2000. Instead, their message--like that beamed in headlines in Egypt's al-Ahram newspaper last Sunday--was that "Egypt advises Palestinians to postpone the state declaration date." The reason, said another leading Egyptian daily, was to "avoid further complications."

Given this chorus of reluctance to proceed with Arafat's ultimate threat of unilateral declaration, the Palestinian leader is likely to step back from the brink, postpone the declaration date until later this year and offer some face-saving mechanism, such as establishing a committee to draft the state's "Declaration of Independence." Possible alternative dates all fall after America's November elections: November 15, the anniversary of the Algiers Declaration of Independence in 1988; November 29, the anniversary of the original Partition Resolution; or perhaps the end of the year.

**Understanding the Call for Restraint** Several trends came together in sending the Arab "yellow light" to Arafat, not all of them reflecting the apparent moderation implied in the idea of postponing unilateralism. Indeed, the dominant theme was that postponement was driven by weakness, not by wisdom. To be sure, overall Arab support for Palestinian "self-determination" i.e., the establishment of a state--remains high. While some Arab media commentators were sometimes openly and harshly critical of Arafat's statehood plans and negotiating strategy, they generally placed much more blame for the slow pace of Arab achievement of this goal on the perceived weaknesses that Arabs and Palestinians suffer at the hands of Israel and the United States. Editorial writers often expressed resignation tinged with fear that American coercion on behalf of Israel would compel Arafat to accept unwanted

compromises about Jerusalem's future, the refugees' claim to a "right to return," the permanent retention of Israeli settlements inside the West Bank, and future Israeli security prerogatives. As PLO member Basl Aql wrote in Jordan's al-Ra'i newspaper on August 14, "Conditions in the Arab world do not encourage the declaration of a powerless Palestinian state under siege by the U.S. and Israel. If Washington disapproves of that state, Arab leaders will not dare extend meaningful backing to it. The Arab governments are, quite simply, not free agents these days. Arab backing, which is vital for that state, would be purely verbal and rhetorical."

Declaring statehood might bring some psychological satisfaction, observers noted, but it would leave the erroneous impression that the Palestinian conflict with Israel had been resolved to the liking of the Palestinian people and the Arab world. Moreover, there was wide recognition that Palestinian unilateralism would trigger Israel's own unilateral response: annexation of some territory and withdrawal of the concessions offered at Camp David (particularly concerning Jerusalem). Among Palestinians, there was a special worry that unilateralism would trigger an Israeli closure of the West Bank and Gaza, once again preventing the entry of more than 50,000 Palestinian workers at a time when unemployment in PA is at its lowest levels since 1993. And periodically, commentators noted that unilateralism might give Israel the option of rejuvenating the moribund Israeli-Syrian negotiations, thereby putting Palestinian demands on a back political burner.

Rarely mentioned in Arab media was the concern that unilateralism would have a negative impact upon Ehud Barak's political fortunes, that it might cost the Palestinians the political standing of the first Israeli leader poised to negotiate Palestinian sovereignty and recognize Palestinian interests in Jerusalem. On the contrary, just as coalition partners abandoned Barak, his poll numbers plummeted and the prospect of early elections grew strong, Arab leaders and opinion-makers argued that unchecked Israeli strength is the dominant reality of the peace process. Paraphrasing Anwar Sadat's adage about America in the 1970s, Colonel Muhammad Dahlan--the head of the Palestinian Preventive Security Service in the Gaza--told the Palestinian newspaper al-Ayyam on July 28 that, "The Israeli side holds all the cards, since it controls the land and Jerusalem and prevents the refugees from returning to their homes." This view has been echoed frequently in Arab media, such as in the words of Palestinian editorialist Majid Khayali in al-Hayat on August 15: "The main problem is the imbalance of power between the two sides. Israel holds most of the cards and, with total U.S. backing, decides what to offer and what to withhold. It is also free of any meaningful Arab or international pressure."

A powerful Arab incentive for urging postponement of unilateralism appears to have been a desire to maintain good relations with the United States. As one Palestinian commentator, Nasser al-Sahli, put it, "Many Arab states are showing near--total indifference [to the peace process]. Arab governments have been treating Jerusalem as though it is just another scrap of territory. What had always been burning Arab concerns has, in this age of American hegemony, been turned into private parochial matters." Hence, for example, the highly public but largely procedural Egyptian effort throughout August to reverse the perception of Egypt's unhelpfulness during the Camp David summit.

In contrast to the punitive Arab reaction to the September 1978 Camp David summit, when Arab political leaders met at the Baghdad conference to vilify Anwar Sadat for reaching a "separate peace" with Israel, the Arab world this time pursued no collective action. Calls for a summit dissipated within days, largely because of Egypt's opposition. The most important post-summit meeting was a gathering in late August of the Moroccan-chaired Jerusalem Committee of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Though the committee reiterated the Arab and Islamic worlds' commitment to Palestinian sovereignty over East Jerusalem, it offered no rousing Arab-Muslim chorus in support of Arafat's September 13 plans or for his negotiating demands. Indeed, its detailed statement did not escape criticism by some Arab commentators as lukewarm or weak. This sentiment was foreshadowed by the former editor of the pan-Arab al-Hayat, Jihad al-Khazen, who noted on August 24 that "Palestinians cannot fight the U.S. and Israel

on their own when the Arabs and Moslems are afraid of even meeting lest they anger the United States."

The political laments that circulated in the Arab world over the last six weeks are not new; they are generally in line with sentiments that have pervaded Arab politics since the U.S. victory in the Gulf war. But they are important reminders that a policy decision--in this case, urging postponement of a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI)--that appears to be grounded in moderation and enlightened self-interest may in fact have other motivations, at least among the intelligentsia and media elite. The negative attitude evinced by Arab elites toward America, Israel, and the compromises that Arafat will of necessity have to make to reach peace, suggest that popular Arab support for a negotiated settlement with Israel--even in the event of an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord--is likely to remain weak for some time to come.

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