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"The Media and Language"

By Kenneth W. Stein

After I was interviewed by CNN on October 17, an analyst from London immediately gave her opinion. In the middle of that exchange, the CNN anchor referred to the Sharm el-Sheikh agreement as a "peace agreement." When we were off the air, I suggested that more care be given to the choice of language. "This was not a peace agreement, but an agreement to cease the hostilities," I said. He graciously acknowledged the distinction. I left the anchor desk, mumbling to myself, "Don't they understand that language choice shapes attitudes and deepens emotions?"

Prior to the end of the July Camp David summit, the stated goal of the Palestinian leadership remained full Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza and east Jerusalem, the establishment of a Palestinian state, return of as many refugees who wish to return, removal of all the settlement, and Arab sovereignty over east Jerusalem and the Moslem Holy Sites.

After Arafat traveled to Arab, Asian and European capitals, he was urged to postpone a unilateral declaration of an independent Palestinian state. The promised declaration of a state for September 13, 2000, came and went. Palestinian discontentment increased; by mid-September, many were fed up with waiting for their state. The Palestinian Arab press was dispirited by Arafat's leadership for compromising with the Israelis, disdainful of Washington's cuddling of Israel, and uniformly angry that Washington was pressuring Arafat to reach a compromise agreement.

At the same time, Palestinian Arabs lamented Israel's unequalled military power, their own political powerlessness, and lack of interest by the Arab world.

In August, Basl Aql, a PLO member, said, "Arab backing, which is vital for that [Palestinian] state, would be purely verbal and rhetorical." Writing from London, an Arab commentator noted, "Arab governments have been treating Jerusalem as though it is just another scrap of territory. What had always been burning Arab concerns have, in this age of American hegemony, been turned into private parochial matters."

Another wrote, of the imbalance of power, "Israel...decides what to

offer and what to withhold. It is also free of any meaningful Arab or international pressure."

One concluded that the Palestinian predicament was due to the "long accumulation of gross mistakes by the Palestinian leadership."

While the new school year started with Palestinian text books not making mention of Israel, there was little, if any, notice of anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic sentiment from Palestinian Arab sources.

Once the state's declaration was postponed, a foreboding environment became darker. Fear increased that Arafat might be forced to accept historic compromises on Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, and Palestinian prerogatives. An imperfect agreement was at hand. And then two other additives: Palestinian television aired programs which roused memories and fired passions about the 1948 conflict and the national conflict was injected with religious passions.

And yet, in the days just before the outbreak of violence, Palestinian and Israeli negotiators were engaged in diplomacy, Arafat and Barak met cordially, and Barak even suggested east Jerusalem could be the capital of the Palestinian state.

On September 29, the day after Sharon visited the Temple Mount, the prayer leader in Jerusalem's al-Aqsa mosque is reported to have said, "We did not hear one ruler for Muslims declaring that he wants to eradicate the Jews from Palestine. Instead, they declare that Sharon's visit is the cause because they were defending Barak and the Labor Party." It got worse.

In the Friday, October 13, sermon in the Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan Mosque, in Gaza, the following is reportedly to have been said, "The Jews and Jews, whether Labor or Likud...do not have any moderates or any advocates of peace. They are all liars. O' brother believers, the criminals, the terrorists are the Jews, who have butchered our children, orphaned them, widowed our women and desecrated our holy places and sacred sites."

It apparently ended with, "We shall not forget Haifa, and Acre, and the Galilee, and Jaffa, and the Triangle and the Negev, and the rest of our cities and villages. It is only a matter of time... Have no mercy on the Jews, no matter where they are, in any country. Fight them, wherever you are. Wherever you meet them, kill them. Wherever you are, kill those Jews and those Americans who are like them!"

Arafat used militancy along with diplomacy; in his estimation, they

were not incompatible options. Violence could postpone signing an agreement, enlist the international community to pressure Israel into additional concessions, and portray Israel in the media as the bad guy. It relieved pent-up frustration, catalyzed Arab leadership attention, and galvanized significant support in the Arab street.

The negative dynamism of August was history. Violence shifted the sense of lament and powerlessness to resurgent Palestinian pride and coherent action. Arafat did not position himself for assassination; he refused to sign an agreement imposed upon him by Israeli demands and Washington's pressure. Spilling blood in the name of religion surfaced.

In retrospect, complaining to the CNN anchor about the difference between agreement and treaty pales in comparison: the use of religion as a platform for political cohesion and mobilization is incendiary; it contains explosive consequences.

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