

Countdown to May 1999: Internal Palestinian Deliberations

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Brief Analysis

As U.S. negotiator Dennis Ross continued his efforts this week to bridge gaps preventing an Israeli-Palestinian agreement on "further redeployment" (FRD), Palestinian Authority leader Yasir Arafat was at the Arab League Foreign Minister's meeting in Cairo seeking backing for his plan to establish a Palestinian state next year. His efforts are part of a larger campaign to gain international endorsement for the unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) that, absent an Israeli-Palestinian final settlement, he has pledged to make on May 4, 1999, the end of the five-year transitional period agreed to in the Oslo Accords.

Interestingly, the march toward a Palestinian UDI has not met with enthusiastic support from the Arab states (none of which pledged material aid to Arafat's plan in Cairo) or even within the Palestinian community. While Israelis (strongly) and Americans (more tepidly) have warned Arafat against unilateralism, some prominent Palestinians -- from the Islamist movement, the pro-democracy groups, and even from Arafat's own Fatah movement -- have voiced opposition. Examining the intra-Palestinian debate on a UDI offers a fascinating perspective on political thinking within the PA.

Support for a Unilateral Declaration: For public figures who have tied their fates to Oslo, the need for something tangible to show at the end of the five-year interim period is, apparently, acute. Khalil Shikaki, polling expert and director of the Nablus-based Center for Palestine Research and Studies, believes that the national movement that has sold the Oslo process to the Palestinian people has to deliver on May 4. "If the state is not declared on May 4," he says, "we should start the countdown for the demise of the national movement [i.e., the PLO], its leadership and ideology." This sense that Arafat has little choice but to make the declaration was echoed by Ahmad Abd al-Rahman, secretary general of the Palestinian Council of Ministers, in Jerusalem's al-Quds magazine: "The Palestinian people who acceded to the peace agreement will not wait any longer for the declaration of their national independence and for the proclamation of their independent state with holy Jerusalem as its capital." Jerusalem political figure Faisal Husayni has also discussed unilateral declaration as an inevitable step that will lead to conflict but will ultimately offer the Palestinians a chance to achieve their goals. He predicts "many violent confrontations and many deaths," and acknowledges the military advantages of the Israelis, but counts as a major Palestinian advantage that "we are willing to pay with our lives."

> Nabil Sha'ath, PA minister of planning and international cooperation, told Amman's Al-Ra'y that the Authority is "dead serious" about declaring a state "and will not go back on it." Sha'ath considers the timing crucial -- if the end of the Oslo period is simply allowed to pass, he worries, the Palestinians will be communicating a willingness to accept occupation indefinitely. Sha'ath defends the original decision to sign the Oslo accords, crediting the agreement with an irreversible recognition by many Israelis and most of the international community that the Palestinians have a right to "an independent state on their soil." Symbolic benefits such as letting Israel and the world know that the status quo is not indefinitely acceptable will be worth the initial move, which will then be followed by actions on the ground.

Opposition Rooted in Cynicism: Not all Palestinians, however, are convinced by this logic. Critics like Haidar Abd al-Shafi question the value of a declaration beyond a brief sense of glory for the Palestinians and a moment of historical importance for Arafat. Abd al-Shafi, one of the most highly respected Palestinian figures, led the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid conference in 1991. He withdrew from the peace process in 1993, angry that Arafat signed an Oslo accord that did not, in Abd al-Shafi's opinion, adequately protect the rights of the Palestinian people. In 1996 he ran for the Palestinian Legislative Council and won more votes than any other candidate, and then increased his prominence even further when he resigned to protest PA corruption and the failure of the Council to confront it adequately.

Abd al-Shafi is now speaking out against Arafat's plan for a unilateral declaration: "To declare a state without any jurisdiction over territory, without any sovereignty, with all the restrictions that we know that Israel imposes with regard to movement . . . what is the logic of declaring a state?" He does not share Husayni's assessment that the political struggle against occupations can continue at least as effectively after a UDI.

> Another high-profile critic of a unilateral declaration, from the other end of the political spectrum, is Hamas leader Shaykh Ahmad Yasin, who has never wavered from his rejection of Oslo. His argument, as told to Amman's al-Bilad on August 19, is that the Palestinians should be pulling out of a process they never should have agreed to enter, at which point they would be able to wage a unified and focused struggle against Israel. He expresses confidence that Israel will cease to exist as a state during the first quarter of the next century, so why settle for a "midget pseudo-state" without full sovereignty? Both Yasin and Shafi have raised the point that Arafat already declared statehood a decade ago (in the Palestine National Council's Algiers Declaration) and received recognition from more than 100 countries, but with no tangible benefits for the Palestinian people. Both argue that the declaration would be a move made from desperation, and it would make more sense for Arafat simply to withdraw from the peace process rather than insult Palestinian sensibilities with a partial act devoid of practical content.

Where the Disagreement Lies -- And Where it Doesn't: UDI advocates stress the fact that the Palestinians have the right to a state at the end of the Oslo period, and have concerned themselves to a great extent with gaining recognition internationally. Their Palestinian critics are not challenging them on the issue of that right, but on the basis of the practical ramifications of a declaration. Among Palestinians, there is no argument on the basis of legal aspects of Oslo; nor are there any Palestinian voices publicly urging patience and a continuation of the Oslo process beyond May. On the contrary, while proponents of the declaration are primarily individuals who have some stake in Oslo, opponents are drawn primarily from the ranks of those who either rejected the peace process from the start, like Hamas, or turned away from it in frustration long ago, like Abd al-Shafi.

Conclusions: Ibrahim Ghawshah of Hamas was undoubtedly correct when he told Amman's al-Bilad that the PA wants to "proclaim the so-called Palestinian state in May 1999 so it would be able to tell the Palestinian people that they succeeded in accomplishing something, no matter how small." This "small" achievement, however, may be enough to spark a cycle of actions and counteractions that could lead to bloodshed without any progress toward the negotiated resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to which both parties committed themselves in Oslo. Arafat spokesman Marwan Kanafani has stated that the PA would prefer for the Palestinian state to come into being as a result of an agreement with Israel, and the plan for a unilateral declaration comes out of despair that such an agreement can never come.

> The best-case scenario lies not in eleventh-hour efforts to coerce, cajole, or convince Arafat not to declare independence next year, but rather in committing the resources now -- political, diplomatic, and economic -- before the preparations for worst-case scenarios become self-fulfilling prophecies. Whereas the current diplomacy on the FRD package is important, long-range planning and crisis-prevention are essential to avoid risking a cycle of escalating unilateral acts whose outcome is impossible to predict.

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