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"Elusive Palestinian State Still Waits on Arafat"

By Kenneth W. Stein

Yasser Arafat has some choices to make.

The leader of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization can expunge the radicals, militants and activists who believe Israel is illegitimate, and use violence and terrorism against Israel, or he can become a footnote to history.

Either he recognizes the constraints of geography and demography that imprison Israelis and Palestinians, or he never serves as president of the Palestinian state that surely must come into being west of the Jordan River.

The existence of a Palestinian state is essential for a negotiated outcome of the present situation. Israel cannot absorb three million Palestinians and remain a majority Jewish state. Palestinian Arabs will not accept a state elsewhere than in Palestine.

Five years ago, when Arafat left a meeting with then-Israeli President Ezer Weizmann, the Palestinian leader said, "Since we ... launched the peace process, we renounced violence and both of us opened a new page for a historical reconciliation and permanent coexistence. Violence is neither our policy nor our strategy, because we have to live as neighbors while observing each other's interests and rights for the sake of our children and your children."

But the 10 Israelis killed and more than 180 wounded on the Jerusalem mall last week were almost all Jewish Israeli teenagers. The Palestinian militant group Hamas claimed responsibility for the killings, as it did for most of the carnage in Israel in late November and December where more than 50 Israelis were killed and four times that were wounded.

Whatever Arafat's views, the stated objective of Hamas is the unequivocal destruction of Israel. For Hamas, the phrase "ending Israeli occupation" does not mean an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem, and the establishment of a Palestinian

state in some of the land east of the Jordan River. "Ending Israeli occupation" means ending all of Israel.

In order to preserve a semblance of domestic Palestinian harmony, Arafat has not stopped the anti-Jewish venom regularly spewed into the public domain by Hamas, the Palestinian media and other radical Palestinian groups.

Successful negotiations require ripeness. Ripeness can come from physical or psychological need. As in the past, a readiness for talks after the 1973 War, when then-General Ariel Sharon had surrounded the Egyptian Third Army and was preparing to destroy it in retribution for the surprise attack on Israel, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat sensed the situation was dire.

Israeli society was traumatized by the loss of more than 2,200 Israelis killed, almost 6,000 wounded and hundreds of Israeli POWs held. Israel urgently needed to negotiate for the return of its POWs. Revenge was Sharon's motivation.

Had Sharon and Israel destroyed the 15,000-man Third Army, Sadat's presidency surely would have faltered, no negotiations with Israel would have ensued, and the POWs would not have been returned so quickly.

Enter Henry Kissinger. He used the ripeness for negotiations on both sides to have Egyptian and Israeli generals negotiate a cease-fire and a separation-of-forces understanding. Then, Richard Nixon's secretary of state negotiated an Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement.

In 1979, President Carter finished this part of Arab-Israeli negotiations with the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty. The comparison of these 1970s events with today is uncanny in similarity and perhaps in outcome. Four things are different, though. First, Arafat does not command the control and respect of his Palestinian community that Sadat enjoyed from Egyptians. Arafat's approval rating has plunged from 47 percent fifteen months ago to 34 percent today.

Arafat's strong preference is not to crack down on Hamas. If he does, even mildly, he could provoke a Palestinian civil war and severe competition for succession to his leadership mantle.

Second, Nixon and Kissinger saw Sadat as the turnkey opportunity to reduce Soviet presence in the Middle East and needed Sadat's embrace. Arafat does not provide the Bush Administration with any

similar geo-strategic incentive.

By fingering Hamas as a murderous organization allied with the PLO and demanding action against it, the Bush Administration apparently has dismissed the likelihood that Arab and Muslim states will hurt the international coalition arrayed against terrorism elsewhere.

Third, Sharon labors with heavy political constraints as he works to keep his coalition intact and answer to Israeli public opinion.

Finally, the historical moment has changed: Then, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir believe "grass would grow in her hand" before an Egyptian leader made peace with Israel. Today, Israel is engaged in a series of negotiations with its neighbors. Israeli retribution against Arafat might feel good, but it contains a host of negative political consequences. For that matter, the public record suggests Sharon does want to depose or dispose of Arafat.

In various interviews this year, Sharon said, "It is not up to us to decide who the Palestinians elect to lead them...Gradual solutions should be pursued. We will reach a solution in which there is a Palestinian state...by agreement... demilitarized with the things we need to exist."

Less than three months after the assault on the United States, Arafat and his Palestinian people are surrounded like Osama bin Laden, al-Qaida and the Taliban. In its own way and for its own purposes, Israel has joined belatedly and through a back door, the international coalition against terrorism. The Arab world wanted the Bush Administration to put pressure on Israel to negotiate; ironically, the pressure is on Arafat.

Is there a mechanism for Arafat to extricate himself from the cul-de-sac that has narrowed around him in recent days?

The Bush Administration supports the establishment of a Palestinian state. Secretary of State Colin Powell requested an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Two senior U.S. envoys are available to carry on talks in Jerusalem.

Yes, if he wants to use it, Arafat can parachute into a Palestinian state, but he has to choose once again his definition of "ending occupation" -- the one he needs, not the one he may prefer.