

FOR many months the slugfest has gone on now. Not that long ago, Yitzhak Shamir was on the ropes being pounded both by his political foes in the Labour Party and on the extreme Israeli Right.

But this lengthy, bloody, round ends with Yasser Arafat being beaten as the bell sounds.

You will recall that when I first began to write about the Arafat-Shamir struggle analogised in the form of a heavy-weight 15-round boxing match — back in the early months of last year — I noted that it was likely to be an extremely protracted, gruelling struggle.

So far, Arafat has won just one round, the first.

For those of you who need a bit of a refresher on American boxing, this doesn't mean he necessarily badly hurt his opponent, and certainly not that he knocked him down. It simply means that the panel of three judges at ringside which gives points to each fighter as the round progresses then 'awards' each indecisive round on the basis of these points.

As I wrote when I began this series, "The boxing match can be thought of as beginning last November in Algiers (that was November 1988) with the 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."

In the beginning of this historic political struggle pitting two long-time survivors and master politicians, Shamir and Arafat, the Bush administration was taking power in Washington. Arafat had decided the time had come. He came out swinging as never before, advised, erroneously in the judgement of this writer that something basically new could be expected from Washington.

Arafat was everywhere. In late 1988 there was the Stockholm meeting, then the fiasco over the visa which caused his New York visit to the UN to be aborted, then the special UN session in Geneva, and then the start of the US-Israeli "dia-

From



Washington

The great struggle — Round 4

logue."

This opening round was a tough one for Shamir, possibly caught off balance a bit by Arafat's energy and boldness, and pre-occupied at the time with internal Israeli politics.

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And so Round 1, fought out during November and December of 1988 and January of last year, went to Arafat on points.

"Arafat not only manoeuvred the PNC with a virtuoso performance," I wrote at the time in this column. "He then capitalised on George Shultz's petulant refusal to even allow him to come to address the UN 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 even as this historic fight began with such energy and vigour displayed by Arafat it was already beginning to be clear that image and reality were not in conformity.

The Palestinian declaration of

Statehood, even with partial recognition in so many world capitals, didn't really take hold either practically or psychologically. For many, Palestine was being born without arms and legs or at best retarded. For others, with the Israelis in the lead spreading the rumour, it was something of a still-birth.

And even with Arafat's elevation to "President" the PLO's reality remained pretty much what it was before — an exile group of Palestinians.

By round 2 Yitzhak Shamir had already regained his balance and composure. By the time he visited the US in early April of last year he was ready to counterattack.

"He has improved so much in person that I was shocked myself," one of America's most senior Jewish personalities — one who long ago, while serving in a cabinet post in the Carter administration, supported a two-state settlement — told me shortly after Shamir's trip. "His strength is getting obnoxious ... and the worst part of all this is that he's going to be staying around as Prime Minister for a long time."

That quote, in fact, was the opening paragraph in this column about round 2.

That same senior personality then went on to prophesise that in the upcoming Israeli political struggles Shamir would "lick the hell out of anybody from Labour which has no leadership now." And when asked about Bush,

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Shamir

this senior statesman's views were equally, uncharacteristically blunt: "Forget it. There is nothing in Washington today to count on. I am disappointed with Bush completely."

In a careful stroke co-ordinated at the time with the Americans and Egyptians, Shamir won round 2 by successfully putting forward his illusive elections peace plan."

Just as his mentor, Menachem Begin, had regained the public relations high-ground a decade before with his "autonomy plan," so now Shamir knew he too had to turn things around somehow.

Begin had succeeded in cutting the ground out from under the Carter administration efforts to move towards "comprehensive solution" and an "international peace conference" —

thereby setting the stage for Camp David and the separate peace with Egypt.

Now Shamir realised that public relations was far more important than actual substance and he managed to co-opt the headlines with a new variant of the old autonomy concept — one rewrapped with an "elections" coating.

Shamir's demeanour and appearance during his American visit were carefully fine-timed for maximum resonance and appeal — calmness, smiles, low-key language. Even columnists like Anthony Lewis got themselves entangled in Shamir's web writing pathetic pleas to the PLO not to reject Shamir's elections "offer."

A lot of this is forgotten, or overlooked now, but it was a crucial element in the historical evolution of contemporary Middle-east diplomacy. For ever since, and still today, the focus of diplomatic (and hence newspaper) attention has not been Palestinian independence, nor the Intifada, but rather some kind of talks about some kind of elections about some kind of autonomy.

And so, towards the end of last year, round 3 was also awarded to Shamir, but just barely. Arafat's strength and credibility seem both to be running down a bit, though Shamir is also being exhausted by the struggle," I wrote at the time. "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."

As round 3 came to an end much of the talk about the new "State of Palestine" had faded, the PLO's desperate attempts to be seated in various UN bodies with full rights of Statehood had largely collapsed, and the "dialogue" with America conducted in Tunis had proved unproductive at best, possibly deceptive at worst.

Yet there were countervailing successes for the Palestinians and for Arafat. The new President of Palestine had been received in many capitals sometimes as a Head of State, the Intifada had proved more a resilient than many had expected, and Arafat had managed to get through the Fatah Congress without much visible damage even though many of his personal choices for some key positions had been pushed aside.

As round 3 ended, Shamir was striking carefully conceived blows but Arafat's short arms (read "Palestinian weakness") made it difficult for his own blows to hit firmly.

Yet the overall political context itself, as round 3 came to an end, left everything still hanging, no clear winner yet in sight.

With these bits of background, history, and perspective, there's a lot more that needs to be said about the extended round 4 and about Yasser Arafat's growing difficulties.