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The Plan to Remove Arafat

By R.S. Zaharna, July 1, 2001

When Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon came to Washington in June to meet President Bush, it was his second visit to the White House in less than six months. Palestinian Authority president Yasser Arafat has yet to meet with Bush; nor is he likely to do so. For all intents and purposes, Arafat has been effectively isolated as a credible party to the peace talks.

After the painful frustration of Camp David in July 2000, then his final effort negotiation marathon in December, Clinton concluded that Arafat was no longer a credible negotiating partner. Marathon negotiations failed and kept failing, leaving Clinton with the perception that Arafat was either unable or unwilling to stand by his agreements. Clinton is said to have passed those sentiments on to officials in the Bush administration as well as to Bush himself. Thus far, the Bush administration appears to have heeded that warning.

The charitable explanation for Arafat's duplicity is politics. Politically, Arafat is in a catch-22 scenario. If he accedes to demands made at the negotiating table that are unpopular with the Palestinian people, he loses credibility with his Palestinian constituency. However, if he holds to the demands of the Palestinian populace, he is seen by the Israeli partners and U.S. negotiation sponsors as too inflexible or unwilling to compromise for the sake of peace.

The uncharitable, if not highly probable, explanation is that Arafat's political style has made him an unstable and unpredictable negotiation partner. Arafat, as a guerilla leader and product of the cold war rivalry between the Americans and Soviets, has an established pattern of trying to "play" with the competing interests of the various parties in any situation in order to escape political capture. Such a strategy may have worked in the seventies, but now the U.S. is the only game in town and the CNN spotlight is everywhere. Even if such a strategy could work, it would require great clarity of thought and action. Now anecdotal evidence from candid news reports suggest that Arafat's frenetic lifestyle may be taking its toll, affecting his ability to maintain consistency in his thoughts and actions. The resulting perception is that Arafat has become, in a word, unpredictable.

Despite Arafat's unpredictability, he maintains absolute control over the Palestinian negotiating position. Since the Madrid Peace Conference held in October 1991, all faxes and phone calls have gone directly to Arafat for his approval. His exclusive control has ruled out the inclusion of professional diplomats and negotiators who could develop a strong, long-term strategy on behalf of the Palestinians. Such centralized control by one person is also proving to be costly, inefficient, and ineffective in the new age of instantaneous information.

While one may disagree with Arafat's negotiation strategy or position, it is his unpredictability that made him an unacceptable and even dangerous negotiating partner. No party to any negotiations can tolerate a situation in which agreements can only be guaranteed for the time it takes to write them down on paper. This is particularly true of the U.S. and Israel. The result, as many international analysts have begun concluding, is that as long as Arafat remains in control no progress could be made in the peace process. From the American and Israeli perspective, Arafat had to be removed.

Sharon's Plan

Although American frustration with Arafat was visibly evident last July at Camp David, that frustration rapidly turned into anger with the emergence of a new Palestinian intifada in September. Now, not only could Arafat be blamed for the failed peace talks, but also for the outbreak of hostilities as well. When Clinton's last ditch efforts failed again in late December, Arafat sealed his fate with the Americans. When Barak lost credibility with the Israeli electorate for his platform, Arafat sealed his fate with the Israelis and made the reemergence of Arafat's nemesis, Ariel Sharon, a reality.

Sharon did not run on the platform of peace. His promise to the Israeli public was security. "Whoever said that the first item on Israel's national agenda should be peace?" asked Sharon in a *Ha'aretz* interview. "Do I attach supreme importance to security? Absolutely."¹

As early as February, analysts began speculating about Sharon's plan to achieve his goal of security.² Two distinct, yet complementary, scenarios have emerged as the most pronounced. One scenario involves a massive, short-term military assault against Palestinian institutions associated with Arafat's police and security forces. A second, longer-term scenario entails targeting and assassinating specific individuals associated with Arafat's political and military organizations. Both scenarios are designed to achieve the same result: to crush the infrastructure and leadership of Arafat's Palestinian Authority.

The first scenario was advanced by Jane's Information Group, a defense and intelligence think tank in Britain. According to Israeli officials quoted in *Jane's Foreign Report*, the military assault could be launched within "three hours or three weeks" and would entail unleashing the "full weight" of Israel's ground forces.³ Ground troops would be backed by the Israeli air force and helicopter gunships.

Israeli forces would be under orders to kill or capture leaders of the Palestinian Authority and activists from Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Israeli forces would also disarm Palestinian factions and destroy all of their installations, including Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah and Gaza. According to Israeli sources, the operation would take about one week, with Israeli military planners estimating casualties at around 100 Israelis and 1,000 Palestinians.

The second scenario consists of destabilizing Arafat's control by systematically targeting and assassinating Palestinians tied to Arafat's command structure. The assassinations bear a pattern in that most victims have been shot numerous times, they have been shot in the upper part of the body, and arrests have not been attempted even though it appeared to have been a viable option

at the time.⁴ The precision strikes, as Israeli officials call them, are designed to reduce "collateral damage." According to *Jane's Foreign Report*, Israeli agents working inside Arab countries have been recalled and they, along with the frogman-commandos of Flotilla 13 and the infantry commandos of Sayeret Matkal, have been ordered to target Arafat's lieutenants.⁵

Evidence of this plan first surfaced in early November when Husesin Abayat's car was hit by helicopter gunships firing anti-tank missiles. More recently, Osama Jawabreh died when an Israeli drone detonated a bomb in a phone he was using. In April, *Middle East Newslin*e reported that one hundred top Palestinians were on Israel's "hit list."⁶ Since November, Israel has assassinated 25 Palestinian activists. As Sharon stated, "There is a plan at work ... Terrorists are being removed from our environs."⁷

Preparing the Situation Militarily on the Ground

Logistically, given the extent of Israel's control as an occupying military power and the gross inequity between the Palestinians and the Israelis, preparing the situation on the ground for either scenario is not that difficult. The West Bank and Gaza--as a geographic entity--are still under Israeli military occupation. However, to understand the extent of Israeli military preparations, it is important to review the situation on the ground prior to the start of the intifada.

Technically, under international law, Israel is an occupying power and the Palestinian population is protected by the Fourth Geneva Convention. However, since its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, Israel has violated those conventions and disregarded United Nations resolutions calling on it to cease and desist from those violations. As result, Israel has established a pattern of being able to do pretty much what it wants in the Palestinian territories, so long as it doesn't alienate its major backer, the United States.

What the Oslo Accord did was separate the Palestinian territory into a patchwork of different areas. "Area A" is territory Israeli military has withdrawn from and which is now under the control of the Palestinian Authority. Currently, most of Gaza and the major West Bank towns such as Nablus and Ramallah are in Area A. "Area B" is territory administered by the Palestinian Authority, but Israel retains control over security. Many of the towns and villages surrounding the Palestinian cities are in Area B. "Area C" is territory, such as the Israeli settlements and Israeli government land, in which the Israelis maintain full control.

Because none of the major Palestinian cities are geographically linked, and because Israel retains control over the city borders and connecting roads, these pockets of "control" by the Palestinian Authority are actually isolated Palestinian enclaves. When any crisis situation occurs affecting Israeli security, these Palestinian enclaves become huge prisons. The Palestinian Authority still has complete control within the city, but the Israeli military positioned on the parameter of the cities do not allow people to enter or leave.

This prison-like, external control over Area A is immediately what happened when the intifada began in September. When it became clear that the intifada was not just another passing phase of Palestinian anger, Israel began systematically expanding its control around Area A and reinforcing the boundaries between Palestinian areas and Israeli ones. As early as November of

last year some Israeli politicians were calling for "separation," and new "settler by-pass" roads were actually begun so Israelis could travel throughout the West Bank and avoid the native Palestinian population.

The Israeli military noose around the Palestinian cities has had several immediate effects. First, it enables the Israelis to control and restrict all Palestinian movement. Second, the road blocks effectively isolate segments of the Palestinian society from each other. For example, students from Gaza can no longer study at Palestinian universities in the West Bank, or employees living in Nablus could no longer reach their jobs at a Palestinian ministry located in Ramallah. Third, it is devastating the Palestinian economy. All Palestinian trade, commerce, and employment literally freezes when the Israelis block the movement of people and products.

When Sharon entered office, external control around Area A dramatically increased and internal controls were introduced. In early March, the Israeli army set up new checkpoints, dug trenches, blocked access roads with boulders, and deployed tanks to further enforce the blockades around the major Palestinian cities in the West Bank. Curfews and closures of Palestinian towns and villages in Area B became more common. Inside the Gaza strip, the Israelis closed the major roads to Palestinian traffic and set up road blocks that divided this 25-mile stretch of land into five separate sectors, transforming a 40-minute commute to work into a 3-hour one. According to the Applied Research Institute in Jerusalem, the degree of Israeli closure forced on the Palestinian territories since the beginning of the Aqsa intifada is "unprecedented in the 34-year Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip."⁸

April 2001 marked a new phase, when the Israeli army began "brief" military incursions into Palestinian-controlled Area A. It is the combined effect of these incursions that suggest the Israelis have a larger political and military agenda than merely containing Palestinian "violence."

First, the incursions directly challenge the Palestinian Authority's authority. The Palestinian Authority can neither defend the land nor protect its people.

Second, as one analyst noted,⁹ the numerous incursions into "Area A" and the fortified Israeli presence in "Area B" have blurred the boundaries between "Area A" and "Area B." Thus areas from which the Israeli army had withdrawn are now gradually reverting to the Israelis. Politically, the Palestinians are losing the land they gained through the Oslo Accords.

Third, the "military incursions" are often accompanied by Israeli bulldozers clearing the land of trees, vegetation, and Palestinian homes, which Israel claims provide a cover for Palestinian attacks against the Israelis. To date, over 250 Palestinian homes have been demolished and the surrounding land cleared.¹⁰ The pretext for clearing the area is that Palestinians have or *might* carry out militant attacks. However, the end result of clearing the land is that the Israelis have created for *themselves* wide swatches of open fields that provide a convenient military staging ground on the periphery of Palestinian-controlled territory.

The End Plan: A Symbolic Image

Logistically, military preparations as described above are not difficult, considering the control that Israel has over the Palestinians. What is surprising, however, is that Israel is undertaking such extensive military preparations in full view of the international community and in complete violation of international law and the Oslo Accords.

In a recent interview published in the *Washington Post*, Ariel Sharon called Arafat "an obstacle" to peace. Practically speaking, the image created of "an obstacle" leaves one with two options: either go around the obstacle to reach one's goal or remove it. Put less delicately, Israeli analyst Joseph Heller said, "If something happens that makes the [Israeli] government come to the conclusion that the Palestinian Authority or the PLO is not part of the solution any more, and that it is part of the problem, then somebody will do away with the problem."¹¹

Already Arafat and the Palestinian Authority are suffering to the point of almost being crushed. The psychological weight of the recurring "leaks" about a massive military attack may be part of the plan itself, for Arafat is being squeezed politically and economically.

Politically, Arafat has been isolated from the U.S.-sponsored negotiations. From the U.S. perspective, Arafat has been held personally responsible for the failure of the negotiations. His unpredictability has made him unacceptable as a negotiating partner on behalf of the Palestinians. The problem is not the Palestinians, per se, it is Arafat. Previous Israeli governments, both Labor and Likud, had made it a policy to negotiate specifically when the situation on the ground was tense. Negotiations were seen as an alternative to violence and as a means for calming the region. Again, the problem is not negotiations, per se, it is Arafat.

Yet, if the Israelis openly refused to negotiate with Arafat, this would solidify Palestinian support of Arafat, given the Palestinian's long history of being denied the freedom to choose their own representation. It is perhaps for this reason that the Israeli created a double-barrel precondition for negotiations that is impossible to meet and pinned it squarely on Arafat: (a) the Israelis will not negotiate as long as there is Palestinian "violence;" (b) Arafat is solely responsible for the violence; (c) there is no way to stop the Palestinian violence, thus (d) there is no way for Arafat to negotiate.

Economically, Arafat and the Palestinians Authority are also struggling. Early this year, the World Bank estimated that the Palestinian Authority was in such desperate economic straits that it could collapse within six months. Already workers in the security forces and government offices, including the foreign ministry and its diplomats stationed abroad, have not been paid for several months. The Israeli closure of Palestinian towns, roads, and borders is costing the Palestinian economy between \$7-10 million per day. Unemployment, which had been going down, has now reached close to 50 percent in some areas. According to the World Bank, over one-third of the Palestinian population, about 1 million people, are living below the poverty line of \$2.10 a day.¹² This economic devastation is a direct result of the Israeli restriction on movement.

Israel has blocked payment of the only relief the Palestinian Authority could expect--owed taxes being paid. External aid from donor countries has dropped precipitously since 1998. The foreign economic assistance that does reach the Palestinians is being channeled directly into the projects

themselves and not through the Palestinian Authority. For example, a recent USAID procurement announcement for urgent medical assistance to the Palestinians reinforced this policy of bypassing the Palestinian Authority: "No funds will go directly to the Palestinian Authority for this assistance package."¹³ This one line, which is now a regular stipulation in grant projects, sends a strong message: economically, the Palestinian Authority is no longer recognized as capable of administering development projects on behalf of the Palestinian people.

Increasingly, with his political power thwarted, his economic authority challenged, and his ability to defend either his land or his people stymied, Arafat does not appear to have much left--except perhaps his once symbolic image as leader of the Palestinian revolution.

Endnotes:

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