



## Arafat's Moment of Truth

**By Michael Gottsegen**

The announcement of new elections in Israel brings Arafat to his long postponed moment of truth.

The polls show that, if the election was held today in Israel, either Netanyahu or Sharon would easily beat Barak. Barak's unpopularity has many causes, but the most important is his unflinching support of the peace process that has continued even in the face of recurrent provocations from the Palestinian side. Despite the worsening situation on the ground, Barak has continued to resist the demands from the Israeli right and center that he "unleash the IDF," believing that doing so would surely torpedo any chance of returning to the negotiating table. For this same reason, Barak has refused to form a national unity government with Likud because he is unwilling to accept their demand that he back away from the proposals that were on the table at Camp David. To date, Barak has been unwilling to give up all hope that a settlement with the Palestinians is possible. Alas, Barak's continuing support for the Oslo process has made him increasingly unpopular as the Al Aqsa Intifadah has come to look more like an unending guerilla war and Arafat like less of a partner. Luckily for Barak and for those in the peace camp, the election will not be held until May at the earliest.

Arafat's moment of truth is now. If he wants to see the creation of a Palestinian state in his lifetime, he had better seize the opportunity to cut a deal with Barak. Otherwise Barak will be defeated in the upcoming elections along with any chance that the Palestinians will realize even a small fraction of their aspirations in the foreseeable future. Barak has offered Arafat and the Palestinians more than any previous Israeli government has ever offered and much more than the government that takes office after Barak's defeat will offer. Presumably Arafat is aware of this and, hopefully, this will give him an incentive to find common ground with Barak before it is too late.

It is, of course, notoriously difficult to predict Arafat's moves or to get a precise fix on how he views any given situation. For all we know, Arafat may be calculating that his advantage lies in a Likud victory over Barak. He may reason that if Sharon or Netanyahu comes to power and, as is quite likely, employs overwhelming force against the Palestinian populace, the Palestinians may be able to leverage the ensuing delegitimation of Israel in the court of world opinion so as to force a decision by the U.N. to deploy a multinational "protection force" in the West Bank and Gaza. Arafat might also believe that this U.N. deployment

will give him the cover he needs to declare a Palestinian state that the world will recognize as legitimate.

While this scenario is not utterly implausible, it is so close to wishful thinking that for the Palestinians to adopt a political position that presupposes this scenario's plausibility would be sheer folly. Politicians who act on the maxim that things must get worse before they can get better only insure that matters will in fact get worse. There is no guarantee they will ever get better. One would think that the Palestinians would have ample reason not to place themselves in a situation in which they must count on turning a Netanyahu or Sharon victory to their long-term advantage.

Arafat has declared time and again that he is committed to making the "peace of the brave." What might this mean? Bravery on the battlefield of war means risking life and limb for the sake of a noble and worthy end. Bravery on the battlefield of peace is entirely different. It entails a willingness to take risks for the sake of peace, to compromise, to accept less than one wants. It also entails a willingness to control those elements in one's own camp that are enemies of peace and would do anything to insure it never comes about. To better understand what the peace of the brave might require of him in the present situation, Arafat would do well to consider the example of David Ben Gurion.

In 1947, Ben Gurion was in a position not dissimilar to Arafat's today. The U.N. had offered the Zionists a plan for the partition of Palestine that would grant the Jews less than half of what they had wanted, expected, and felt they deserved. God had promised the Jews the whole of the land and Lord Balfour had promised it again in 1917. But half of what had been originally promised by the British had been taken away to form the Hashemite kingdom of Transjordan, and now the U.N. was offering the Jews less than half of what remained. Moreover, according to the Partition Plan, the Jewish state would be composed of three barely contiguous and seemingly indefensible land areas. And the Old City of Jerusalem, the object of Jewish yearning for so many generations, was not even included in the area that was to come under Jewish sovereignty. For many Zionists, the U.N.'s offer was unjust and unacceptable. They argued vociferously that the Partition Plan should be rejected and that the Jews of Palestine should continue their military and diplomatic struggle until they achieved all that, in their view, justice demanded.

But Ben Gurion saw the matter differently. He, too, wanted the whole loaf and knew that in a perfect world the U.N. would have granted to the Zionists all that Lord Balfour had promised and justice demanded. And yet, Ben Gurion was a political realist. He understood that politics is the art of the possible and that partition was the best deal he could get. Unwilling to let an unachievable ideal become an obstacle in the way of achieving what was best under the circumstances, Ben Gurion prevailed upon his fellow Zionists to accept the compromise that the Partition Plan entailed.

If Ben Gurion had been a purist or an ideologue, he would have declared partition to be unjust and rejected it. Who knows what would have ensued if the Zionists had chosen the path of rejection? Perhaps they would have been able to secure a better deal a year or two later, but then again perhaps not. When the historical hour is ripe with potential and fraught with uncertainty, leaders must demonstrate a readiness to seize the moment, and not let the opportunity pass to secure half of their aims because of a preference for a dream that is most likely going to be elusive in the present circumstances.

The challenge that the Palestinians face today is akin to that faced by the Zionists in 1947. From Arafat's perspective, and from the perspective of many if not most Palestinians, what Barak placed on the table at Camp David is inadequate and far less than justice demands. Many Palestinians still believe they have an inalienable right to the whole of Palestine, and yet Barak offers them less than half of it. Even with regard to the West Bank and Gaza alone, many Palestinians feel that the terms offered by Barak are unacceptable. The land Israel would annex around Jerusalem would in effect split the West Bank into two largely non-contiguous parts. Moreover, Hatam al Sharif (the Temple Mount) and al Quds (Jerusalem), which the Palestinians regard as the symbolic center of their national identity, are not even included in the area that would come under Palestinian sovereignty.

For most Palestinians, the sheer injustice of what has been offered is palpable and an outrage. And what of the Palestinians' right of return to the land that they believe to have been theirs since time immemorial? For fifty years, Palestinians have lived by this dream and they measure any proposal to end the conflict against this sacred aspiration. By this standard, what Barak has offered seems neither generous nor just.

In 1947, the Revisionist Zionists rejected the U.N.'s partition proposal and vowed to fight on until their dreams were realized. Ben Gurion pursued a different path, believing that accepting the partition plan offered the Zionists the best deal they could get under the circumstances and that it was an acceptable offer, even if just barely. The opposition to Ben Gurion from the right was intense and militant. Many feared that a civil war between the Irgun and the Haganah would result if the Partition Plan was accepted.

But Ben Gurion was not to be deterred and in the end he prevailed. Not only did he show himself to be a consummate pragmatist by accepting the partition plan. He also showed real firmness of will when he acted forcefully to reign in his right flank and ordered the Haganah to shell the Irgun's gunrunner, the Altalena, in June of 1948 because he feared that the Irgun would use the weapons on board the ship to undermine the ceasefire with the Arabs. In the end, thanks to Ben Gurion's pragmatism and firmness, the State of Israel, though small and seemingly indefensible, was born, survived and prospered.

So far Arafat has not shown himself to be made of the same stuff as Ben Gurion, but the game is not yet over. So far Arafat seems to have too much of Hamlet in him or too much of the poker player. Either he cannot decide what to do, and temporizes, or he has decided not to accept anything less than a total victory. In fact, Arafat has many good reasons to reject Barak's offer, just as Ben Gurion had many good reasons to reject the partition plan. Arafat can reject Barak's offer, claiming that he has justice on his side. But if he continues to insist on having it all, he and his people will end up with nothing but thorns and thistles. If he chooses to keep his people in a stateless wilderness and to nourish them on quixotic dreams, one imagines that his people will find small comfort in the knowledge that they have right on their side when they have little else besides.

In the meantime, of course, time marches on. The ground shifts and the Al Aqsa Intifadah rages. Fatah is radicalized, the Tanzim are armed and Hamas terrorists -- whom the Palestinian Authority released from jail -- are carrying out attacks on civilian targets in Israel. Understandably, many Israelis are becoming increasingly less amenable to making the concessions that Barak had espoused in the name of peace with the Palestinians, and Barak's popularity plummets. New elections have been called. It may now be too late for the "peace of the brave." It may be that the Israeli public would now reject the terms of peace that Barak had offered to Arafat at Camp David even if Arafat were, at this late moment, to finally embrace them as a basis for settling the conflict. But then again, perhaps the Israeli center, which yearns for peace and seemed to be on the verge of accepting Barak's proposals in August, would overcome their skepticism and anxiety if Arafat were to respond positively, even at this late date, to the Camp David proposals for ending the conflict.

That Barak himself would respond positively if Arafat finally rose to the historical occasion seems clear enough. Barak has tied his political fortunes to making peace with the Palestinians and continues to bet on Arafat and the Palestinian Authority (albeit against increasingly long odds). What Arafat needs to understand is that cutting a deal with Barak is his last best hope for winning a secure and dignified future for his people. Accepting what Barak is offering means compromising the dream, but this is the way of the world. Those who insist upon a whole loaf when only a half is available will go hungry and must accept the blame.

We must hope against hope that Arafat will seize the moment and put the region back on the road to peace. Otherwise, he shall reap the whirlwind that might consume us all.

