

Arafat:

A Leader Who Did Not Lead

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The seeds of failure at Camp David were planted before the summit began. Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat was not willing to make the concessions necessary for an agreement, and the reason he was unwilling was that he had not adequately prepared his public.

Indeed, the collapse of the summit meeting yesterday illustrates the dangerous consequences faced by a leader who fills his public with unrealistic expectations and is then boxed in by those expectations. In short, this is what happens when a leader does not lead. President Clinton, in some revealing comments yesterday at the White House, described Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak as a person of "particular courage, vision and understanding of the historical importance of this moment," while making only scant mention of Arafat's efforts.

Asked about this disparity, Clinton replied, "I think it is fair to say that at this moment in time, maybe because [Israelis] had been preparing for it longer, maybe because [Israelis] thought through it more, that the prime minister moved forward more from his initial position than Chairman Arafat, particularly surrounding questions of Jerusalem." He added that Barak did not come to Camp David "to play it safe with his political future."

Well-timed leaks in the Israeli press revealed Barak's negotiating positions, including the ceding of up to 94.5 percent of the West Bank and permitting the return of some 100,000 refugees to Israel and perhaps up to 500,000 refugees to the West Bank, along with the uprooting of 40,000 Jewish settlers. In contrast, there were no public indications in the Palestinian press of any potential Palestinian compromises. To the contrary. Palestinian officials kept saying that they expected 100 percent of the West Bank; their "concession" had been their very willingness to recognize the existence of the Jewish state in the landmark 1993 Oslo accord.

For example, at a conference last month in East Jerusalem, the Arafat-appointed mufti of Jerusalem (the official in charge of Islamic religious affairs), Ikrima Sabri, issued what the Palestinian press hailed as a "historic document," which stated, "we believe in the sanctity of Jerusalem and what is around--acknowledging our religious and historical right to our holy city and affirming our right of complete sovereignty over every speck of dirt in it." Faisal Husseini, the Palestinian Authority official who heads the Jerusalem affairs portfolio, made sure nobody missed the point. He is cited in Al-Hayat al-Jadida as stating that the document has the status of a religious fatwa or edict.

This hard-line approach was not just a pre-game tactical move. During the summit, Washington-based PLO Representative Hassan Abdel-Rahman went on record as saying, "we will not accept any proposal that gives us less than full sovereignty [over East Jerusalem]. Without full sovereignty, there will be no deal." Just a few days ago, he indicated to The Washington Post that "the margin for compromise is absolutely nil."

Given this kind of rhetoric, it is not surprising that a poll of Palestinians conducted last month by the Jerusalem Media Communications Center showed that 62 percent rejected out of hand a proposal for a compromise agreement on Jerusalem under which the Palestinians would assume "total responsibility over religious sites" and less-than-total sovereignty over East Jerusalem. Such numbers illustrate the vicious circle created by leaders who are trapped by the false expectations that they themselves create in the public imagination.

Like Arafat, Barak also faced domestic pressures, but unlike Arafat, he did not box himself in with maximalist demands coming into the summit. To the contrary, he engaged in a taboo-shattering discussion on a variety of tough issues, foremost among them Jerusalem. One could argue that Barak's flexibility provides hope that common ground can eventually be found. But as he pointed out yesterday, it takes two to tango.

There will be competing pressures on both Barak and Arafat to harden their stances in the post-summit period. Some constituencies will insist on assurances that concessions won't be made in the future. In the case of Barak, some of his governing coalition partners--and perhaps even the opposition Likud--will seek to extract a price for resurrecting Barak's disintegrated coalition. That price will be getting Barak to forswear some of the tentative concessions made at Camp David.

Pressure will also mount on Arafat to unilaterally declare a Palestinian state in September, a move that could trigger a deterioration of relations between the two sides and even a resort to violence. It was therefore very important that President Clinton yesterday called on all parties to avoid unilateral actions, thereby signaling to Arafat that the United States will not recognize a Palestinian state if it is not the product of negotiations.

There is no alternative to negotiations but a bleak future for both Israelis and Palestinians. Geography is stubborn, and no one can choose his neighbors. Negotiation requires both compromise and leadership. Arafat should realize that leaders need to lead and not follow.



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