

The Bush-Sharon scheme: Calling for Arafat's ouster

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A popular Middle Eastern joke insists President Bush's recent speech on a Palestinian state was delayed for a few days, waiting for a translation from the original Hebrew. The joke reflects Arabic anger that U.S. policy is driven by what the current Israeli leadership thinks is good for Israel. The joke also reflects a widespread media-driven perception that the most important point in Bush's speech was his call for Arafat's ouster.

Bush's criticism of the Palestinian leader makes Arafat's reelection almost a certainty, a development Bush and Sharon must have anticipated. If this was Sharon's plan, now adopted by Bush, then look for this development: Demanding his removal keeps a reelected Arafat in power so the inevitable suicide bombings continue, connecting Palestinians with ongoing terrorism. Next, Israel crushes all radical Islamic opposition (appealing to Bush's single-minded terrorism agenda). Then the new state of Palestine emerges as a collection of small, unconnected cantons under Israeli military supervision.

Arafat was allowed to return to the region in 1993 with the understanding that he would serve as Israel's local sheriff. He would keep the peace in population centers. In return he would have limited autonomy with his own flag, postage stamps, airport and limited civilian authority. Meanwhile, because this was a process and not an agreement, Israel would retain its illegal settlements and—in the interest of security—control all border crossings.

Arafat did not make a successful transfer from revolutionary hero to public official, not only because that shift is never easy but also because he was forced to ally himself with Israel and the American CIA in order to perform his duties as sheriff. Neither Israel nor the American government gave priority to Palestinian economic viability or to the freedom of Palestinians. Israel's security was always the driving force behind American policy. This arrangement, designed for U.S. and Israeli

consumption, did nothing for the Palestinian people. The benefits went largely to members of Arafat's leadership team, who built elaborate homes next to refugee slums and drove big cars carrying documents that whisked them through Israeli checkpoints.

Suicide bombing emerged as a response that was aimed at both Israel and Arafat's rule. Desperate acts of a people without hope, suicide bombings are designed to change public opinion, but in this instance they were doomed to failure. Struggling to put a positive spin on these attacks, Palestinians have tried to argue that Israel's military occupation is a form of state terrorism, because they are violent attacks on a civilian population. It should have been obvious that this perspective would be lost on a public that recoils in horror at explosions that kill children in shopping malls.

Any hope that this strategy could succeed ended on September 11. As Henry Siegman wrote recently in the *International Herald Tribune*, "Only someone entirely out of touch with reality could have failed to understand that after September 11, continued Palestinian terrorism against a civilian population is an absolutely predictable prescription for Palestinian disaster."

In a sign that media govern how the public responds to public statements, Siegman, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, observed that Bush's call for Arafat's ouster completely overshadowed the speech's strong reminder that the U.S. still considers the West Bank and Gaza to be "occupied" rather than "disputed," Israel's term of choice. Siegman added that after calling the Palestinian Authority "corrupt," Bush also said Israel's "corrupting" occupation must end, "as must the suffering and impoverishment of the Palestinian people."

Media reports and analysis pushed the Arafat-ouster segment of Bush's speech, largely ignoring parts not congenial to Israel. Ariel Sharon doesn't have to write Bush's speeches; he only has to make sure the public understands them from Israel's perspective. The American media comply with this strategy.

Palestinian leaders, looking toward a post-Arafat era, have begun to cautiously explore pragmatic ways of relating to their own constituencies. In doing so they have not yet mastered the skill of playing to both a local and a broader audience. "You have to appeal to people's self-interest, in terms of what works and what doesn't work," argues Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian legislator. Ashrawi was one of 55 Palestinian intellectuals and journalists who recently published an appeal that called

for a reassessment of military operations that target civilians in Israel—not in the West Bank or Gaza—and urged those behind them to “stop pushing our youth to carry out these operations.”

As James Bennett noted in the *New York Times*, “The appeal clearly stopped short of a blanket condemnation of all suicide bombings.” But the open letter did say that the attacks were not “producing any results except confirming the hatred, malice and loathing between the two peoples.” Good advice at home, but for broader consumption it was not nearly a strong enough statement against suicide bombing, especially after September 11.