

RUSH!

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TIME FOR ARAFAT TO GET SERIOUS ABOUT PEACE

When Yasser Arafat meets with President Bill Clinton on March 3 at the White House, the faltering Israeli-Palestinian peace talks will dominate the agenda. Much has changed since Arafat's first visit to the White House in September 1993 to sign the Declaration of Principles that launched the current round of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Those negotiations, initiated in a wave of enthusiasm, have stalled repeatedly and now proceed at a glacial pace.

Arafat himself is primarily at fault for the recent diplomatic deadlock and the declining prospects for a stable peace. He delayed signing an agreement on Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank city of Hebron for many weeks until he had extracted additional post-Hebron Israeli concessions, including a timetable guaranteed by Washington for three more partial Israeli military withdrawals that will leave Israel in control only of Jewish settlements and "specified military locations" by August 31, 1998. Arafat also continues to undermine the prospects for long-term peace by failing to root out anti-Israeli terrorism and to denounce terrorists unequivocally.

President Clinton should seize the opportunity to turn his meeting with Arafat into much more than a photo opportunity. Clinton should forcefully press Arafat to comply fully with his past commitments to clamp down on terrorism, halt his inflammatory rhetoric, and finally amend the Palestine Covenant, the charter of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), to delete calls for Israel's destruction. If Clinton fails to convince Arafat of the absolute necessity of complying with the terms of his past agreements with Israel, there will be little hope of reaching a final agreement, and the widely acclaimed peace "breakthrough" in Clinton's first term will unravel rapidly during his second term.

Arafat's flawed record. Arafat has proven to be an untrustworthy negotiating partner since the September 1993 signing of the framework agreement negotiated secretly in Oslo, Norway. He repeatedly has pocketed concrete Israeli concessions, such as troop withdrawals from most of Gaza and about 30 percent of the West Bank, in return for promises which too often have gone unfulfilled.

In direct contravention of the Oslo accords, Arafat's Palestinian Authority (PA) has permitted known terrorists to roam freely inside PA-controlled territory and has taken no action against 200 suspected terrorists identified to it by the Israeli government. It has failed to extradite 27 terrorists wanted by the Israeli government for crimes against Israelis, including at least six who continue to serve in the Palestinian security services. In addition, Arafat has expanded his police force far beyond the 30,000 permitted by the Oslo accords. The PA police, together with various internal security forces, now form an armed militia of up to 50,000 men. The PA already has violated the painstakingly negotiated Hebron agreement, signed January 15, which set the terms of Israeli military withdrawal from 80 percent of Hebron, the last major Palestinian city that had been under Israeli control. *The New York Times* reported that significantly more than the 400 PA policemen allowed under the agreement were deployed inside Hebron, armed with more than the allotted 200 pistols and 100 rifles.

Arafat also has raised the ire of Israelis through bellicose rhetoric that raises strong doubts about his peaceful intentions. He repeatedly has called for a *jihad* (holy war) to liberate Jerusalem and has described slain Palestinian terrorists as martyrs. When Israel opened a second exit to an archaeological tunnel in Jerusalem last September 23, Arafat falsely charged that the tunnel exit defiled Muslim holy sites located 250 yards away. Official Palestinian television and radio stations subsequently incited his followers and helped orchestrate civil violence that claimed the lives of 15 Israelis and 59 Palestinians. In the course of the September carnage, PA police fired on Israeli troops, thereby calling into question a cornerstone of the Oslo accords: Palestinian renunciation of violence.

Rather than assuage Israeli anxieties on that score, Arafat has reinforced Israeli suspicions by failing to purge the Palestinian Covenant of references to Israel's destruction. Despite the fact that changes in the covenant were required by the 1993 Oslo accords and by the Oslo II agreement signed at the White House in September 1995, Arafat has failed to follow through on his commitment. The Palestinian National Council voted in April 1996 to amend the covenant in principle but referred the matter to a committee which, since then, has done nothing. Arafat's foot-dragging on this and other commitments has strengthened suspicions in Israel that he is engaged in strategic deception and will revert to the "war process" once he has extracted everything he can from the "peace process." In fact, Israeli intelligence analysts are increasingly concerned that Arafat is preparing for another violent confrontation, perhaps even on a larger scale than the September 1996 civil riots.

Given the high level of distrust between Israelis and Palestinians and the declining credibility of the Oslo process, the prospects for a final settlement are growing ever dimmer. The final status talks, slated to begin on March 17, are likely to bog down quickly over the contentious issues of border demarcation, Palestinian statehood, Jerusalem, water rights, and the future status of Israeli settlers and Palestinian refugees. Consideration of these thorny issues was postponed until now on the assumption that the two sides could build confidence in each other while sorting out the less difficult issues related to interim Palestinian self-rule.

But this confidence-building experiment has turned into an Israeli nightmare. More Israelis have been killed by Palestinian terrorists in the three and one-half years since the Oslo agreement was signed than in the entire decade before it was signed. Arafat's spotty compliance record has weakened the Israelis' willingness to make additional risky concessions and helped propel Benjamin Netanyahu into the Prime Minister's office in Israel's May 1996 elections. Netanyahu has warned that future Israeli withdrawals will be carried out only on the basis of reciprocity. Further Palestinian backsliding therefore will doom the peace negotiations.

Needed: Firm U.S. pressure on Arafat. To salvage the foundering peace negotiations, President Clinton must warn Arafat that the Oslo process is doomed to failure unless Israelis see that it yields peace with security, not just a one-sided Israeli withdrawal. Clinton should press Arafat to comply scrupulously with the terms of the interim agreements already reached. This means that Arafat must crack down relentlessly and systematically on Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) and other terrorist groups opposed to peace with Israel, arrest known terrorists, and extradite those wanted by Israel. Arafat also must cease his inflammatory rhetoric and amend the Palestinian Covenant to prove that he can be trusted to carry out his commitments.

To demonstrate that he is serious, Clinton should warn Arafat that American aid to the Palestinians, which has been pouring in at the rate of \$100 million per year, will be cut off unless Arafat delivers on all of his commitments under the accords. If Clinton fails to use this leverage, Congress should step in and exercise strict congressional oversight over American aid under the terms of the 1994 Middle East Peace Facilitation Act, which set aside prohibitions against U.S. funding for the PLO. Absent American pressure, Arafat most likely will continue to do as little as possible; but unless he complies fully with the terms of the interim peace accords, Israel will have little reason to take the increasingly dangerous risks inherent in a final settlement.

American diplomatic pressure encouraged Prime Minister Netanyahu's pragmatic signing of the Hebron accord. Now it is time for "evenhanded" American pressure on Yasser Arafat to secure full compliance with that agreement and the Oslo accords. If the Clinton-Arafat meeting produces little but a photo opportunity and another handshake, the chances of reaching a stable Israeli-Palestinian peace will continue to evaporate.

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