Arafat and the Anatomy of a Revolt

Yezid Sayigh

In October 2000, at the onset of the latest intifada, key political and security officials on both the Palestinian and the Israeli side still considered an Israeli–Palestinian peace deal to be politically realisable. Some of the substance of a mutually acceptable deal finally emerged at the bilateral talks held in the Red Sea resort of Taba in late January 2001, but by then it was too late to alter the course of events. Although the basic political parameters of the Palestinian–Israeli relationship have not changed, new political dynamics on both sides make it virtually impossible to arrive at a durable diplomatic solution in the medium term, say two to four years. It is highly unlikely that a Palestinian state will emerge in this time-frame. The present situation of low-intensity conflict will almost certainly persist for the rest of 2001, and in all likelihood for at least another year beyond that.

The combination of physical and human attrition locally and of forceful diplomatic intervention by the principal outside parties might eventually prove sufficient to shift political attitudes and bring about acceptance of terms leading to a genuinely equitable and durable peace. The alternative is a ‘balkanisation’ of the conflict, as social civility and rule of law on both sides of the ‘Green Line’ give way to ethno-nationalist confrontation between Jewish settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and to a deepening divide over the political status and legal entitlements of Arab citizens in Israel.1

Palestinian Authority (PA) President Yasser Arafat bears much of the responsibility for this precarious state of affairs, though not for the reasons cited by official Israeli sources. Contrary to the Israeli account, his behaviour since the start of the intifada has reflected not the existence of a prior strategy based on the use of force, but the absence of any strategy.2 His political management has been marked by a high degree of improvisation and short-termism, confirming the absence of an original strategy and of a clear purpose, whether preconceived or otherwise. There has also been minimal Palestinian understanding of how particular modes of political and military behaviour

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might lead to specific end-results, whether tactical or strategic, reflecting untested and confused assumptions about their impact on the intended Israeli target.

The result has been counter-productive in the short term, causing as much damage as benefit to the PA’s standing in international public and government opinion, and seriously detrimental in the medium-term to the Palestinian national objective of securing a peace deal on terms more conducive to achieving territorial integrity and meaningful sovereignty than the Israeli proposals presented by then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak at the Camp David summit of July 2000. Whatever the material contribution of successive Israeli governments to the collapse of the Oslo framework or Israel’s moral and legal responsibility for its own behaviour since autumn 2000, Arafat is guilty of strategic misjudgement, with consequences for the Palestinians of potentially historic proportions.3

**The making of Arafat’s strategic dilemma**

Israel has sought to portray the outbreak of Palestinian protests following Sharon’s visit to Jerusalem’s Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount as deliberately engineered by the PA, and subsequent Palestinian use of firearms as pre-planned. According to a view held by certain senior figures in the Israeli military and intelligence establishment, Arafat had taken a strategic decision as far back as Barak’s election in mid-1999, to initiate hostilities with Israel regardless of the expected resumption and final outcome of the permanent status peace talks. In short, the analysis goes, he was both unable emotionally to bring himself to sign a final peace treaty with Israel and determined, for domestic political reasons, to wrest Palestinian independence by a ‘war of liberation’ rather than win it through negotiation.4

Machiavellian calculations and political use of violence are certainly not beyond Arafat, and his management of events since autumn 2000 is replete with concrete (and often self-defeating) examples. In attributing premeditation to Arafat, however, the teleological nature of the Israeli argument renders the collapse of the peace process inevitable and unavoidable, thus absolving Israeli policies and side-stepping Palestinian objections to Israeli proposals at the Camp David summit.

What is entirely misunderstood or overlooked in this and similar Israeli accounts is both the reality of the strategic dilemma Arafat faced on the eve of the intifada and the extent to which his subsequent behaviour reflected his instinctive attempt to escape that dilemma. In the wake of Camp David, negotiation was still the only option he was actively pursuing, but his bargaining position was weakened, and in the absence of US support he clearly lacked the means to bring effective pressure to bear on Barak to deliver more favourable terms. He authorised substantive follow-on negotiations at senior level in mid-September, but the continued unravelling of Barak’s governing coalition and approach of US presidential elections threatened to deprive him imminently of two interlocutors upon whom his diplomatic strategy depended
heavily. Rather than threaten this strategy, the spontaneous civilian protests sparked by Sharon’s visit on 28 September and the killing by Israeli police of unarmed protestors on Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount the following day provided Arafat with an escape from his predicament.

The Making of a Crisis

The start of the intifada allowed Arafat to employ a familiar tactic, honed throughout his long political career, of al-huroub ila al-amam (‘escape by running forwards’). Neither an initiator nor a planner, he has instead seized upon the fortuitous eruption of a major crisis or other dramatic event brought about by external agency to obscure and escape a strategic predicament, and then sought to intensify and prolong that event as a means of gaining ‘crisis dominance’ and ultimately of inducing an outcome to his advantage. Examples include the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) civil war in 1983, which allowed him to re-launch his diplomatic cooperation with Jordan (and tacitly Egypt); the ‘camps war’ with the Lebanese Shi’i Amal militia in 1985–88, which enabled him to isolate PLO factions loyal to Syria and regain acceptance by the main PLO factions of his leadership (and effectively of his diplomacy); the intifada of 1987–88, which brought the PLO back to prominence and secured a formal dialogue with the US; and on a lesser scale, the clashes with Israeli troops provoked by the September 1996 Hasmonean tunnel incident, which created the political conditions that compelled then-Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to transfer the bulk of Hebron to PA security control four months later.

The eruption of the intifada of autumn 2000 offered Arafat a similar opportunity. The killing of unarmed Palestinian demonstrators, including children, by Israeli fire appeared instantly both to restore his international standing, energise vociferous Arab support and reverse the political tables on Barak. Arafat’s instinctive reaction was to maintain this advantage, which in a crude sense required a daily death toll. This does not mean that he ordered the initial Palestinian use of firearms against Israeli forces in the West Bank and Gaza, about three days into the intifada; but it means that once a few local Fatah activists in some cities under PA control had taken this initiative, he needed do no more than denote tacit assent to continued use of firearms, by refraining from issuing internal orders to cease fire. An implicit ‘green light’ was signalled by Arafat’s choice to leave the country at this critical moment – in order to attend events as pressing as a public rally in Tunisia and a seminar in Spain – making him conveniently unavailable to take command responsibility for the situation, while leaving Barak to ‘stew’.

By reconstructing the situation as a crisis, Arafat sought to mobilise outside parties, both regional and international, and involve them in an effort to head off the threat to the peace process and regional stability. However, in doing so he made a series of misjudgements. An early instance was the inflated Palestinian reading of the initial response of the Arab and Islamic worlds to the intifada. The threat to convene summit meetings of the League of Arab States
and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference provided Arafat with an effective political tool, but its value dwindled once these organisations manifested their reluctance to offer much more than rhetorical support in light of the risks of a wider military or diplomatic confrontation with Israel or the US.

More seriously, Arafat over-estimated the extent to which the \textit{intifada} had actually altered the strategic political balance. In turn, he miscalculated the scope and scale of concessions that could be wrung from Barak. He was also excessively optimistic about Barak’s ability to stay in office at all. Clinton’s proposal on 28 December came far closer to meeting the Palestinian demands with respect to Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and Palestinian refugees’ right of return to Israel, but Arafat refused to engage, presumably hoping to win better terms from Barak. By then this was clearly not forthcoming, yet first-hand anecdotal evidence suggests that Arafat still believed he could ‘lever’ Barak as late as end January 2001. His abrupt \textit{volte-face} with Israeli general elections not a week away, warning Israeli Jewish voters that Sharon would only bring war and urging Israeli Arab voters to set aside their bitterness towards Barak and ‘save peace’ by voting for him, suggests a sudden and rude awakening to political reality.

The fact that Arafat had to keep changing his operative assumptions led to shifting tactical objectives as the crisis wore on. Whereas finding a safe political exit was uppermost in his mind in late autumn 2000, this was replaced after the election of Sharon and inauguration of President George W. Bush by the single-minded striving to obtain explicit renewal of Israeli and – even more importantly, given his perception of American hegemonic influence – US recognition of his exclusive status as Palestinian leader and interlocutor.

The same paradox explains Arafat’s handling of diplomatic efforts to end the crisis, most notably the Sharm el-Sheikh summit of mid-October 2000 and the publication in late April 2001 of the report of The Sharm el-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee headed by former US Senator George Mitchell. In the former instance, Arafat’s call for international fact-finding and observer missions appears to have been intended essentially to deflect external pressure to end Palestinian use of firearms and thus relinquish the advantages seemingly offered by continuation of the \textit{intifada}. Similar reasoning probably lay behind his failure to capitalise on the Fact-Finding Committee’s call for a complete freeze on all Israeli settlement activity and renewal of EU language regarding the settlements as illegal under international law. He preferred instead to renew the demand for international observers, through which he could hope to implicate outside powers more intimately in the crisis.

Israeli policies have worked to Arafat’s advantage in certain respects, and in others fuelled his threat perceptions in ways that only prolonged the crisis. The attempt to employ coercive diplomacy to compel Arafat to restore the status quo ante with regard to security conditions is a case in point. Barak’s immediate use of lethal fire against unarmed demonstrators at the start of the \textit{intifada} is a case in point, having been decided as a matter of policy following
similar clashes the previous May. Though clearly intended to signal both resolve and restraint, Israel’s strict retaliatory policy failed to ensure ‘escalation dominance’ because it played into Arafat’s purpose to incur casualties and intensify the crisis, thus solidifying his domestic backing on the one hand and raising the profile of outside diplomatic intervention on the other. Recognition of this perverse consequence no doubt deterred the generally hawkish Sharon from ordering the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) to re-occupy PA-controlled cities, even after the horrific Hamas suicide bombing of a Tel Aviv disco in early June 2001. Demonstrative or temporary reoccupation would only lead to an escalatory spiral with little end-reward, so long as Arafat and the PA were not wholly eliminated as actors.

A related, if distinct factor has been the Israeli effort domestically and internationally to discredit Arafat personally as a valid negotiating partner and interlocutor. For instance, intelligence leaks to the media about his purported preparation of refuges to flee to in Iraq and Libya, converged with statements about his supposed congenital inability to close a permanent status peace deal with Israel. This has only reinforced his belief in the importance of securing an explicit statement or public demonstration renewing Israeli and US recognition of his symbolic status and practical role as political counterpart. Hence his insistence since the election of Sharon and inauguration of Bush on reconvening the Sharm el-Sheikh summit, and his anger towards his own deputy, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), for seemingly unblocking the impasse by visiting Washington DC in May 2001.

One of the more fanciful, and misleading, Israeli narratives emanating from military and intelligence sources has attributed a ‘Saladin Syndrome’ to Arafat, who supposedly dreams of entering Arab East Jerusalem as a conqueror, riding a wave of intifada violence. This imagery has more to do with the Orientalist imaginings of its propagators than with the historical analogy really driving much of the PA president’s behaviour: the fate of the Palestinian nationalist leader of the mandate period, mufti Amin Huseini, who in 1939 rejected the British White Paper offering full Arab sovereignty over the entire country after 10 years (in return for limited Jewish immigration for the first 5), and was permanently exiled by the British following the collapse of the Arab Revolt of 1936–39. Huseini was blamed by his own people for the catastrophic defeat of 1948 and died a lonely death many years later. Ironically, Arafat’s determination to avoid the fate of Huseini by striking a historic deal with Israel is at risk of being neutralised by a similar fear of being outflanked by militant ‘field’ activists.

**Anatomy of a dysfunctional revolt**

Arafat has come to rely on the political advice of a small circle of senior PA officials of varying competence, almost all ‘returnees’ from Tunisian exile. Most influential are his personal aides and ‘gate-keepers’, who control access to the president not only of persons (including the previous circle), but also of information, which is heavily filtered. This has had contradictory effects: on the
one hand, PA ministers and senior officials with access to the president practice
the art of ‘Arafat-watching’, inferring political direction from his demeanour
and tone and escalating or moderating the rhetoric of their own public
statements accordingly; on the other hand, they express increasingly bitter
frustration and disdain in private for his leadership style and policy decisions.
Arafat has the merit of being genuinely elected to public office as PA president,
but his loss of direct contact with the PLO rank-and-file and ordinary
Palestinian people has weakened the charismatic element of his leadership in a
way that distribution of patronage from his office has not compensated,
especially as the cumulative effect of his management style has been to de-
institutionalise Palestinian national politics.

This has had a direct bearing on the course of the intifada. Not least is the
clear disregard of his leadership for one of the most fundamental causes of the
two intifadas of 1987 and 2000: Israeli settlement activity. Not only was this
issue lightly skated over during negotiation of the various Oslo framework
agreements, but for six years the PA left this, one of the most pressing threats to
the national patrimony it sought to establish through statehood, wholly to the
meagre resources of a parliamentary committee and a handful of local NGOs.
Crudely put, the settlements were ‘out of sight, out of mind’ for Arafat.

Similarly, the PA failed heavily to prepare for the contest with Israel it
always knew would come, to assert its claim to East Jerusalem. Rather than
invest time and resources in mobilising and organising the city’s Palestinian
inhabitants for an eventual campaign of peaceful protest or civilian
disobedience, Arafat chose instead to undermine their best-known figure,
Faisal Huseini, who strove to provide a modicum of leadership and modest
institution-building until his death from natural causes in June 2001. True to
style, the PA president has since tied management of the Jerusalem ‘file’
directly to himself, thus ensuring that this powerful symbolic resource cannot
be used by any other to build competing legitimacy. In both the settlements
and the Jerusalem ‘files’, the structure of political and bureaucratic dynamics
within the PA limited the incentive and opportunity for other players
(including the secular and Islamist opposition) to make these genuine and
unflagging priorities.7

During the intifada, the counter-productive resort to firearms by Fatah, the
principal Palestinian nationalist organisation headed by Arafat, has been as
much a reflection of dysfunctional trends in Palestinian political organisation
as of anger towards Israel.8 It is a far cry from the operations of Lebanese
Hizbollah, which managed its own military campaign against Israel with precise
political direction, disciplined implementation, organisational coherence and
close integration with civilian and media activities. The political purpose is
clearly different in the Palestinian case: here military means serve Arafat’s aim
of ‘crisis maintenance’ and arm-twisting, rather than being intended literally to
drive out the Israelis, something that local activists understand and that
reduces their incentive to resolve the contradictions and dysfunctions in
their own actions.
The use of military force has moreover reflected implicit tensions and rivalries between key players within Fatah and the PA, particularly in the West Bank. A complex relationship obtains there between Arafat, Fatah’s most-televised cadre Marwan Barghouthi, Barghouthi’s rivals within Fatah, and PA security agencies, most notably Preventive Security headed by Jibril Rajoub and, to a lesser extent, General Intelligence headed by Tawfik Tirawi. An additional dimension is the role of activists of refugee background, whose longstanding social, economic and political marginality was compounded by the minimal change in their status that large-scale membership in Fatah and PA security agencies since 1994 had granted them. In addition, the glory of martyrdom is attractive to youths with few other prospects.

These internal dynamics help explain the often chaotic and counterproductive nature of Palestinian military activity. The PA has achieved greater control over firing from areas under its exclusive security control since April 2001. But uncoordinated, ‘freelance’ attacks launched haphazardly from built-up areas or around facilities and crossing points of vital economic interest to the Palestinians themselves, coupled with the tendency of senior PA officials and local media to exaggerate the scope and scale of Israeli military action, had previously scored several ‘own goals’. The result was to: raise threat perceptions and heighten insecurity among the civilian population and even among PA and security personnel; draw Israeli return fire and thus contribute to a civilian exodus from emerging front-line areas; provide justifications for Israeli closure of passage points for travellers and goods between the dispersed enclaves of PA control; and undermine international sympathy for the Palestinian position. Similarly, Fatah’s attempt since April 2001 to match military means to political ends, by concentrating its attacks on Israeli settlers and soldiers in the West Bank and Gaza, has been offset by its unwillingness to oppose Hamas’ and Islamic Jihad’s tactic of bombing ordinary civilian targets inside Israel proper.

The most serious leadership failing has arguably been the absence of any sustained effort to deliver a specific political message to the Israeli government, parliamentary parties and voting public. Without clear enunciation of concrete Palestinian demands, Israeli audiences have been unable to calculate the comparative costs and benefits of pursuing one course of action or another towards the Palestinians (in contrast to the experience with Hizbollah). Their fallback has been to assume the worst about Palestinian intentions, leading the Israeli domestic political field to the ‘default’ position of the nationalist right, which sees an opportunity to roll back the Oslo framework and even remove its main consequence, the establishment of the PA as a self-governing political institution. A Palestinian strategy combining diplomatic and military means with clear strategic aims, effective leadership and some sense of political end-state would still have entailed high risks, but in its absence the resort to violence has had a hugely negative impact on Israeli perceptions. Not only have attitudes across the Israeli political spectrum hardened towards the substantive terms of peace with the Palestinians, especially regarding the
return of even token numbers of refugees, but in a polarised climate the political rights and very presence of the country’s own Israeli-Arab citizens are being called into question.

The other side of the coin is the Palestinian leadership’s failure to address its own constituency. Arafat has yet to state the strategic and tactical aims of the intifada directly to his people, or even to the PA and Fatah rank-and-file. Indeed, this is consistent with the PA leadership’s reluctance throughout the negotiations (up to, and including the Camp David and Taba peace talks), to engage in debate, whether publicly or even internally, about the substance of what would constitute an acceptable deal. The close-lipped manner in which Arafat led the process and the discrepancy of substantive views relayed by different members of the senior negotiating echelon gave a distinct impression of embarrassment and left the Palestinian public unprepared for necessary compromises and trade-offs, even when the balance of evidence suggests that the public correctly anticipated these and was willing to entertain them, if properly approached and as part of a package deal.9

The PA leadership’s incapacity to enunciate clear (and realisable) goals has in turn led to palpable ambivalence among various Palestinian audiences towards the violent means and ultimate outcome of the intifada. Frustration with Israeli policies and resolution not to submit to coercion appear only to have deepened as poverty and daily humiliation at Israeli checkpoints have intensified, and as the general public has gradually grown accustomed to the escalating military tactics and weaponry deployed by the IDF. But there is an equally clear desire for an end to the conflict and mixed feelings about the PA’s performance. Dissent, which with a few exceptions has remained informal and private, has focused on correcting the above litany of flaws in the interest of attaining national objectives at future negotiations with Israel and of achieving internal reforms in governance and leadership.10 But Arafat’s resistance severely inhibits the PA’s ability to take the initiative and steer a new direction towards more constructive and ultimately rewarding forms of negotiation (or, if necessary, confrontation) with Israel.

**Future trajectories**

Outside parties sense that something fundamental has changed since the failure of the Camp David summit and the subsequent outbreak of the intifada in autumn 2000. Yet, for the most part, their responses still focus on immediate crisis management and damage limitation, in the hope of somehow resuming the peace process in the short-term (that is, within a year if not less). In spring 2001, the PA leadership seemed to conclude that its salvation lay in bringing down Sharon’s national unity government. To the extent that any further thinking went into this approach, it consisted of the assumption that the fall of a Likud-led government would naturally bring a Labour-led coalition back into power. This view was not entirely without substance – opinion polls showed that a majority of Israelis still supported negotiation, and even evacuation of settlements as part of a peaceful resolution of the conflict – but it did not grasp
the depth of the shift in Israeli politics and public opinion in other, key respects. General elections under present circumstances would probably strengthen the Israeli right and broaden its scope of action against the PA domestically. No less importantly, a broad political alliance (if not a quasi-merger) may be forming around a Labour–Likud centrist core that is more similar than disparate in its view of the contours of a final peace deal with the Palestinians (as well as sharing a secular outlook and espousal of free-market social and economic policy).

To help bring about any other outcome would require the PA to exercise greater self-discipline and political vision than it has done previously. To do so would in turn require Arafat to take charge in a manner alien to him, but failure would only encourage Israel to seek his removal and possibly the dismantling of the PA. Against this background, events could follow one of three trajectories.

**Scenario 1: Palestinian guerrilla campaign**

By spring 2001, Fatah seemed to be attempting to develop a more carefully targeted guerrilla campaign focusing on settler and associated IDF targets in the West Bank and Gaza. Arafat’s insistence since 1993 in portraying PA autonomy as equivalent to sovereignty has helped obscure from Israeli and international audiences the extent of continued Israeli control over all key levers affecting every facet of Palestinian life: security; external and internal trade; residence and travel abroad; land use outside the boundaries of established Palestinian municipalities; access to natural resources, especially water; and primary legislation. However, the Israeli political establishment and society in general have yet to grasp the lesson that South African President F.W. de Klerk drew in 1991: that the system of control could not be indefinitely prolonged through limited modification in ways that always left the white minority with ultimate veto power in all key domains, and simply had to go. It may be that only after further loss of life and misery on both sides, will Israel come to a similar conclusion, something its political leadership was not yet ready to countenance at Camp David in July 2000. But a Palestinian guerrilla campaign could only hope to have such an effect, at best, if it were closely coordinated with Palestinian civilian resistance and accompanied by a clear and constructive political message to Israel, containing a frank definition of the terms of permanent status peace.

**Scenario 2: Israeli destruction of the PA**

Any Israeli government would feel unable to tolerate systematic and sustained low-intensity military pressure indefinitely, even if it privately distinguished between settler casualties and victims of terrorist attacks inside Israel proper. What might nonetheless push matters to a head is the deterioration of present friction between armed settlers and the IDF into firefights, or, no less importantly, the disintegration of Sharon’s base of support within Likud. There are signs of both prospects, and indeed the more militant settlers might well
undertake deliberately escalatory action with the precise aim of either forcing Sharon to destroy the PA or else bringing him down, thus paving the way for the return of Netanyahu, who was already comporting himself by summer 2001 with the air of prime minister in-waiting.

However, an Israeli invasion and wholesale dismantling of the PA would prove futile and counter-productive. Clearly, it would remove the prospect of facing an opponent able to mobilise and coordinate (however poorly) political and material resources on a national scale and to invoke international diplomacy, but this would only be a short-term gain. The Palestinian population has acquired political, organisational, and military skills it lacked prior to 1993, so Israel would soon either face a more bitter resistance than in 1967-93, or else be obliged to resort to far more draconian measures than before – including prolonged mass internment and expulsions. This would threaten the national security and internal stability of neighbouring Arab states – above all Jordan’s – in ways they could not afford to ignore, and could trigger the sort of international intervention that both Israel and the principal outside powers have always sought to avoid. Such considerations may be precisely why Sharon has been so reluctant, contrary to type, to approve significantly greater use of Israeli military force against the PA.

He has, however, revived plans originally prepared by Barak for the establishment of a buffer zone (comprising walls, trenches and manned outposts) to separate Israeli and Palestinian population centres. The overall purpose seems to be to place Israel politically, and the IDF militarily, in a position where it retains all options, including the ability either to ‘hunker down’ or to conduct an invasion swiftly, with least political cost regionally and internationally. The result could be a protracted political deadlock and a military stalemate on the ground, with none of the local or external factors present that are necessary to provide an exit. Fear of further deterioration could even prompt principal outside powers to acquiesce tacitly in the replacement of Arafat by another PA figure, if not actively encourage forces inside the PA to engineer such a development, thus bringing about the very nightmare scenario that he has long sought to avoid.

Scenario 3: PA collapse
Prolongation of the crisis will not place Israel alone under pressure. The PA has been under strain since the start of the intifada, and could disintegrate under the combined impact of its own dysfunctionality and Israeli counter-measures. Indeed, Arafat has used the spectre of a Hamas take-over in the event of the PA’s collapse, to mobilise international diplomatic and financial support to help shore up the PA. Yet here, as elsewhere, reality is more mixed. On the one hand, the PA has never functioned as a system of government at any point since 1994, with the curious consequence that its near-total paralysis as a civilian administration since the start of the intifada in autumn 2000 has made relatively little difference to people’s lives. Local society has resorted to its own devices and networks, developed during 27 years of direct Israeli occupation, in order
to maintain trade and eke out a living wherever possible. This means an
imperceptible and implicit restoration of links with Israeli administrative
authorities and businesses, but also indicates a capacity for resilience and
survival under adverse conditions that blunts the utility of Israeli measures
intended to coerce the PA by punishing its civilian population.

On the other hand, the developments that might alter the picture more
seriously are internal to the PA, even if affected by external conditions. An
important element of the PA’s success in maintaining cohesion has been its
continued ability to pay salaries to well over 120,000 public sector employees,
including 40,000 police personnel, and to provide indirect subventions to
thousands of Fatah activists. Funding pledged by the Arab states and
(separately, and more modestly) by the EU has helped postpone the crunch to
autumn 2001, and might be spun out beyond that, but any serious shortfall
could erode the remarkably high level (given the general atmosphere of
violence) of law and order and basic social civility that still obtain in PA-
controlled areas. What makes this prospect possible, and therefore worrying, is
the fragmentation of Fatah – which has become a mere coalition of lightly-
armed fiefdoms based in city neighbourhoods and refugee camps – and the
unspoken rivalry between heads of PA security agencies who have their sights
implicitly set on the post-Arafat succession. Somali-style disintegration is not
yet likely, given the countervailing effect of nationalist sentiment and societal
constraints, but the IDF’s parcelling of PA-controlled areas into dozens of
isolated pockets may encourage a centrifugal effect should PA structures start
to crumble (especially in the event of Arafat’s passing). This does not mean that
the conflict with Israel would end, only that it could get uglier, with little hope
of finding a valid Palestinian negotiating partner.

Final assessment
The Israeli nationalist right would probably celebrate the collapse of the PA as
heralding the ultimate victory of the Zionist project in Palestine, not least by
clearing the way for final expansion and consolidation of Jewish settlement in
the West Bank and East Jerusalem (and, secondarily, Gaza). The Palestinians,
whose right to statehood was acknowledged in the UN Partition Plan of 1947
(General Assembly Resolution 181), would have missed the post-Cold War
opportunity to make the transition to statehood, and would find themselves no
closer to statehood than the Kurds. If this course of events were to occur,
Arafat’s misjudgement in autumn 2000 would have been of historic
proportions. At best, Arafat’s choices since autumn 2001 rank beside the two
most important strategic mistakes of his previous, long political career:
confronting Syria in Lebanon in 1976, and siding with Saddam Hussein in 1990.
On this occasion, too, there is a price to pay and it will take several years to
recover, if the lessons are learned, by which time Arafat may no longer be leading
the Palestinians.

There is little that concerned outside powers can do in the short-term to
reduce political risks. The medium-term does not offer fundamentally different
options, but it allows a perspective to develop on the positive impact that certain contributory measures could have if applied consistently and with unity of purpose by the international community. Most immediate to hand is the so-called ‘Mitchell Report’, with its emphasis on leading methodically from confidence-building – including the freeze on all Israeli settlement activity – to resumption of permanent status peace talks. The report’s emphasis on protecting civilians from the effects of conflict (even though it omits the Fourth Geneva Convention) could further be used to prevent collective punishment of the Palestinian civilian population, ensuring its freedom of movement and normal economic activity (crucially including external trade), and thus encouraging a shift of the battlefield back to the negotiating table.

The principal contribution that the international community can make is to help ‘hold the line’, in the hope of preventing further deterioration along any of the three trajectories discussed above and affecting the cost-benefit calculation of both Israel and the PA. But it remains incumbent on both the latter parties to restructure their relationship. Outside powers can encourage political movement on the Israeli side by raising implicit recognition of East Jerusalem as the future Palestinian capital in response to accelerated settlement activities inside its Arab neighbourhoods, and by extending de facto recognition of the PA as a state-in-waiting. These positions would establish a political bottom-line with Israel, while leaving all other substantive issues for negotiation. Finally, nothing that has happened so far absolves the Palestinian leadership of its own contribution to the current situation, its obligations under international law and its duty to its people to secure an independent state, based on the rule of law, through negotiation with Israel.
Notes

1 The ‘Green Line’ is the 1949 Armistice Line that defined the effective border between Israel and the neighbouring West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza Strip until 4 June 1967.

2 The term intifada (uprising) is used by Palestinians to describe their confrontation with Israel since autumn 2000. I do not regard it as an accurate or appropriate description, given the marginality of civilian resistance and unarmed mass protests, and use it here for convenience only. For an example of Israeli accounts of Arafat’s behaviour, see ‘Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee, First Statement of the Government of Israel’, 28 December 2000, paragraphs 21 and 22 (inter alia).

3 The term ‘Oslo framework’ refers to the series of interim agreements, protocols, and memoranda of understanding signed between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel, starting with the Oslo Accords of September 1993.

4 The notion that Arafat could not bring himself to sign peace with Israel is curious, given the historical record: in pursuit of a negotiated settlement with Israel, Arafat persuaded the PLO to adopt diplomacy as a central strategy in 1974, fought a civil war launched by hard-line opponents of his diplomacy in 1983, signed the Oslo Accords and recognized Israel formally in 1994, and took decisive action against Islamist groups following the bombings inside Israel of spring 1996. I have studied this evolution elsewhere, in Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

5 The relaxed rules of engagement concerning use of live and rubber-coated ammunition formed part of the IDF’s ‘Field of Thorns’ operational plan for quick suppression of stone-throwing protests.

6 By summer 2000, there were growing calls in Israel for precisely such a wholesale onslaught. Leaked reports (such as ‘The Israeli generals’ plan’, Foreign Report, 12 July 2001) suggest that the IDF expected reoccupation of all PA-controlled areas to cost 100–300 Israeli and at least 1,000 Palestinian deaths, and to be accompanied by the mass internment of PA police and some civilian personnel and expulsion to neighbouring Arab countries of the PLO ‘returnees’. Rightwing Israeli politicians have suggested re-installing Israeli military governors in every Palestinian city or town, to rule through local civilian administrators.

7 Sari Nuseibeh, head of the Jerusalem Open University, gave rare public confirmation of PA abdication of its responsibility towards East Jerusalem in a speech commemorating Faisal Huseini on 17 July 2001.

8 The mass turnout and informal provision of law and order by PA security agencies for Faisal Huseini’s funeral showed, for one day, what could be done to assert the Palestinian claim to East Jerusalem peacefully.

9 The fact that this failing was mirrored on the Israeli side by no means exonerates the Palestinian leadership for its own shortcomings. Notable exceptions include roundtable discussions and public petitions organized by Miftah, the NGO headed by former Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi, and a panel discussion among four left-of-centre figures published in Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyyah (Beirut), Summer 2001 (no. 47), pp. 42–59.

10 The contours of such a peace deal might well be identical to the so-called Beilin-Eitan Agreement.
(National Agreement Regarding the Negotiations on the Permanent Settlement with the Palestinians), published on 22 January 1997. Drafted by a leading figure of the Labour left and the then-head of the Likud parliamentary faction (with then-prime ministerial candidate Netanyahu’s blessing), its main elements and guiding principles resurfaced almost exactly in Barak’s Camp David proposals.