

AJF 212

# Arafat and the Uses of Terror

*Jonathan Torop*

IN THE wake of recent acts of terrorism and anti-Israel violence by Palestinians, it seemed for a moment that even supporters of the "peace process" had begun to wonder about Yasir Arafat's commitment to his proclaimed goal of cooperation with Israel and to the renunciation of violence. Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the March 21 bombing in a Tel Aviv café, questions were raised about the PLO chairman's ability or even his willingness to control the extreme elements within rejectionist groups like Hamas. In the months before the most recent round of violence, Arafat had freed 120 Hamas terrorists, including over a dozen directly involved in previous killings of Israelis, and he had conferred with Hamas representatives on his return from meeting Bill Clinton in Washington in March.

Yet by the time Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, came to Washington in early April, the main question preoccupying American officials from the President on down was not the peaceful intentions of the PLO but the peaceful intentions of *Israel*, and especially whether Netanyahu (in the words of a report in the *New York Times*) was ready "to prove—in deeds, not just words—that he [was] sincere" in those intentions. This was a remarkable (if, by now, all too familiar) turnabout. Still, no matter how often it is downplayed or denied, the is-

sue raised by the recent round of violence is the same issue that has dogged the "peace process" since its inception. That issue is not Arafat's relation with the extremists, and not whether he can rein them in. It is, rather, his own fundamental disposition, and that of the movement he leads, toward the state of Israel.

SPEAKING ON the White House lawn in September 1993, Yitzhak Rabin, the late Prime Minister of Israel, hailed the newly signed Oslo accords between his country and the PLO as marking the start of an era in which "we all will say farewell to arms." And indeed, those agreements stipulated that from then on, the parties would work out their differences through negotiation and without resort to violence. In particular, the PLO was bound by Oslo to relinquish the option of war against Israel. Arafat, soon to become chairman of the Palestinian Authority (PA), explicitly accepted this point by stating in a formal letter to Rabin (September 9, 1993) that the PLO "renounces the use of terrorism and other acts of violence," and in his own remarks on the White House lawn he too invoked a new age of "peace" and "coexistence."

The understanding embedded in the Oslo accords was reiterated in subsequent agreements as well. Thus, the May 1994 Gaza-Jericho agreement (also known as the Cairo agreement) stated that the "Palestinian Authority . . . shall . . . abstain from incitement, including hostile propaganda,"

JONATHAN TOROP, a new contributor, is a Soref research fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

against Israel. In the September 28, 1995, Israel-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo II), the PA promised to "take all measures necessary in order to prevent acts of terrorism, crime, and hostilities." And after the Israeli withdrawal from four-fifths of Hebron in January 1997, the PA pledged once again to prevent "incitement and hostile propaganda," combat terror, and prevent violence.

A look at the record, however, reveals that to Arafat and his men, the Oslo accords in no way require the end of conflict or the surrender of the war option against Israel. Since Oslo, rather, the PLO has been following its own version of the classic strategy of guerrilla warfare: "jaw jaw, shoot shoot." Even while invoking the pieties of reconciliation, Arafat and his aides *themselves* have regularly resorted to threats of violence, incitements to violence, encouragement of violence, and outright acts of violence. For them, Oslo or no Oslo, the armed struggle against the Jewish state remains a central element of strategy.

PERHAPS THE most dramatic illustration of the PLO's attitude toward its Oslo commitments was the mini-war launched by Arafat in September 1996 that left over 70 dead—and that resulted in increased international pressure on the Jewish state to accede to Palestinian demands.\*

What happened was this. Shortly after the government of Israel opened a new exit to an archeological tunnel in Jerusalem, Arafat stated that this action constituted a "crime against [Islamic] religious and holy" places—in fact, the tunnel was nowhere in the vicinity of such places—and that Palestinians "will not stand by quietly." He, certainly, did not. Ordering Palestinian police not to stop crowds from "spontaneously" charging Israeli troops, the chairman declared that Jerusalem would have to be won with "blood" and "fire" and whipped up PA security forces with these words:

They will fight for Allah, and they will kill and be killed, and this is a solemn oath. . . . Our blood is cheap compared with the cause which has brought us together and which at moments separated us, but shortly we will meet again in heaven. . . . Palestine is our land and Jerusalem is our capital.

Palestinian media and PA officials echoed their leader's sentiments. In Ramallah (according to a report in the *Wall Street Journal*), the Voice of Palestine radio station "ran constant broadcasts calling on Palestinians to go into the streets and enlist in

the battle against the 'Zionist entity.'" The religious leader of the Palestinian police forces, Mufti Abdel-Salam Abu Shukeidem, urged his soldiers, "Our blessings to you, you who fight at the gates of the enemy and knock on heaven's door with his skull in your hands." All these words had their intended effect. As one Palestinian told the Associated Press, "The Palestinian Authority is giving us the green light . . . to come back to the *intifada*."

But it would be a mistake to think that it took an actual "provocation" by Israel for Arafat and his men to prepare Palestinians for violence. A month and a half before the tunnel incident, Arafat was quoted in the *New York Times* calling Israel a "demon" and urging Palestinians to use "all means" at their disposal to fight the Jewish state. Muhammad Dahlan, the PA's top security official for Gaza, said during the same period: "The Palestinian Authority does not exclude the return to the armed struggle, and it will then use its weapons." And in an interview with an Egyptian newspaper, Arafat, when asked what means he had at his disposal to halt the "Judaization of Jerusalem," replied, "I will tell you something: It is wrong to believe that I have nothing. We have a great deal and my quiver is full. But I had better not say too much. . . ."

THE CHAIRMAN's "quiver," as is by now well known, includes tens of thousands of men under arms. According to the Oslo agreement, at the present stage the PA was supposed to limit itself to a force of 24,000 lightly armed policemen. Arafat's army is by now at least 40,000 strong; its troops travel in armored personnel carriers, and in most cases carry machine guns, wear fatigues, and boast combat experience. In addition, Arafat has formed as many as seven or perhaps ten different secret-police forces in the West Bank and Gaza.

The existence of these armed forces figures prominently in the PLO's public diplomacy. Thus, during the violence in late September, the PA's representative in France, Leila Shahid, alluded to "thousands of armed Palestinian police in the territories" and hinted darkly of a return to violence that would be "more serious than the *intifada*." Sometimes such warnings are uttered with an air of feigned helplessness, as if to suggest that Arafat, despite his own wishes, might not be able to restrain the righteous ire of his followers. His aide Faisal Husseini told Germany's *Der Spiegel* that

If the Palestinians continue to feel that the

\* For a further discussion of the September mini-war, see Norman Podhoretz's "The Tragic Predicament of Benjamin Netanyahu" in the December 1996 issue.—ED.

Israelis are not interested in the continuation of the peace process, the Palestinian government will no longer be able to control the people—not always even their own armed policemen.

The truth, of course, is otherwise: within limits, Arafat can turn the violence on and off to suit his purposes. When he issued an unambiguous ceasefire command last September, PA soldiers immediately stopped shooting; and when there was a danger of things getting out of hand in Jerusalem this March, his troops acted as a restraining force.

Perhaps the most succinct summing-up of the Palestinian position on the use, and the usefulness, of armed force has come from two PA officials. Here is Ahmad Quray (alias Abu Ala), chairman of the Palestine Legislative Council and head of the Palestinian negotiating committee:

If Israel does not honor the agreements, . . . the response to the continuation of the occupation will be more dangerous than the *intifada*. . . . [T]he arms available . . . and the organization [are] better than in the past. . . . The alternative to peace will be bad for the Israelis, something which they do not want. The Palestinian people will oppose the occupation, from children to adults, *including the Palestinian police* [emphasis added].

And here is Nabil Shaath, Arafat's planning minister, speaking in March 1996—that is, *after* a wave of suicide bombings had killed 59 Israelis, and *after* an anti-terrorism summit which was intended to signal a total repudiation of violence on the part of the Palestinians:

If the negotiations reach a dead end, we shall go back to the struggle and strife, as we did for 40 years. It is not beyond our capabilities. . . . As long as Israel goes forward [with concessions], there are no problems, which is why we observe the agreements of peace and nonviolence. But if and when Israel will say, "That's it, we won't talk about Jerusalem, we won't return refugees, we won't dismantle settlements, and we won't retreat from borders," then all the acts of violence will return. *Except that this time we'll have 30,000 armed Palestinian soldiers who will operate in areas in which we have unprecedented elements of freedoms* [emphasis added]. . . .

THAT STATEMENTS like these reflect a real strategy rather than ad-hoc bluster is made clearer by the fact that they have a history: the incitements of 1996 were simply an extension into

practice of a position adumbrated by PLO leaders ever since Oslo, and repeated at regular intervals regardless of who has happened to be in power in Israel. In May 1993, for example, in a speech at Ramallah's Bir Zeit University just after the signing of the first Oslo accord, Faisal Husseini told his Arab audience, "Everything you see and hear today is for tactical and strategic reasons. We have not given up the rifle. We still have armed gangs in the areas and if we do not get our state we will take them out of the closet and fight again." Around the same time, Husseini told the Egyptian weekly *Al-Arabi*, "If Israel continues to undermine the path to peace, there will be no other alternative but . . . the military option."

Moreover, Palestinian leaders have gone beyond issuing threats of violence simply as a means of forcing further concessions from Israel. They quite openly keep alive the hope of destroying the Jewish state altogether. This they have done not only by refusing to amend the Palestinian Covenant, which calls for the elimination of Israel, but by periodically restating their particular interpretation of the "peace process."

Thus, the PA's justice minister, Freih Abu Middein, has said, "We must remember that the main enemy of the Palestinian people, now and forever, is Israel." On another occasion, reading a speech in Arafat's name, Abu Middein stated, "I say once more that Israel shall remain the principal enemy of the Palestinian people, not only now but also in the future."

Arafat himself, in a radio address in November 1995, asserted that "The struggle will continue until all of Palestine is liberated." Similarly, Arafat informed a group of Arab ambassadors meeting in Stockholm in January 1996 that the PLO had plans to "eliminate the state of Israel [by making] life unbearable for the Jews." He went on:

We Palestinians will take over everything, including Jerusalem. . . . We of the PLO will now concentrate all our efforts on splitting Israel psychologically into two camps. Within five years we will have six to seven million Arabs living on the West Bank and in Jerusalem . . . we [will] import all kinds of Arabs. . . . Three and a half million Arabs will thus be brought to Palestine. You understand that we plan to eliminate the state of Israel and establish a purely Palestinian state. . . . I have no use for Jews; they are and remain Jews. We now need all the help we can get from you in our battle for a united Palestine under total Arab-Muslim control.

IT IS in line with such long-term goals that Arafat—not Hamas, but Arafat himself—has repeatedly called for *jihad*, holy war, against the Jewish state. What does he mean by this? In Islam, *jihad* (“striving”) has come historically to signify a religious duty to attack infidels and remove them from the House of Islam. All male, free, adult Muslims are required to engage in *jihad*, and a Muslim who dies in battle is assured a place in paradise. That such acts of martyrdom exercise a powerful hold on the imagination of Palestinians can be readily gleaned from their penchant for suicide bombings—and from the enthusiasm these acts arouse among the populace.

To be sure, there is in Islam the concept—uncommon though it is—of a peaceful *jihad*, and Arafat has often disingenuously protested that this is what he has had in mind in invoking the term. But the notion of a peaceful *jihad* is so rare that one never encounters it in Arab writing or speech without an accompanying explanation for its use. In the speeches of Arafat and other PA officials, by contrast, calls for *jihad* are routinely joined to invocations of battle, sacrifice, and armed struggle.

The sheer number of *jihad* speeches given by Arafat since the signing of Oslo I in September 1993 is nothing short of astonishing. One of the most notorious occurred at a mosque in South Africa in 1994. During an event closed to the media, the chairman proclaimed:

The *jihad* will continue. . . . You have to understand our main battle is Jerusalem. . . . You have to come and fight a *jihad* to liberate Jerusalem, your precious shrine. . . . No, it is not their capital. It is our capital.

Arafat echoed the South Africa speech literally dozens of times in 1995 and 1996. On June 19, 1995, he was filmed at Al-Azhar University in Gaza:

We are all seekers of martyrdom in the path of truth and right toward Jerusalem, the capital of the state of Palestine. The commitment stands and the oath is firm to continue this long and arduous *jihad* in the path of martyrdom and sacrifices. . . . The commitment still stands and the oath is still firm to continue this difficult *jihad*, this long *jihad*, this arduous *jihad* in the path of martyrs, the path of sacrifices, but this is a path of victory and glory.

Shortly after the violence committed by PA police in September 1996, Arafat announced again:

We will be willing to die as martyrs until our flag flies over Jerusalem. No one should be-

lieve they can frighten us with weapons. We have much stronger weapons, the weapon of belief, the weapon of sacrifice, the weapon of *jihad*. . . . We shall continue the *jihad*, the long *jihad*, a complex *jihad*, a *jihad* of attrition, of holy death. Warfare is our only way to victory. The path of glory, the path of *jihad*.

On October 21, 1996, at a refugee camp in the West Bank:

We know only one word: *jihad*, *jihad*, *jihad*. When we stopped the *intifada*, we did not stop the *jihad* for the establishment of a Palestinian state whose capital is Jerusalem. He who doesn't like it—let him drink some water from the Dead Sea or the Sea of Gaza. . . . We are now entering the phase of the great *jihad* prior to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state whose capital is Jerusalem. . . . We are in a conflict with the Zionist movement and the [1917] Balfour Declaration [recognizing a Jewish homeland in Palestine] and all imperialist activities. . . . We have a long struggle ahead of us. I call upon each and every one of you to bring into this world at least twelve children and to give me ten of them in order to continue the struggle.

What does it say about a leader formally committed to peace that he loses no opportunity to advocate holy war? And what does it say about the prospects for peace that overwhelming numbers of his constituents appear to support this aim, and a significant number have been prepared to act on it?

LIKE A car accelerating toward a brick wall, the “peace process” is approaching the stage of final-status talks, in which the most complicated and intractable issues—Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, borders, statehood—are to be discussed. Given the delicacy of the moment, it should give pause to any disinterested onlooker that Israelis and Palestinians disagree on a point as basic as whether the Oslo agreements say, in Yitzhak Rabin's words, “farewell to arms” or, rather, as Arafat appears to have it, “we reserve the right to return to armed struggle at any time our demands are not met, and even to seek the final destruction of our ‘peace partner.’”

The simple fact is that Arafat and his men have spent three and a half years expounding just this position, and in the mini-war of September 1996 and other outrages directed against Israel have demonstrated their own readiness to match word to deed. When the crunch comes, no one can claim not to have been warned.