

## Round Three goes to Shamir—but just barely



UN Gen. Assembly

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## From



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## Washington

# The battle of Palestine rages in political arena

**T**HE great political struggle between the Yitzhak Shamir-led government of Israel and the PLO of Yasser Arafat has become bogged down in what can be described as traditional diplomacy at a time when the Intifada itself continues to escalate.

This basic situation is in itself something of a victory for Israel for day after day the Palestinian situation in the occupied territories deteriorates, world attention turns elsewhere, the Israelis get use to the new situation brought on by the Intifada, and the impetus towards the fulfilment of the dream of a truly independent Palestinian state stalls.

Moreover, with each passing day the grand historic peace initiative of Yasser Arafat fails to bear any eatable fruit, and calls for facing the serious predicament of the Palestinian struggle for independence grow ever more bold.

Last April when I first wrote likening the ongoing contest between Shamir and Arafat to a world-class, 15-round boxing match, the situation looked a bit brighter.

At the time I felt Round One had to be awarded to Arafat. He had captured the world's attention during the months of November and December and then capitalising on the stubborn American refusal to even allow him to address the United Nations in New York.

Even though doing so required an unprecedented resignation threat communicated to the Americans from far and

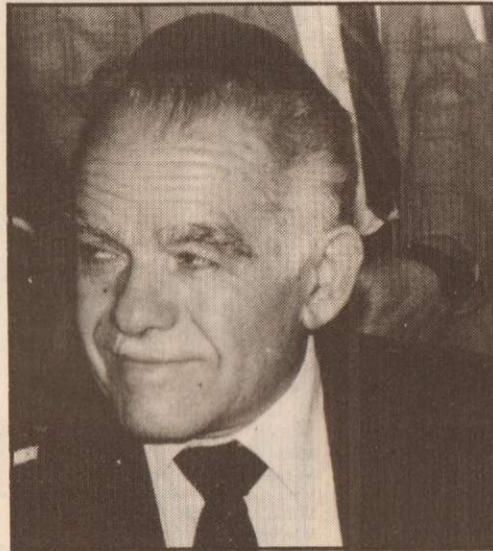
wide, Arafat has placed himself squarely at centre stage and was larger than life.

But Round Two I concluded had to be awarded to Shamir *on points* for how he manoeuvred during his visit to Washington. He deftly put forward his deceptive "election scheme" rehabilitating himself in the eyes of much of the press and at least some of the American Jewish establishments. In doing so he continually deflected pressures — from both at home and abroad — urging him to truly respond in similar grand style to the historic gestures coming from the Palestinian national leadership.

Here's how I summarised the situation back in early April:

"The boxing match can be thought of as beginning last November in Algiers with the revolutionary Palestine National Council meeting. That meeting was like the bell announcing the beginning of the fight. It not only allowed Arafat to take specific steps to formally recognise Israel and clearly enunciate the offer of a two-state solution to Israel. It also started a kind of clock of moderate credibility ticking for what can be thought of as the entire conservative wing of the PLO. If and when that clock winds down Arafat could finally find himself forced out or else be compelled by the internal dynamics within the PLO to retrench his exceedingly compromising positions."

Now, some five months later, Arafat's strength and credibility seem both to be running down a bit, though Shamir is also being



Shamir

exhausted by the struggle. In both cases it's beginning to appear that neither of them may have the staying power to last the full 15 rounds though they both still seem determined to try.

Just a few days ago Arafat was threatening a future Palestinian-sparked war and renewing his previous warnings that he could still return to another PNC, admits he has made little real progress, and calls for yet another major turn of direction. But for most analysts these were simply gestures on the part of the "old man" designed to put the Palestinian issue back on the political agenda as the UN General Assembly session drew close and in advance of this week's Baker-Shevardnadze meeting at Jackson Hole, Wyoming.



Arafat

In a contrary vein, as I write today the PLO president has been on a shuttle to Cairo helping Hosni Mubarak prepare for his upcoming visit to the UN and seemingly grasping at any straws in the wind by allowing talk of having the Egyptians "select" the Palestinians that maybe the Israelis will talk too under the auspices of the Egyptian government.

Recalling how things looked back in April when the boxing-match analogy was first initiated, the overall situation was a bit more tilted towards the PLO's initiatives.

"Round 1, fought out mostly during December and January, went to Arafat 'on points,'" I then wrote. "For those of you unfamiliar with the specifics of boxing, if there isn't a knockout, the judges decide the winner

based 'on points' awarded to each boxer during each round. If both fighters are still standing at the end of the fifteen three-minute rounds the judges tally the 'points' and determine a victory."

At that time, as it looked to me "Arafat manoeuvred the PNC with a virtuoso performance. He then capitalised on George Shultz's petulant refusal to even allow him to come to address the United Nations in New York by capturing the spotlight of world attention in Geneva as few have ever done before. Then Arafat deftly manoeuvred for weeks, finally feeling compelled to threaten his own resignation, all in order to get Washington to reverse course and at least begin a 'dialogue' with the PLO. After that Arafat orchestrated recognition for the

embryonic state of Palestine all around the world from more countries than recognise Israel."

But now much of the talk about the new "State of Palestine" has faded, the PLO's attempts to be seated in various UN bodies with full rights of statehood have largely collapsed, and the 'dialogue' with America conducted in Tunis has proved unproductive (at best), possibly deceptive (at worst).

Of course there are some countervailing successes as well. Arafat has been received in some capitals as head of state and is scheduled to soon be on his way to his first visit to Japan. The Intifada has proved more durable and resilient than most had expected. And Arafat managed to get through the Fatah congress without much visible damage, though insiders are well aware that many of Arafat's own candidates were slighted and passed over. This was especially the case with Nabil Shaath — the Fatah congress' big loser — who has been serving as Arafat's personal envoy in pushing the peace strategy.

We remain though in the early rounds of this historic political battle, one now being fought out through the personalities and policies of Shamir and Arafat. Yet the depth of the Palestinian Intifada coupled with the ongoing support from various quarters around the world gives the Palestinians reason for hope and courage.

Still, Round Three goes to Yitzhak Shamir — even if just barely and again "on points."

His great success has been to keep much of the world talking about his "elections" scheme all these months, putting Arafat on the defensive and deflecting attention away from the Intifada itself.

Now Shamir — cleverly operating through Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin — has got the Egyptians reinvolved and focused attention on the unlikely possibility that somehow the Egyptians will be able to play the matchmaker. But both parties, both Shamir and Arafat, need to give the impression of movement, the illusion of serious hope, and so the dance continues.

In reality there is little they could agree on if they were to come together, hence the illusion of forward motion becomes the goal in itself.

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If the Americans say no Arafat's claims for progress and his backing of the "American dialogue" will seem highly questionable.

The upcoming round then is likely to be fought much more quickly and much more intensely than Round Three. And the results are likely to be known just a few weeks down the road.