

## The great struggle—Part III

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# Arafat's big mistake

THOSE of you who follow this column regularly will be familiar with the "Great Struggle" in which Yitzhak Shamir and Yasser Arafat go after each other, round after round.

Going back to the opening bell when Arafat's came forward with his gambit recognising Israel and renouncing "terrorism" (late in 1988), I have been analogising this historic struggle to that of a 15-round heavy-weight boxing match.

Past columns, of course, considered the struggle at earlier stages, in earlier rounds if you will.

The round just finished, #4, was a very extended and bloody one. And this is the final part of a series summing up how this important Round has been fought out — entirely in the context of what was initially called the Shamir Plan, then got metamorphosed a bit into the Mubarak Plan, and finally temporarily collapsed as the Baker Plan.

Round 4 was such a convoluted and extended Round because Shamir was basically successful in foisting upon us all his "election plan."

First of all he co-opting the newspaper and TV discussion, twisting these away from talk about the Intifada and Palestinian statehood. Then Shamir turned the tables on his Labour Party partners showing them that his Likud is far more entrenched in power in Israel than they have ever wanted to admit.

In the first part of this series, a few weeks ago, I looked back at the earlier Rounds outlining how Arafat had won the first only to lose the next two.

The second part then went on to examine the core issue over which Round 4 was fought — Shamir's "elections conspiracy," a plan aided by both the Americans and Egyptians — for their own reasons — and a plan purposefully designed to put Arafat in a very tricky political situation



Yasser Arafat

while preventing any progress towards a real Palestinian state.

In the end, Shamir wins Round 4 because his elections plan has been quite a success in causing further delay and confusion, as was the focus of Part II. Shamir also wins this Round because in general he makes far fewer mistakes than Arafat, as this is the focus of this concluding part.

Make no doubt about it, Arafat is a world-class politician. Furthermore, he has uniquely come to symbolise the Palestinian struggle. He juggles his supporters and benefactors with amazing agility. And he has managed to survive beyond nearly everyone's expectations.

Still, Arafat has serious weaknesses which have plagued him for some time and which emerge as serious liabilities in this historic struggle in which he has been matched with a fitting opponent, a man of similar physical stature who has also devoted his life to his own cause.

Among Arafat's major weaknesses is that his choice of representatives has been extremely uneven. He has chosen some excellent people over the years; but this has been overshadowed by his choice of cronies and yes-men in too many crucial positions — including what could have been, and what should have been, a key post here in Washington that has been held for the past 15 years

by two unqualified persons, Hatem Hussein and Hassan Rahman.

Additionally, Arafat has still not learned, after so many years of experience, how to speak to the crucial American audience. He insists on using his broken and inadequate English, rather than being translated by a first-class English-speaker, as many world leaders from Gorbachev to Ortega do with great dignity and success.

Furthermore, Arafat usually gets distracted during interviews in English with the American press, clearly not preparing himself minimally as he should. Indeed, his performance on the important NBC *Meet The Press* Sunday television late last year was awful.

But worse than these naggingly persistent mistakes, while Arafat seems to be a master of inter-Arab and inter-Palestinian affairs, the other side of that coin is that he remains shallow in his appreciation of what is what and who is who within Israel and the Jewish world. Time and time again Arafat seems to lack an awareness of just who he is dealing with when it comes to the Jewish world.

A few years back, for instance, when he met with the Jewish delegation of five in Stockholm, Sweden, Arafat sadly elevated Rita Hauser to international visibility.

Hauser — a front person for elements in both the Republican Party and Israel's Labour Party — then used her new contacts with the Palestinian leadership, and her new-found and undeserved credibility, against the Palestinians. First she encouraged Arafat to make his groveling statements, one after the other. Then she portrayed the US-PLO "dialogue" in Tunis as a breakthrough. And then she pushed and cajoled Arafat towards accepting the Shamir elections approach and for a while even tried to get the Palestinians to accept "autonomy" rather

than independence.

In another example, this one at the time of the last Palestine National Council meeting, a representative from the Jewish lobby in Washington, masquerading as a writer and researcher, was invited and pampered by the PLO, while real American Jewish and Israel friends were either overlooked or discouraged from attending.

It has also been strongly rumoured that the murder of Abu Jihad was set by an Israeli female who had penetrated PLO security through many visits to Tunis and Abu Jihad's home.

Most crucial of all, however, and the reason Arafat has been left so bloodied by Round 4, is that he allowed himself to get trapped in the political quicksand of Shamir's "elections conspiracy." And he has yet to extricate himself from this serious mistake in political judgement.

Allowing the Shamir "election plan" to take root — a political Trojan Horse actually designed to smother the Intifada and buttress American support — is

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beyond doubt Arafat's greatest error of the past few years.

From inception the plan was craftily designed — with the help of State Department and White House officials as well as Henry Kissinger — to buy time through political obfuscation and semantic chicanery. The Intifada had thrown Israel off balance and seriously damaged Israel's public image. The "elections conspiracy" was designed as Israel's remedy, as a new political offensive for Israel, one that sounded good but amounted to little.

And indeed the plan has worked to allow Shamir the time needed to get back on top. Furthermore, expect soon another chapter in this same election plan again designed to take back the political initiative and neutralise the pressures that have been growing between the US and Israel.

Sadly in retrospect, though it was foreseeable as it was happening as well, Arafat never needed to agree to play this kind of political game and to risk squandering the gains of the Intifada.

Arafat could have stood upright in the beginning and simply said with a firm voice — a la Nelson Mandela — that the Palestinians will themselves hold their own elections when they are free to do so, that the PNC represents the Palestinians until then, and that the Palestinians had no interest in wasting more time discussing another Israeli-sponsored occupation election.

Instead, listening again to his American interlocutors — pro-Bush and pro-Labour Jewish advisers such as Hauser, Arafat allowed Shamir's "elections conspiracy" to grab the headlines and dominate diplomatic activity for nearly a year. In essence he wasted a very crucial diplomatic year — worse than wasted actually for all the while, of course, repression of the Intifada was stepped up and more Soviet Jews brought to Israel and Palestine.

So Round 4 has ended with Arafat on the ropes and Shamir making a bit of a comeback. Both fighters are visibly tiring; and yet the fight still has many rounds yet to go.

