

(WASHINGTON — June 1990)

YASSER Arafat, the President of Palestine even though he has not been in any part of his country for over 20 years, and Yitzhak Shamir, the wiry former terrorist turned, Mossad agent, turned, successor to Menachem Begin, are clearly engaged in the final struggle of their lives.

Moreover, each of these men has become a much larger than life paradigm for a whole generation of Palestinians and Israelis — aging generation of protagonists who first attempted to totally negate the other and now, in their final years, are attempting to outrun and exhaust the other.

Played out publicly on the world's diplomatic stage, as well as behind-the-scenes by the intelligence apparatus of both the Israeli government and the PLO, this struggle pits against each other these two men, both small in physical stature but political giants, in what is likely to be a struggle to the death rather than one of eventual reconciliation.

To follow this ongoing battle in this column I've been using the analogy of a 15-round heavy-weight boxing match. The opening bell was back in the last months of 1988 with Arafat's decision to play his final cards — recognition of Israel within the 1967 boundaries in exchange for a Palestinian mini-state.

Round 4 has been a very extended and bloody one. And for that reason I'm dealing with it in three parts. The first part was published on June 13, went into the previous rounds outlining how Arafat won the first, only to loose the next two.

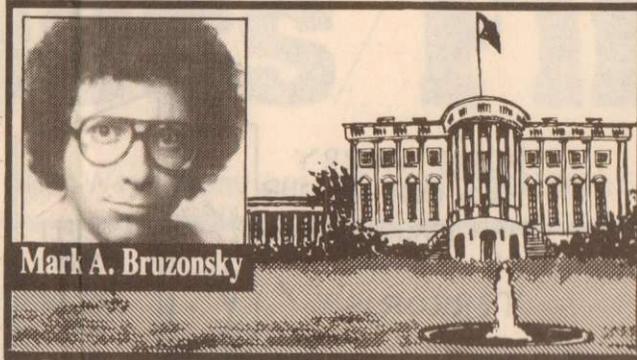
This part looks at the Shamir elections plan as a Trojan Horse purposefully designed to put Arafat in a very difficult and very tricky political situation while preventing any progress towards a real Palestinian State.

And the final part, next week, looks at the various errors Arafat has made over the past year.

Round 4 has been entirely fought out in the context of what was first the Mubarak Plan, then the Baker Plan — plans which themselves evolved out of the Shamir Plan which is precisely why they have failed.

For Shamir the basic goal has been very simply to buy more time, avoid key decisions, exhaust both the Intifada and the PLO, further consolidate Israel's hold over all the territory west of the Jordan River, and await new

From



Washington

The great struggle—Round 4 (part II)

Elections conspiracy

developments and opportunities.

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Shamir had watched his mentor Menachem Begin upend the last movement towards a Palestinian State back in 1977 shortly after the new "human rights" oriented American President had actually called for a "Palestinian homeland", the superpowers had issued a joint statement, and an international peace conference seemed on the horizon.

Begin then struck with his "autonomy plan" in public while behind-the-scenes encouraged Egyptian President Sadat to steer his own course. President Carter, and his Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, held their ground at first; but soon Begin had them right when he wanted them. And the Egyptian-Israeli separate peace was the result, with nothing but sweet words for the unconsulted Palestinians.

The "Shamir Plan" for Palestinian elections is of the same genre as Begin's "auton-

omy plan"; and it has had much the same result. Shamir coopted the public relations terrain, twisted the debate, grabbed the headlines. And like Begin he then held firm to his real goal — preventing a Palestinian State and ensuring Israeli control over all the territory west of the Jordan.

In this sense Round 4 had been fought out in the context of a kind of "elections conspiracy" — "conspiracy" because without

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the active support of other Shamir himself wouldn't have been able to twist the issues as he has.

For Arafat, being able to project even an illusion of progress has gradually taken over from the original goal of catalysing a major political breakthrough. Having played the very "final cards" he had for a decade insisted he could not play until he would for sure get something tangible in return, Arafat has grown increasingly desperate to keep breathing life into his assertion that he actually knows where he is going rather than just swimming along with the tide.

Why did Arafat play his "final

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cards" in the first place? It was partially the result of grossly overly optimistic advice — coming from a variety of close advisers, and some new Jewish friends fronting for Israel's Labour Party such as Rita Hausner — partly the perceived necessity resulting from the Intifada itself, and partly the timing of a new President in Washington about to take power.

Once the Intifada erupted the PLO had to play a bit of a

catch-up game. Arafat critics insist that the Intifada was mostly home-grown, itself the result of building frustrations only with Israeli expansion and intransigence and the PLO has no role in it.

And so, during the past year a kind of informal conspiracy has evolved out of the Israeli-US attempt to quell the Intifada with the resurrected notion of elections in the occupied territories.

The conspiracy has in a novel way linked the moderate Republicans in the Bush administration, Israel's Labour Party, the moderate pro-American regimes with Egypt in the forefront, and

Yasser Arafat's core of the PLO.

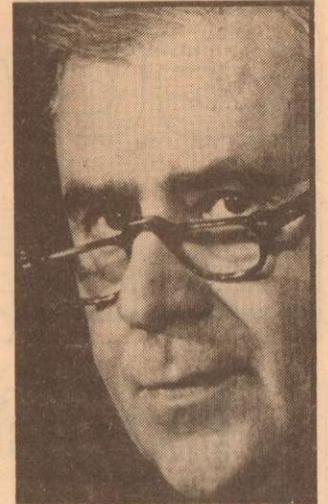
And the goal for all the parties has been pretty much the same — to portray an illusion of political progress as a substitute for the realities of political gridlock in hopes that illusion itself can bring pressures for changes in reality.

With a serious political settlement still far beyond reach, keeping the "peace process" at least credible if not potent became the more short-term goal of all the parties to the conspiracy, none of whom had a blueprint they were able to assert beyond Sharon's grudging and duplicitous offer.

But to keep this political charade itself credible either the Israeli coalition government had to be "pushed" into some kind of quasi-acceptance of the plan initially named for Mubarak and then reincarnated as the Baker initiative. Or else the government in Israeli had to be changed with the Labour Party put back in charge.

The Mubarak-Baker Plan had always had much more to do with imagery than actual substance. For even if successful it only would have delayed any attempt to deal with the real issues by simply bringing about talks in Cairo that the Israelis would have insisted be focused only on elections in the occupied territories and a long drawn-out process of autonomy.

Still, for the various parties involved, something elusive and



Cyrus Vance

nearly illusory was far preferable to admitting stalemate and dealing with escalating pressures to return to new forms of confrontation.

And so, for the Americans the strategy offered the perception that there was "progress" being made in the peace process.

For the Egyptians, there was the same plus the hope that Cairo would continue to be perceived as pivotal to American diplomacy in the Mid-east, and thus deserving of more American attention and money.

For the Israeli centre — Labour Party still at the helm though now with an advanced case of arteriosclerosis — there was the chance of coming back to power and discrediting the Israeli right.

And for Yasser Arafat there was the hope that if he could somehow just show progress, that his huge gamble could be said to be paying off and he could minimise the danger of opposition in the PLO.

But now, two and a half years into the Intifada, and a year and a half after Arafat's dramatic move in Geneva, the whole "peace process" has fizzled.

Arafat himself has been knocked up in the ring, Palestinian despair rising like a chorus.

But both Shamir and Arafat have been saved by the bell ending Round 4 and sending them back to their corners for consultations and recuperation as they prepare for the bell to begin again.