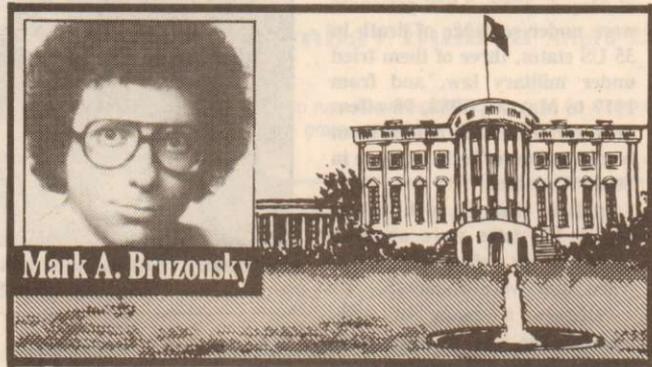


From



Washington

Bleak political forecast

HARD political realpolitik and "moderate" political aspirations are not in sync in today's Mid-east when it comes to thinking about Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The bottom line is don't expect a real Palestinian state very soon. However things might seem in Europe or parts of the Mid-east, or as much as many of us might want to believe otherwise, this is the clear message coming both from official Washington and from a cold, hard-headed assessment of political "realities" in the US and Israel as well as the Arab World.

Yasser Arafat may now be president, and the PLO may now have a few more contacts with the Americans, some Israelis, and some important American and European Jews. But the reality of the Palestinian predicament in very serious, straightforward, realpolitik terms, is that the PLO has done a kind of ideological strip-tease, gotten but a few coins in return, and has been left on a diplomatic tightrope in full public glare.

In short, while the Intifada that got everything rejuvenated again goes on, the PLO's actual achievements are nearly totally in the area of public visibility and diplomatic activity. Precisely how long Arafat can hold onto such an illusory "peace process" is guesswork of course. What is more factual is that Al-Fatah and its globe-trotting representatives are already beginning to run hard attempting to replace what they had anticipated as history-making political progress with uplifting rhetoric and lowered expectations.

By December, within weeks of the historic Algiers PNC, things already weren't going well or as expected. George Shultz wouldn't even let Arafat come to the UN. And then, finally, already desperate, Arafat had to threaten resignation in Geneva in order to provoke the Americans simply to "talk" to the PLO in Tunis. Of course, both Arafat and the US have had self-interest in making this appear a major development; but the underlying reality, here too, is that the US and the PLO have been in contact for

a long time by various means. Only the public theatrics has changed.

Now, four more months later even the much-touted "dialogue" with the Americans seems to be more shadow than substance. And there is mounting pressure, even from Palestinian moderates, to either find a way to force life into the discussions or to suspend them until a day when the Americans are ready for something more serious.

Indeed Professor Noam Chomsky, in a recent discussion of US foreign policy, noted that Israeli Defence Minister Rabin has privately spoken of his own glee that the US had got the PLO involved in such a "dialogue", for it actually suits Israel's purposes in buying the time needed to crush the Intifada and outmanoeuvre the PLO's diplomatic efforts.

When it comes to actual progress in transforming the occupied territories into a sovereign political entity—the much-discussed two-state solution—the PLO's achievements are very few. And this situation is not likely to change soon.

Arafat's historic gambit, successful endorsed by the PNC in Algiers at a time when politics seemed far more fluid than today, was taken of course in anticipation of new leadership in both Israel and the US. But in this most important regard it now appears that Arafat's timing was erroneous, his desperate gamble possibly ill-advised in retrospect.

Arafat's basic game-plan was that by finally playing the cards he always said he was holding in reserve for the right time—i.e., recognition of Israel and acceptance of the goal of a very small state in but a fraction of historic Palestine—the PLO could somehow get the new American administration to take bold steps with Israel, while at the same time fostering positive internal changes inside Israel.

But looking back all Arafat has really gotten from the Americans is an extended, rather half-hearted series of meetings in Tunis, a few visas for his emissaries, and vague words from George Bush that do little but parrot expressions used at Camp David or in previous speeches by American offi-

cials over the years. All the while, of course, the reality for Palestinians in the occupied territories is increased repression and death.

And while Palestinians around the world still rally wildly to the PLO and Arafat, the new president of the Palestinians, doesn't seem to want to realise that this is more a symbolic situation by a struggling people, not necessarily unending endorsement for himself and his personal entourage.

The PLO as a collective institution has come to represent the very concept of Palestine and that's why it commands the loyalty of Palestinians everywhere. Here too image and reality are out of sync. Actually there are many waiting in the wings of the Palestinian struggle—indeed the very Intifada that Arafat had managed to grab hold of and ride is in some ways a rebellion against the failures and inadequacies of the current generation of PLO leaders.

Furthermore, Arafat's major step in getting the Algiers PNC to endorse his approach last November was not accomplished without a price. Even his most loyal aides have already begun publicly warning that the "Clock is ticking on Arafat's peace initiative", to simply quote the April 18 headline in *The Washington Times* reporting on a press conference by Nabil Shaath in Washington.

It appears that one way Al-Fatah leaders are hoping to stay on top is to become abit self-critical while at the same time continuing to play footsie with Washington. Shaath, for instance, went on to say that "a year without progress should be the maximum investment before we should expect serious trouble...One of the trouble spots would be the difficulty to contain the ban on terrorism", Shaath noted in his talk to Washington journalists.

And in addition, Arafat's people are also beginning to paint a picture of potential catastrophe as a way of further pressuring the Americans to take steps that have increasingly become unlikely. "The apocalypse is really what everybody fears, the apocalypse is total conflagration that will involve the whole area, not just the occupied territories, with all the potential for chemical weapons, all the potential for long-range missiles" is how Shaath put it during his talk.

It's a very interesting political juggling act; and one that Shaath himself plays exceedingly well. But this attempt to be all things and masquerade very small political crumbs as full-course meals will sooner or later probably collapse onto itself. For the PLO under Arafat has no way back, only forward, and yet the path ahead is clearly blocked by very major barriers carefully erected by Israel and its friends.

Israelis, as they have done so successfully so many times before, are playing for time—the very time even Arafat loyalists are beginning to admit is fleeting for the conservatives who hold power in today's PLO. And each day it seems the PLO is trapping itself further in a futile and endless bargaining process over "elections", just as Yitzhak Shamir anticipated. Gone is the sensible talk of an "international conference" and "compre-

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