

# POLICY FOCUS

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## Whither the Peace Process? The Local Leadership Option

by Martin Indyk

"No Palestinian moderates allowed."

That is the meaning of Yassir Arafat's recent rejection of King Hussein's terms for entering peace negotiations and the message behind the subsequent murder of Zafir al-Masri on the West Bank. Where does this leave U.S. efforts to advance the Middle East peace process by involving Palestinians in negotiations with Jordan and Israel?

### Option 1: Punish Hussein, Resurrect Arafat

The four alternatives seem bleak. We could continue to pursue the illusion of a transformed Arafat. But given that this is the sixth American overture he has rejected since Jimmy Carter first tried in 1977, it is hard to see what purpose would be served in trying again.

Some will argue that if only we now endorsed "self-determination" for the Palestinians, Arafat would be prepared to meet our terms. But if that in fact happened, we would have presided over the resurrection of Arafat at King Hussein's expense; and, by bringing the PLO into the process, we would have succeeded in forcing Israel out. We would in effect be placing ourselves at loggerheads with Israel and Jordan, our partners in the peace process. We would immediately have achieved direct negotiations between the U.S. and the PLO but, in the process, we would have destroyed the chance for direct negotiations between the Arabs and Israel.

More importantly, our endorsement of "self-determination" would be interpreted by all parties to the conflict as support for an independent Palestinian state. But such a state would threaten first Jordan and then Israel, while

providing its Soviet ally with ample opportunity for troublemaking in the Middle East heartland.

### Option 2: The International Conference

Second, we could pursue that other illusion that always presents itself when the peace process appears to have reached a roadblock—the international conference. Some will argue that an international conference which brought the Syrians into the process would obviate Hussein's need for the PLO. But the only conference Syria will attend is one in which it has the whip-hand. And given Syria's maximalist position (Assad is now vowing to place the Golan Heights "in the center of Syria") such a conference would only "increase our disappointment," as Sadat was fond of warning.

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## Hussein's Plan: Sidestepping Arafat

by Robert Satloff

*What remains is who will represent the Palestinian people. When a side that can represent the Palestinian people appears, we will be at its side.*

King Hussein, interviewed in *al-Siyasah*, March 1

By openly challenging the leadership of Yassir Arafat, King Hussein has broached once again an issue that has been simmering beneath the surface of Jordanian-PLO relations for more than a decade—who speaks for the Palestinians in Israeli-held territory. In re-

cent weeks, the King has publicly called for Palestinians in the occupied territories to come forth with their own, alternative leadership and has even floated again his 1972 proposal of a United Arab Kingdom with provinces on both banks of the Jordan.

There is little doubt that the March 2 assassination of Nablus mayor Zafir al-Masri, who symbolized Hussein's vision of an independent leadership, curtailed progress toward the creation of such an alternative. But Masri's

death may prove to be just a stumbling block, not a stone wall. As ex-Gaza mayor Rashad ash-Shawwa said after Masri's murder, "the idea itself which Masri supported, and in which many others including myself believe, has not died."

Hussein's efforts to foster a more amenable West Bank alternative to the Arafat leadership are not new. In April 1985, he appointed a cabinet with 11 Palestinian ministers headed by Prime

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# The Local Leadership Option

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The only international conference that is attractive to the U.S. is a phony conference in which the Soviet Union, Syria and the PLO give the speeches while Israel, a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation and the U.S. do the negotiating elsewhere. This kind of conference is unattractive to the Soviet Union and Syria and, given their current success in blocking our moves to promote it, they have little reason to turn around now and accept it. The conference they will insist upon is one in which they retain a veto over the bilateral negotiations.

## Option 3: Benign Neglect

If we cannot either solve the problem of Palestinian representation or reach agreement on the forum in which the negotiations will take place, the third alternative of a policy of "benign neglect" begins to look more attractive. After all, if the parties to the conflict are not ready to take the risks necessary to make peace, then it is entirely possible that the Palestinian problem cannot be solved. In these circumstances, creative American diplomacy may well be foredoomed. Better then, the argument goes, to focus on the growing power of radical forces in the Middle East and promote stability through deterrence rather than "solutionism."

The problem with this approach is that while the U.S. can live without a peace process, its local allies cannot. Israel needs a peace process if it is to reduce the immense human and economic costs of war that are taking their toll on the very fabric of its society. And it needs to find some method for dealing with the growing demographic threat posed by a burgeoning Palestinian population in its midst.

Egypt needs a peace process because it cannot otherwise break out of its isolation in the Arab world, short of tearing up its peace treaty with Israel. If there is no process, the pressure will mount on the Mubarak regime to take such drastic steps. Put simply, if there is no peace process, then the peace

treaty with Israel will remain a separate peace. And if this is the only peace in the Middle East, it is unlikely to survive.

Jordan also needs a peace process because, like Israel, it faces a Palestinian demographic problem that threatens Hashemite dominance. Moreover, as long as the peace process focusses on Jordan, the leverage of this small, weak and otherwise insignificant power is enhanced with every other interested party. And in the absence of such a process, Jordan is more vulnerable than the others to extreme solutions that threaten to fill the vacuum.

ceeding holds any prospect of a breakthrough. What then should the Reagan Administration do?

The first requirement is to reaffirm the basic objective of solving the Palestinian problem in a Jordanian context, via direct negotiations between Israel and a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. Even if the circumstances are not now conducive to such a solution, it is the only objective that serves American interests as well as the interests of our partners in the peace process, Israel, Jordan and Egypt.

The second requirement is to prepare the ground for the pursuit of this

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***"[The U.S. must] make clear—especially to the PLO's Arab interlocutors—that we no longer have an interest in courting the PLO leadership and no desire to have it accept our conditions for recognition."***

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## Option 4: Pressuring the King

This leaves the fourth alternative, the "pure" Jordan option, in which King Hussein brings Palestinian representatives from the West Bank and Gaza to the negotiating table with Israel. This has always been the ostensible objective of the 1982 Reagan Plan and it is congruent with Israel's conception of negotiations. The problem, however, is that it imposes considerable risks on Hussein since it would provoke the certain opposition of the PLO, Syria and the Soviet Union. Given his problems of demography (a majority of his subjects are Palestinians) and geography (a much stronger Syria on his northern border), the King has been unwilling to take this risk.

## A Better Policy: Preparing for the Next Stage.

We therefore find ourselves in a quandary. Activism appears to be needed, yet none of the ways of pro-

objective in the future by helping to promote alternative Palestinian representatives from the territories capable of replacing the paralyzed militancy and hidebound ideology of Arafat and his henchmen.

Such an idea is rarely greeted with much enthusiasm at the best of times. For better or worse, many observers argue, Arafat represents the Palestinians and there is no credible alternative. The murder of Zafir al-Masri has reinforced their argument for he was the first credible, indigenous West Banker to emerge in recent years. His death, and the subsequent withdrawal of other mayoral candidates, appears to demonstrate that when the PLO leadership fails to maintain its legitimacy among the West Bank Palestinians through armed struggle or diplomatic maneuvering, it can still retain legitimacy by violence and intimidation. For even though Masri was apparently murdered by Abu Nidal or the PFLP, Arafat's leadership benefited most from the elimination of this Jordanian, indigenous leader.



The skeptics, however, overlook a number of factors which make the emergence of an alternative leadership now more possible. First, for more than a year, the government of Israel, which controls the territories, has been laying the groundwork for this alternative leadership.

Israel has been attempting to improve the standard of living in Palestinian towns and to provide the residents with the opportunity to run their own affairs. To do this, West Bank and Gaza leaders are not required to defy the PLO by entering into negotiations with Israel on behalf of the Palestinians. However, by assuming responsibility for the basic functions of government and for economic development in the territories, these local leaders are gaining control of the means to build their own legitimacy at the expense of the PLO leadership which is forced to operate from outside the territories.

A second factor bolsters this effort to build an alternative local leadership. King Hussein has begun to take advantage of the shift in Israeli policy to build his own influence in the territories at the expense of the PLO leadership. This is a significant departure. Although he has always competed with the PLO for the allegiance of his former subjects, his efforts have been desultory. Now, however, sensing the weakness of the PLO, he is encouraging the pro-Jordanians in the West Bank to take advantage of Israel's offer and he is providing them with some financial backing to do the job.

Hussein's break with the PLO leadership and his call to the residents of the territories to seek alternative leaders are serious steps. Hussein is trying to prove simultaneously that the PLO leadership has failed the Palestinians on the international level and that local leaders can at least deliver a better day-to-day existence for them.

Of course, the PLO leadership will resist these efforts to loosen its stranglehold on the Palestinians in the territories. But its claim to represent them is now under challenge on four fronts. Internally, the leadership is severely split, not only between those who reside in Damascus and those who remain loyal to Arafat, but also

between Arafat and his own lieutenants who would prefer to make a complete break with Jordan and reconcile with Syria.

PLO. Now that we have entered a "period of reflection," there is a new opportunity to pursue this alternative, low-profile process.

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*"I think the question of a Jordanian option is about whether you strive for peace or give up and say nothing can be done."*

—Shimon Peres, *Jerusalem Television*, March 5

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In the territories, the PLO leadership is finding it increasingly difficult to compete with Jordan. Its financial resources are diminishing and avenues for channelling funds to its loyalists in the territories are being severely restricted by Jordan and Israel.

On the inter-Arab level, the PLO leadership lacks an independent base of operations and is therefore more dependent than ever on the support of the Arab states. Yet it is under serious challenge by both Jordan and Syria. While it can still command the support of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iraq, these regimes are all preoccupied with far more pressing problems of their own.

On the international level, the PLO leadership's support is waning. The decline in Arab oil power, the revulsion with PLO terrorism, and the image of intransigence that has come to replace Arafat's earlier image as a moderate have all contributed to this process. Arafat has been prevented from attending the UN General Assembly; apparently, he is no longer even welcome in Moscow.

### **U.S. Policy: Promoting the Moderates**

The United States can play a helpful role in this process by encouraging Israel and Jordan to continue along their present paths. This is not a new direction for the Reagan Administration. Secretary of State George Shultz was the first to raise the idea of "quality of life" for the Palestinians in 1984. It was not, however, pursued with any vigor because the Hussein-Arafat initiative diverted American attention to the pursuit yet again of a transformed

Above all, our strategic objective must be clear. We would be supporting an effort already begun by our partners in the peace process to promote a legitimate, local Palestinian leadership that will over time serve as an alternative to the current PLO leadership. Our diplomatic activities must therefore be consistent with this objective. On the international level we would need to avoid any actions that might give new credibility to Yassir Arafat. We would have to make clear—especially to the PLO's Arab interlocutors—that we no longer have an interest in courting the PLO leadership and no desire to make concessions or have it accept our conditions for recognition. We would have to embark on a serious effort to deprive Arafat of the recognition he has already achieved among our European and Japanese allies. And we would have to ensure that the U.S. Consulate in east Jerusalem sent this same signal to the Palestinians it deals with. We might also need to provide funds for the economic development projects undertaken by the local leadership. But if it does so, the U.S. must be careful to avoid channeling these resources through organizations that are sympathetic to, or dependent upon, the PLO leadership.

Those who remain skeptical that this "local leadership" option can work should bear in mind that the U.S. has spent nine years pursuing the option of transforming Arafat without the slightest measure of success. If we had spent that time trying to circumvent the PLO leadership we would probably not be facing an impasse today. It is not too late to try another way.



# 'Devolution': A Consensus

by Michael Lewis

On February 8, Prime Minister Shimon Peres announced his plan for "devolution" for the West Bank and Gaza. The proposal entails a gradual transfer to the Arab inhabitants of responsibility for running their own municipal affairs, with increased authority over health, education, welfare and other services as well as over the "development of water resources and the means of sustenance in the territories." Israeli administrators of Arab towns and Israeli civil administration officials would be replaced with (Israeli-appointed) Arab mayors and officials, and Israeli control over the day-to-day lives of Palestinians in the territories would be reduced to a minimum.

Peres has suggested that devolution could be applied first to Gaza, where administrative directors have already been appointed and where there is little dispute over government lands or water resources.

## Improvements in the Quality of Life

Peres's plan is the latest in a series of steps taken by Israel to improve the "quality of life" in the West Bank and Gaza since the National Unity Government took office in the fall of 1984. Restrictions on foreign travel by West Bank residents, as well as visits to the West Bank across the Jordan river bridges, have been relaxed. Censorship of books has been virtually eliminated and censorship of the press eased. Controls on the transfer of money into the territories as well as tariffs on the exports of vegetables from the West Bank to Jordan have been removed. New factories and hospitals have been approved. Permission was granted for the establishment of the first Arab bank in the West Bank, but the plan has been blocked by Jordan, which feared that the bank would attract deposits that otherwise would go to Jordanian banks. And opposition to American-sponsored attempts to

promote investments in the territories has been dropped. Under Shmuel Goren, the coordinator of activities in the territories, Israel is now actively seeking to attract major industrial investment to the territories. Finally, Israel will appoint local mayors and municipal councils to replace the Israeli governors who have controlled the major cities. Zafir al-Masri was the first of several intended appointments for the cities of Nablus, Ramallah, Hebron and al-Bireh.

Neither this liberalization, nor the

the assassination of Zafir al-Masri. Although Peres affirmed his determination to press forward with devolution in the aftermath of Masri's murder, success will depend on the ability and willingness of the Palestinians to resist a campaign of violent intimidation by various factions of the PLO. The immediate response was for several Arab candidates for mayor to withdraw their names from consideration. However, the deputy mayor of Nablus, Hafiz Tuqan, has now assumed Masri's responsibilities.

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*"The murder of Zafir al-Masri . . . should not deter us from pursuing the trend of appointing local Arabs to run the affairs of the localities. If they want to do so, they will indeed do so, and we shall encourage them."*

—West Bank Administrator Shmuel Goren,  
Jerusalem Television, March 8

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new measures announced by Peres, add up to the goal of "self-determination" espoused by Palestinian nationalists. The Israeli army will not be withdrawn from the area for fear that this would give free rein to the PLO. Nor will Israeli settlements or settlers be subject to the local authorities. Nor, at least for the moment, will elections be held, although Peres has said that they might be held at an appropriate, calmer moment.

Peres is not proposing "devolution" as an ultimate solution to the status of the territories, but as a path around the current impasse in the peace process. His hope is that local self-governance will hasten the emergence of an indigenous leadership in the territories which might eventually serve in partnership with Jordan's King Hussein in a renewed effort to forge a long-term settlement.

It is precisely the fear on the part of Palestinian radicals that this strategy might succeed that no doubt motivated

## Devolution v. Unilateral Autonomy

Peres's plan differs from "unilateral autonomy," a concept first advanced in 1980 by Moshe Dayan. Dayan advocated abolition of the Israeli military administration of the territories and withdrawal of the army from Arab towns to border areas and strategically important points. Israel however would retain its option to reinstate the military government. Dayan proposed that these steps be taken without setting conditions or seeking Arab agreement, because he believed that local leaders would refuse to negotiate anything but full sovereignty, a demand Israel could not accept.

A revival of the "unilateral autonomy" idea would prove controversial not only between the partners in the National Unity Government, but within each of the parties as well. The idea is supported by some on the left of the Labor Party, such as Gad Ya'aqobi,



# Policy in Israeli Politics

Minister of Economy and Planning, but it is opposed by other Laborites, notably Defense Minister Rabin whose views are crucial.

Rabin is scheduled to remain in his post under the rotation agreement and thus will continue to be responsible for Israeli policy in the territories. The Defense Minister opposes unilateral autonomy because he believes that the PLO will fill the vacuum, forcing Israel to reassume control. Rabin however does support the extension of self-rule to residents of the territories, the appointment of Arab mayors and the negotiation of a final settlement with leaders from the West Bank and Gaza in conjunction with Jordan.

The Likud leadership also opposes "unilateral autonomy," asserting it would lead to PLO control over the West Bank. Likud has demanded that the government adhere to a policy of autonomy for the population, but not

shows, he argues, that this approach holds much greater potential than any formal Jordan option.

While "unilateral autonomy" is high-

ly happen in the West Bank and Gaza. These three are:

—to retain Israeli sovereignty over the territory, but to grant autonomy to

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***"[The Palestinians in the territories] are saying 'no' to Hussein, the PLO, mayors and devolution, but what are they saying 'yes' to? They are the ones who should give the answers; you and I cannot answer for them."***

**—Shimon Peres, Jerusalem Television, March 5**

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ly controversial, Peres's devolution plan enjoys widespread support in Israel. This is the case at least in part because devolution leaves unresolved the bitterly divisive issue of what comes next. Apart from extreme positions advocated at the radical fringes of Israeli politics (to permit the creation of a PLO-dominated Palestinian state, at one end; or to drive the Arabs out of

the Arab population (Likud's position);

—to reach a territorial compromise for dividing the territories with Jordan (Rabin's goal);

—to achieve an agreement with Jordan over "functional compromise" or shared rule of the territories (Peres's preference).

Devolution precludes none of these three options. Although Peres came in for some criticism from his political opponents, he should encounter no serious domestic political problems by proceeding on this course. And because Rabin and the Likud leadership are agreeable, the policy can be expected to continue after the rotation of the National Unity Government.

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***"Israel is willing to hold peace talks with a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation in which 'any resident of the West Bank or Gaza Strip can participate . . . without reservation.'"***

**—Yitzhak Rabin, quoted in *al-Quds*, February 26**

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for the land—its interpretation of the Camp David Accords. A noteworthy exception to the Likud consensus is MK Ehud Olmert who has supported the concept of unilateral autonomy since Dayan first proposed it. He questions the feasibility of a territorial compromise with Jordan, and favors a different kind of "Jordan option" based on the assumption that formal negotiations are out of the question. He believes that Israel should seek behind-the-scenes cooperation from Jordan as it grants unilateral autonomy to the West Bank and Gaza, in order to create a new reality. A tradition of such cooperation since 1967 has brought about a quiet understanding and

the territories, at the other end), the mainstream is divided among three broad notions of what should ultimate-

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# Hussein and the West Bank

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Minister Zaid al-Rifai, himself the son of a Palestinian. Hussein specifically named ministers with close family ties to the major West Bank cities—like Nablus's Yafir al-Masri (Foreign Affairs); Jerusalem's Hazim Nuseibah (Prime Ministerial Affairs); and Ramallah's Hanna Odeh (Finance). Since then, Jordan has embarked on a carefully calibrated plan to promote an independent political elite inside the occupied territories.

## Undercutting Arafat, Not 'the PLO'

According to that plan, Hussein did not contest the PLO's position as the paramount symbol of Palestinian national aspirations. He has come to understand that the PLO has evolved over the past fifteen years from an organization committed to "Palestinian nationalism" into the sole repository of those nationalist sentiments. Hussein realized that to be a Palestinian nationalist one had to be seen as a supporter of "the PLO" and that no Palestinian can dare to be labelled "anti-PLO." His 1985 initiative, therefore, incorporated the PLO as junior partner in diplomatic efforts. Zafir al-Masri, for example, assumed the municipal reins in Nablus under the banner of the PLO.

But the King still sought to undermine the current PLO leadership, which he saw as being more interested in the long-term competition for power in some future Palestinian entity than in the short-term goal of securing the liberation of the occupied lands. Therefore, Hussein tried to drive a wedge between the PLO leadership and the West Bank rank-and-file by promoting pragmatic leaders whose immediate concern was the improvement of the day-to-day lives of the local Palestinians. His tactics were to employ Jordan's still potent political and financial capital to encourage these men to step forward and to bolster their support among the thousands of Palestinians in West Bank cities.

## Seeking Credible Palestinians

This strategy explains why in the same month (April) as Hussein launched his plan, 35 prominent Palestinians from the territories presented a petition in support of Arafat and the PLO's role as representative of the Palestinian people to U.S. envoy Richard Murphy. Pro-Jordanians—such as Shawwa, former Jordanian defense minister Anwar Nuseibah, Deputy Speaker of the Jordanian Senate Hikmat al-Masri, Bethlehem mayor Elias Freij, Basil Kana'an and Issam Anani—were featured prominently among the list of signatories that included many well-known Arafat supporters. To "Hussein's men"—the core of the alternative Palestinian leadership—appearing alongside "Arafat's men" was an integral part of the effort to establish their own nationalist credentials.

## Coming Forward

Political moves continued throughout the summer. In June, Jordan promoted the formation of a moderate political grouping in East Jerusalem, centered around Anani, businessman Othman Khallak and newspaper editor

## Power of the Purse

At the same time, Hussein was engaged in an equally important contest for economic power in the territories. By controlling the flow of goods, money and people across the Jordan River bridges, Jordan held significant leverage over the every-day lives of the West Bankers. In April, the King began to use that leverage to gain influence for sympathetic Palestinian leaders. One of the Rifai government's first acts was to liberalize trans-Jordan trade, enhance intelligence activity along the border and free up millions of dinars for Amman-approved development projects. Jordanian subsidies, flowing over the bridges at an unprecedented rate—nearly \$1 million per day—were diverted away from bedrock PLO-backers and funneled to pro-Jordanian cities, towns and workers' associations.

By autumn, *sub rosa* coordination between Amman and West Bank Palestinian leaders began in earnest. Palestinian luminaries began a series of trips to Amman to confer with Jordanian political leaders. Before the end of October, a month in which Hussein suffered the twin jolts of the Achille Lauro hijacking and the London joint delegation fiasco, Zafir al-Masri reportedly received the King's approval of his request to be mayor of Nablus.

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*"... the idea itself which Masri supported, and in which many others including myself believe, has not died."*

—ex-Gaza Mayor Rashad ash-Shawwa,  
*Ha'aretz*, March 3

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Mahmud abu Zuluf. In July, leading Palestinians with known Jordanian sympathies, including Shawwa, Anani, Hikmat al-Masri and Freij, founded the Party in Support of Jordanian-Palestinian Joint Action. These organizations were created to coordinate West Bank backing for the King's diplomatic efforts and to provide a platform for his West Bank supporters.

In November, Hussein started making tentative moves toward an open appeal for local Palestinians to sidestep the existing PLO leadership. In a November 2 speech opening parliament, he called for "drafting a general plan and detailed program for economic and social development of the occupied territory..." Shawwa, Hikmat al-Masri and ex-Jerusalem gover-



nor Anwar al-Khatib met with Rifai the next day, and three days later, Zafir al-Masri formally submitted to Israel his request to assume the mayoralty of Nablus. Two weeks after the December 2 assassination of moderate Ramallah notable Aziz Shehadeh, Masri and his Chamber of Commerce supporters took over the Nablus municipality.

### Parliamentary Maneuvers

On November 26, Jordan's parliament became the setting for Hussein's next move: the first election of West Bank deputies since the Six Day War. In hotly contested ballots, parliament elected four men to represent constituencies in Hebron, Tulkarm, Ramallah and Nablus. Parliament has since continued to be a focus of Jordan's anti-Arafat initiative. Praising Hussein's February 19 speech, Jordan's House of Representatives declared itself "the representatives . . . of the one Jordanian people on the two banks of the Kingdom." And under an election law just approved in Jordan, West Bank representation will soon double in the Kingdom's parliament. At least 30 new deputies will be elected by their fellow parliamentarians to bring West Bank representation to a par with the East Bank. Moreover, in a move to indicate the Kingdom's responsibilities for *all* Palestinians, Hussein's cabinet is contemplating an amendment that would for the first time enfranchise Palestinians living in UNRWA refugee camps—Palestinians that have long comprised the PLO's hard-core constituency.

Throughout this period, there were continued reports that Jordan was "flexing its muscles" toward the PLO on the West Bank. Amman, for example, was determined to funnel money to pro-Jordanian development projects and drive the fund of the PLO-Jordan Joint Committee further into debt.

### February 19: An Open Challenge

When the Hussein-Arafat talks finally broke down, the King decided to remove the subtlety from his year-long contest for power on the West Bank.

In his February 19 speech, Hussein effectively branded the PLO chairman a liar and a cheat, and he called on Palestinians to rally around a new leadership. On the West Bank, dozens of men came forward in all the major West Bank cities, submitting their candidacies for mayoral and municipal council positions. Most were neither quislings nor Jordanian lackeys; rather, they were representatives of the "70 percent" of West Bankers that former Nablus mayor Bassam ash-Shaka'a says are "so fed up with the situation that they are ready for nearly any compromise."

are also simultaneously appointed in Nablus, Hebron and Ramallah.

Men like Hikmat al-Masri warned the King of the danger in severing ties with the PLO leadership too quickly. In the days after Hussein's speech, Masri implored the King "not to allow the ship of [Jordan-PLO] political coordination as based on the February 11 accord to sink and drown all passengers aboard it." As Arafat reportedly told a group of Palestinian leaders who traveled to Amman to forestall the break with Hussein, challenging the PLO on the West Bank would be "suicidal."

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***"Both King Hussein and the PLO have failed. It's time for Palestinians in the West Bank to do something for themselves now. Zafir tried, and we must try also."***

**—ex-Nablus Mayor Hamdi Kana'an,  
*Washington Post*, March 3**

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Hussein's program of confidence-building among West Bank elites was right on track. Having jettisoned his usual path of "quiet diplomacy" on the West Bank, the King appealed directly to a different breed of Palestinian leaders—nationalists who are realistic about the problems facing the West Bank and are pragmatic about the choice of potential solutions available to them.

### Hussein's Mistake

But in calling on the Palestinians to openly reject the PLO leadership, the King erred by moving too soon. Ten months—from April 1985 to February 1986—was simply not enough time in which to nurture a full-fledged indigenous Palestinian leadership. Although prospects for success looked bright in the days following the King's speech, Masri's murder on March 2 reminded West Bankers that much was left to do before they could strike out on their own. Following the murder, all the mayoral candidates withdrew their nominations. Since then, only one—al-Bireh's Jamal al-Tarifi—has again stated his willingness to become mayor, but on the condition that mayors

### A Step-by-Step Approach

To foster a West Bank elite independent of Fatah domination, Hussein now has to pursue the policy of confidence-building that was in force prior to February. These are the behind-the-scenes efforts to promote a new leadership in an array of Palestinian fora—trade associations, social welfare associations, youth clubs, schools and universities. They are the low-profile plans—underwriting development projects, scholarship programs, housing subsidies and the establishment of a local bank—that could produce a moderate, practical and efficacious leadership. Only after that leadership is fully entrenched within the administrative framework of the municipalities—running public utilities, supervising work projects and parceling out building permits and city contracts—should Hussein encourage local mayors and city councilmen to challenge directly the PLO's hold on the territories.

In the end, the choice will belong to the Palestinians. But after a long-term program of investment and development—both political and economic—they may feel strong enough not only to make that choice but to stick by it.

# Masri's Murder: Who Benefits?

A curious myth has already arisen about the life and death of Zafir al-Masri.

Masri, a millionaire businessman, was assassinated outside Nablus City Hall March 2, ten weeks after he assumed the mayoralty of the West Bank's largest city. As this story goes, Masri's candidacy received the hearty blessing of Yassir Arafat's Fatah wing of the PLO, with Jordan's King Hussein only reluctantly assenting to the appointment. According to a *Washington Post* editorial, Masri's appointment had received Arafat's "encouragement" but only the "tacit approval" of King Hussein.

Closer scrutiny reveals the error of this version of the Masri story. First, Jordan actively encouraged Masri to step forward and present himself as a nationalist yet practical alternative to the Fatah leadership. Second, that leadership strongly opposed Masri's candidacy as a threat to its hegemonic hold over West Bank politics—as indeed it was. Third, Fatah did publicly endorse Masri's candidacy, but only after his appointment was a *fait accompli*. Consider the following chronology:

—Nov. 3: Hikmat al-Masri, Zafir's brother and deputy speaker of the Jordanian Senate, traveled to Amman to meet with Prime Minister Zaid al-Rifai.

—Nov. 6: Zafir al-Masri filed a request with the Israeli civilian administration to assume the mayor's post in Nablus

—Nov. 10: Farouk Kaddoumi, PLO "foreign minister," warned that "attempts to appoint heads and members of municipal councils in the occupied territories . . . will be met with all types of popular resistance and total rejection." (Algiers, Voice of Palestine Radio)

—Nov. 26: Israel announced its approval of Masri's mayoral request.

—Dec. 2: Aziz Shehadeh, a leading West Bank moderate, is stabbed to death near his home in Ramallah. Abu Nidal claims responsibility.

—Dec. 11: Arafat deputy Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad) warned that "the Palestinian cannot capitulate because capitulation means death." (Baghdad, Iraqi News Agency)

—Dec. 17: Masri assumed mayoralty of Nablus.

—Dec. 28: PLO Executive Committee member Mahmud Abbas offered first PLO endorsement of Masri. (*Jordan Times*)

Fatah joined the Masri bandwagon only after a campaign of threats and retribution proved fruitless. Continued opposition to his appointment after December 17 would have underscored Fatah's weakening authority on the West Bank. In short, Arafat—who never publicly commented on the Masri candidacy—couldn't beat them, so he reluctantly joined them.

Masri's own politics posed a direct threat to Arafat's. A keen student of the dynamics of West Bank politics, Masri never criticized the almost mystical aura that Arafat and the PLO maintain as symbols of Palestinian nationalism.

But everyone knew that Masri stood for something else: staunch advocacy of local initiatives to improve the quality of life on the West Bank. He was, for example, the driving force behind efforts to establish a Palestinian bank on the West Bank, a plan even opposed by Amman because it would siphon off millions in remittance income now funneled through Jordanian banks. Such quality-of-life programs implicitly undermine Arafat's strategy of stoking militant nationalist fervor by keeping life under Israeli occupation as miserable as possible.

In the long run, Masri posed a dangerous threat. The PFLP or Abu Nidal may have fired the gun that killed Masri, but Arafat, Kaddoumi and Khalaf surely benefit from the pall of fear and intimidation his death has produced.

— Robert Satloff

## The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

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THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY,  
500 NORTH CAPITOL STREET, N.W., • SUITE 318  
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