

Arafat vs. the "Terrorist Infrastructure":

A Status Report

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Brief Analysis

As President Clinton prepares to depart later this week for Gaza to deliver an unprecedented address before members of the Palestine National Council, the looming issues of Palestinian Authority (PA) compliance and implementation of the security provisions detailed in the Wye River Memorandum have once again become the focus of debate. At first, several historically harsh critics of PA efforts to fight terror -- including Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon -- praised the post-Wye River PA crackdown on anti-Israel militants. In recent days however, virtually all Israeli security officials have criticized a regression in Palestinian efforts to prevent incitement, sustain the crackdown, and destroy the terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank and Gaza. Based on history and on recent developments in PA-controlled territory, the on-again/off-again nature of Palestinian security efforts remains the critical question- mark in the future of Wye implementation.

Compliance and Controversy: In accordance with the provisions of Wye River, in the third week in November, the PA issued decrees prohibiting incitement to violence against Israelis and mandating collection of illegal weapons in PA controlled territory. Nevertheless, in the shadow of PA Chairman Yasir Arafat's continued pledges to unilaterally declare statehood on May 4, 1999, Netanyahu last week questioned the efficacy and sincerity of the incitement decree and threatened to forestall Israeli redeployment until the pledge was renounced. As with the incitement declaration, the weapons decree has also become a locus of controversy between the parties -- perhaps best exhibited by PA Police chief Ghazi Jabali's public statement indicating PA unwillingness to confiscate illegal weapons from the Fatah militia. In addition to Palestinian obligations, Israel's oral commitment at Wye River to release 750 Palestinian prisoners has also become a contentious issue. On one side, Israeli authorities assert that they never intended to release Hamas terrorists from prison; according to Chief Palestinian Negotiator Sa'eb Erekat, however, the PA "did not go to Wye to discuss the release of car thieves."

Despite the controversies that have emerged since the Wye River signing, the PA has made some progress toward a crackdown on anti-Israel militants. Approximately 400 anti-Israel militants have been arrested during the month-long crackdown, including Hamas spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmed Yassin (currently under house arrest) and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) leader Iyad al-Haradan. Several other top Hamas chieftains, including Ibrahim

Maqademah and Abdulaziz Rantisi, remain behind bars in PA prisons. The severity of the PA crackdown falls short of that of 1996, when the PA arrested more than 500 anti-Israel militants following the spate of suicide bus-bombings, but it is the most robust since then.

Civil War? The key question is whether the current PA crackdown represents a strategic decision. There are already signs indicating a reversal of the campaign. Some of the 400 militants apprehended by the PA in the latest round of arrests have already been released. And Israeli security officials are complaining privately that the PA makes arrests only under duress and in direct response to Israeli pressure -- as occurred in the case of PIJ leader al-Haradan.

If the PA does attempt to sustain a serious crackdown on anti-Israel militants, it may face some resistance. The Hamas leadership has repeatedly stated that it will avoid "civil war" with the PA at all costs. Yet, shortly after the post-Wye crackdown was initiated, Hamas issued a statement threatening the PA if it continued its crackdown. The statement criticized Arafat's capitulation to the Israelis and vowed retribution in response to continued harassment, stating "Ezzadin al-Qassam [the military wing of Hamas] is not an easy target, but a fire that can burn its enemies." An op-ed in al-Quds later that week likewise warned that the crackdown "could lead to an internal sedition." On November 5, the London Daily Telegraph reported that PA security officials interdicted a plot to assassinate Arafat, which involved a Hamas activist. A cryptic report appeared in the Jordanian Islamist newspaper al-Majd, indicating that Jordanian officials warned the PA not to follow through with any attempts to assassinate senior Hamas officials residing in Jordan. Apparently, the campaign against the anti-Israel militants strained the traditionally cordial relations between Arafat and the Palestinian "national opposition."

'Can We All Get Along?' In this prevailing atmosphere of tension, on November 10 the PA convened meetings with the West Bank and Gaza leadership of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Tayib Abdul Rahim, secretary general of the Palestinian Presidency and a close adviser of Arafat, headed the PA delegation, which included Imad Falooji, a former Hamas leader and current PA Minister of Communications. Accounts in the Palestinian press indicated that the meetings focused on relieving tensions and repairing relations between the PA and the Islamic opposition. Discussions centered on convincing Hamas and the PIJ to not initiate operations that would provide the Israeli government with the pretext to halt withdrawals from Palestinian territory.

Judging from the post-meeting statements of Hamas leaders, apparently some type of accommodation was reached. On November 16, the Jordan Times quoted Hamas leader Ismail Abu Shanab who stated that Hamas "understand[s] that there should be nothing that will embarrass the authority concerning its commitments." Abu Shanab's seemingly innocuous statement bears striking similarity to a statement made in a joint PA-Hamas communique published in al-Quds on December 22, 1995, in which Hamas consented "not to embarrass" the PA by launching terrorist operations against Israel from PA-controlled territory.

Later in November, additional reports emerged discussing the "understanding" reached by the PA and Hamas. According to one report, Arafat's close adviser and member of the PA executive committee, Abbas Zaki, shuttled between Shaykh Yassin in Gaza and Hamas Politburo member Musa Abu Marzouk in Amman, to hammer out the details of a Hamas-PA ceasefire. In return for a cessation of Hamas attacks against Israeli targets for three months, the PA would relent on its crackdown. Afif Safiyah, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) representative in Britain, later publicly confirmed the cessation of hostilities, stating: "We have reached an agreement with them [Hamas] on a three-month cease-fire."

Precedent: Indications suggest that the PA has reached an understanding with Hamas offering a way around the security provisions in the Wye River Memorandum, which specifically call for the elimination of "terrorist cells and the support structure that plans, finances, supplies, and abets terror." Such an understanding provides the PA with the option of maintaining an indigenous terrorist infrastructure for a rainy day -- perhaps after May 4, 1999.

Although the PA has initiated a number of short-term crackdowns against anti-Israel militants since 1994, it has not over the past five years sustained a campaign of significant length. More often than not, the PA has endeavored to maintain cordial relations with the opposition, such as in August 1997, when the PA sponsored the "National Unity Conference to Confront the Challenges," which was attended by representatives of Hamas, the PIJ, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Most recently, on November 20 al-Ayyam reported that PA secretary general Abu Mazen invited the "opposition" to participate in the final status talks. Abu Mazen added that the "liberation of the land inch by inch is the duty of everyone."

Despite its reluctance, the PA has committed itself -- in Oslo and once again in Wye River -- to fighting terror. It has been a long time since Arafat's PA Security Forces have battled the militant Islamic opposition, but there is precedent: the November 1994 showdown against Islamist militants in Gaza which left thirteen dead, and the spring 1996 crackdown following the suicide bombings in Israel.

Clearly, the nearly 40,000-strong PA security apparatus possesses a strategic advantage over the opposition. If anything, since 1994 the balance of power has tilted more in favor of the PA. It remains to be seen whether the PA security forces would remain disciplined during an internecine conflict. The real question, however, is whether Arafat would actually pursue a policy of sustained confrontation.

Conclusion: Since his return to Gaza in 1994, Arafat has walked a political tightrope to maintain consensus, to keep a veneer of national unity, and to remain in the good graces of Washington. Yet, in his attempts not to alienate segments of his population, Arafat has consistently catered to the leanings of the most militant portion of the Palestinian constituency. It is too early to determine if the PA is co-opting or cooperating with the anti-Israel militants. Wye River -- which detailed a regimen of tangible and transparent security obligations -- should have ended the PA's congenial relationship with the anti-Israeli militants. Nevertheless, preliminary signs indicate that, while the PA appears to be complying with some aspects of the latest agreement, its seesaw pattern of only intermittent effort on fighting terror remains largely unchanged.

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