

Arafat's Resistance to a Summit

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Brief Analysis

U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright completed her round of talks with both Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) today, failing to announce the immediate convening of a U.S. summit. At the end of her discussions, she said she would report to U.S. president Bill Clinton on Thursday, and that he would only then determine whether and when such a summit will take place. But Palestinian officials say the likely format will be further Israeli-Palestinian talks with an aim toward convening a summit at a later date.

It is no secret that both President Clinton and Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak favor a summit, while PA chairman Yasir Arafat has resisted such calls. Even if Arafat does ultimately proceed to a summit upon invitation by Clinton, as is expected, it is curious that the person on the receiving end of territorial concession is the most reticent to such a parley.

Despite Albright's cajoling, the Palestinians are holding fast to their opening position that Israel should yield 100 percent of the West Bank. And notwithstanding talk that Israel may yield—in different phases—as much as 90-92 percent of the West Bank, PA planning minister Nabil Shaath insisted today that the gaps remain wide: "You can't really bridge oceans. It's much easier to bridge rivers."

A Stronger Political Position Although Arafat has not openly discussed his resistance to a summit, it seems to be predicated upon his bolstered political position in recent months. It was only earlier this spring that Palestinians were nervous that they were being overlooked as Washington pursued a Damascus-centered peace process. Yet, the collapse of the Geneva summit between Clinton and Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad, followed by the death of the Syrian leader, has now led Arafat to believe that he is the only diplomatic game in town. As Asad's anointed son Bashar seeks to consolidate his power in Damascus, Arafat is no longer worried that he will be outflanked by an Israeli-Syrian peace breakthrough.

Arafat also feels politically emboldened for reasons that transcend the nonfunctioning Syrian track. Specifically, Arafat believes that his peace partners need a deal more than he does. Arafat apparently views Barak as someone who, if he does not reach a deal immediately, will lose power due to a disintegrating coalition. He has watched Israeli negotiating positions move progressively toward a very generous stance. So confident are the Palestinians that Israel's opening posture will collide with their own that just yesterday, PA negotiator Saeb Erakat went so far as to say that if Israel only yields 85 percent of the West Bank—a figure hardly mentioned in Israel until very recently—

there will be no reason for holding a Washington summit. Behind this Palestinian view is the thinking that Clinton is no less desperate than Barak, as the former seeks a "legacy" deal before the end of his term.

The Rationale of Resistance Arafat's resistance to a summit has been both tactical and substantive. Before delving into specifics, it is worth recalling that Arafat is a leader who traditionally relishes brinkmanship. Moreover, the Palestinian approach is one that has worked very well for Arafat in the past, namely, trading procedural moves—in this case attending a summit—in return for substantive concessions. According to reports, Arafat wants a guarantee before attending any summit that he will be able to extract concessions on the Jerusalem and refugee issues.

Arafat also fears that Clinton and Barak will collude against him at a U.S. summit. Palestinian negotiators do not hide their view that of the three, Arafat has the worst grasp of negotiating details, and they therefore want to avoid any substantive "six-eyes" meetings. In the realm of the substantive, Arafat contends, for example, that Israel yielded all of the Sinai to Egypt and evacuated a few thousand settlers in the late 1970s, and he would like to repeat that model in the Palestinian case. But Arafat also knows that different considerations pertain to the West Bank, which is currently home to approximately 180,000 settlers.

Arafat's Alternatives In the meantime, the Palestinian leader seems to be weighing scenarios in the event that a summit, assuming it convenes, fails:

- Unilateral declaration of statehood. The summit fails and the net result is that the Palestinians unilaterally declare statehood on September 13th. Arafat believes much of the world will back him, as per the European Union's Berlin declaration in March 1999. Arafat is insisting that he is not deterred by prospects that such a state could be established amid deteriorating ties with Israel. In response to Israel Defense Forces chief of staff Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz's assertion that the Israeli Army is training for the event of an outbreak of violence, Arafat avowed to cheering Fatah supporters gathered in Nablus earlier this week that Palestinians will not be frightened, and indeed could resort to violence in the event of a failed summit. "We don't get threatened by tanks and planes. No one can threaten us." He added, "He who has forgotten, I want to remind him of . . . seven years of intifada and I say we are willing to start again."

Yet, Arafat's calculus must include other elements as well. Large portions of the Palestinian public consistently support the peace process, and there is suspicion among Palestinians about a unilateral declaration, since they correctly assume that Israel has cards to play. According to a recent poll of the authoritative, Nablus-based Center for Palestine Research and Studies, only 49 percent of Palestinians support a unilateral declaration that would take place in September.

Furthermore, if the Palestinians have full or partial control in 40 percent of the West Bank, a unilateral declaration of statehood could also enable Israel to act unilaterally. Approximately 60 percent of the West Bank is fully in Israel's hands, including the roads between major Palestinian cities. But even if Israel seeks to unilaterally annex only a portion of that percentage, it could be geographically and politically significant. Moreover, it is estimated that the biggest income-producer for the Palestinian Authority is the 140,000 Palestinians who work as day laborers inside Israel, whether legally or illegally. If Israel closes its borders to these workers, it would eliminate significant job opportunities for the foreseeable future.

- Summit yields only a partial deal. According to this scenario, the summit fails to fully resolve a final status deal, but both sides seek to avoid deterioration. In one case, the parties might seek to reach a partial deal, excluding thorny issues such as Jerusalem. By deferring this issue, each side would then jockey for the next round, and the net effect would likely be more tension on the ground. Moreover, for Arafat, this kind of partial solution would be unappetizing, as he has repeatedly pledged to his people that any deal will include Jerusalem.

Another offshoot of this scenario is orchestrated unilateralism. According to this approach, Israel recognizes

Palestinian statehood and agrees to a third interim pullback, while at the same time annexing some settlement blocs.

•Return to Tunis? In recent days, the PA Information Ministry has put forward a radical scenario, namely that a failed summit means that Arafat would contemplate a return to Tunisia—ostensibly because the domestic political consequences of failure are too great.

The flip-side of this possible development is that Palestinian maximalism (insisting on close to 100 percent of the West Bank) would doom Arafat's negotiating partner, Ehud Barak, who faces a disintegrating coalition. The Israeli leader is a made-to-order peacemaker, someone who was elected by Israelis by dint of his impeccable security credentials as the most decorated soldier in Israeli history, his status as a protégé of Yitzhak Rabin, and his reputation as a non-ideologue. Yet, the fragility of Barak's government is indeed the result of his staking everything on the peace process. Arafat apparently has yet to realize what Barak has already recognized: maximalist terms without a peace partner are useless. U.S. officials hope that Arafat will ultimately accept this reality and, in so doing, find the price of making a deal somewhat easier to contemplate.

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