

Arafat, Israeli Elections, May 4, and U.S. Policy

Feb 3, 1999



Brief Analysis

Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat arrived in Washington today, and if it were not for the National Prayer Breakfast brouhaha, most of the city would hardly have noticed. Although much is going on in the Middle East, from the Jordanian succession drama to the Israeli election campaign, perhaps the most intriguing event is Arafat's visit -- in particular, the sheer normalcy of it. The matter-of-fact nature of this visit underscores the emergence of a U.S.-Palestinian relationship separate from the trilateral U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian relationship. In the countdown to May 4, this could be an important development.

May 4 and the Election Connection: Israeli elections -- which are deflecting attention from a clearer focus on internal Palestinian issues and from the Israeli-Palestinian peace process -- are also a key factor inside Palestinian decision making. The vote, scheduled for May 17, has changed the context for Arafat's decision about what to do on May 4, the date when the Oslo "interim period" ends, when his term as ra'is expires, and when final-status negotiations were to have concluded.

For months, Arafat and his colleagues vowed to issue a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) on May 4 if no final agreement with Israel had been reached by then. In return, the Israeli government promised to annex West Bank land still held by Israel. Other Palestinians, official and otherwise, were conflicted on the issue.

Israeli elections, however, appear to have forced the Palestinian Authority (PA) leadership to rethink UDI. Although the PA and its various international advisors deny any wish to interfere in Israel's internal affairs, their desire to see Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu defeated is thinly veiled, and the general assumption is that a UDI would strengthen Netanyahu's electoral prospects. In reality, no issue in Israeli politics is quite so simple. Netanyahu could, for example, benefit from a Palestinian decision to forgo a UDI, by claiming that Likud policies deterred Arafat from taking that step.

In recent weeks, Arafat has changed his tone on UDI. The Israeli elections are not his only consideration; for one thing, the facts on the ground -- Israel's continued presence in Zones B and C -- may make any declaration more of a hardship and an embarrassment than an historic achievement of Palestinian sovereignty. Additionally, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak has publicly stated that he hopes Arafat will postpone the May 4 proclamation, and Jordanian leaders have reportedly echoed this opinion. The United States, whose friendship is crucial for any Palestinian aspirations, has become increasingly public in both its opposition to UDI and its warnings to Arafat to eschew unilateralism. President Bill Clinton and other U.S. officials have stated that the United States will oppose any unilateral action by either party that contradicts the principle of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through negotiations. The European Union has also urged Arafat to continue the negotiations, though Brussels is much more conciliatory to the PA and may provide inducements to Arafat to forgo UDI. Finally, Arafat's Israeli contacts in the Labor party, especially Shimon Peres and Yossi Beilin, have also joined the anti-UDI chorus.

Inside the Palestinian camp, PLO secretary general Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) has hinted strongly that the Palestinians are ready to consider alternative proposals to a UDI. A large majority of the Palestinian Legislative Council voted against a UDI, not out of a commitment to the principle of negotiations but rather out of a belief that

the Palestinians are not yet ready to meet the challenges of confronting Israel over independence. By asserting his right to declare independence on May 4 without actually promising to implement that right, Arafat has hinted broadly that he accepts the proposition that postponement or deferral is a political necessity. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that the date will pass without some declaration or action, and any event may play significantly into the outcome of the Israeli elections.

Dangerous "Solutions": Although the problem appears increasingly manageable, some parties are proposing solutions that are themselves potentially disastrous. Among the ideas currently being floated is a postponement of UDI, with the most frequent target date being December 31, 1999. Some European officials have reportedly offered in advance to recognize a state declared on that date. Proponents of this idea apparently believe such a solution would not only remove the May 4 issue from the election campaign but that it would also provide the newly elected and presumably Labor-led government enough time to conclude final status talks within several months, with the outcome -- Palestinian statehood -- already affirmed.

This analysis seems profoundly flawed. Even if the May elections do bring about a change in Israeli government, there is virtually no chance of reaching a final status agreement in such a short period of time. Further, a new December 31 UDI date holds dangers of its own. Arafat has long been planning large-scale change-of-millennium celebrations. The plans, known as "Bethlehem 2000," involve invitations to many foreign dignitaries, the anticipated participation of throngs of religious pilgrims and other tourists, and as much of a nationalist flavor as possible. Should plans for a UDI become enmeshed in this drama, the matter will take on a momentum of its own, with an unpredictable and largely uncontrollable outcome. Additionally, it would impose a damaging constraint on the Israeli government to have a preset UDI date hanging over its head while it negotiates final status. This is one solution that would be worse than the problem it purports to solve.

What of Wye? The other issue at the top of the Palestinian agenda is implementation of the Wye River Memorandum. Israelis and Palestinians have been competing to convince Washington of their respective versions of why Wye is frozen. Israelis blame the Palestinians for not fulfilling their obligations under the agreement and for threatening a UDI. To mark the end of the scheduled implementation period this week, Israel released a study detailing the current status of each aspect of the Wye memorandum. The report credits the Palestinians with implementing certain facets of Wye, such as changing the PLO Charter, and it faults them for failure to implement a number of security requirements satisfactorily, including confiscation of weapons, reducing the size of the police force, and providing proof of the imprisonment of terrorists. The core element of the Israeli argument is that each phase of territorial redeployment -- Israel's chief responsibility under Wye -- appears in the Wye timetable after all the Palestinian responsibilities, suggesting that Israeli compliance should logically be conditional on Palestinian compliance. Israel argues that it stands ready to implement further redeployments when the Palestinians have met their obligations.

Palestinians, for their part, reject this argument, saying that they have fulfilled their requirements under Wye and that the Israeli government has frozen implementation because of the elections. According to Palestinian officials, Arafat's chief agenda item during his meetings in Washington and his subsequent visit to Europe is to win U.S.-European support for the need to pressure Israel to complete the redeployments.

Washington's strong opposition to UDI appears to be balanced by an assessment of Wye implementation that shades toward the Palestinian position. The United States has never endorsed the Israeli idea of sequential implementation; in addition, it has used adjectives like "regrettable" to describe Israel's nonfulfillment of redeployments but has not characterized less-than-full Palestinian compliance with similar terms. Instead, Washington says it is concerned about aspects of Palestinian compliance and is trying to resolve problems through quiet diplomacy, suggesting by inference that there is little room to solve the problem of redeployments.

Future prospects: The argument that elections are not a consideration for the Israelis (or the Palestinians, for that

matter) is hardly compelling, but electoral considerations may become conducive to progress on Wye when the date is close and the candidates -- including Netanyahu -- all compete for the elusive "center" vote. Although Arafat may be hesitant to do anything to make Netanyahu look good in the period preceding the elections, he would be hard-pressed to justify passing up the chance for a redeployment or some other Wye achievement, such as progress on the Gaza-West Bank land passage or the seaport. This will make the situation increasingly ripe for savvy U.S. facilitation as the date of the election approaches. It also creates a compelling argument for U.S. officials both to discourage foolish proposals to reschedule a UDI and to continue its efforts to foster any possible progress on Wye.

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