

A New Kosovo

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Prime Minister Ehud Barak has managed to convince the Israeli public that "we have no partner for peace today.". This claim is based on the following line of reasoning: Barak, determined to "leave no stone unturned" in his quest for peace, offered the Palestinians "far-reaching concessions" - the kind that they had never before received from Israel and which they will never receive again. However, after considering those proposals, at the moment of truth, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat declined to sign his name on the dotted line, rudely rejected the hand extended in peace, ignited the flames of violence, thus causing any chance of achieving a Palestinian-Israeli peace treaty to go up in smoke.

The rightists add one more piece to this jigsaw puzzle with the argument that the terrorist Palestinians are once more thirsty for Jewish blood, that they never wanted peace to begin with, and that all they ever wanted was to grab as much as they could get in the interim phases and then to go to war.

Meanwhile, leftists are offering the lame explanation that the disturbances are nothing but convulsions that were to be expected during the end phase of the peace negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and that the Palestinians are merely trying to "enhance their positions" before signing a peace treaty with Israel. This lack of clarity regarding the Palestinians' motives is compounded by a total lack of understanding among the members of the Israeli public with regard to the Palestinians' political goals. The hate-mongering video cassettes and the photographs of the lynching of the two Israeli soldiers in Ramallah are reinforcing primordial anxieties, while Arafat is being described as a relentless aggressor whose sole aim is to harm Jews.

Barak has deployed his full powers of persuasion to effectively silence any alternative explanation that could change the overall impression.

Let us imagine for just a moment that Barak's proposal, even if it

has outstripped all previous Israeli proposals in its far-reaching scope, and even if it includes recognition of an independent Palestinian state, is still unacceptable to the Palestinians. The municipal boundaries of Jerusalem, whose area is equal to almost a fifth of the entire West Bank, split the West Bank into a northern and a southern sector. Together with the Gaza Strip, the future Palestinian state would thus consist of three distinct, geographically separated areas.

Barak's "clusters of Jewish settlements" would be spread over an area measuring tens of thousands of acres and would be buttressed with bypass highways, security buffer zones and military installations. Even if there are "only" four or five such "clusters," the upshot would be the creation of a State of Palestine that would consist of isolated strips of land, which would lack its own army, and be completely economically dependent on Israel.

In Palestinian eyes, this "package deal," which is being presented as the "peace agreement that will put an end to the century-old Palestinian-Israeli dispute," is nothing but a trap. The wedding gown that seamstresses Barak and American President Bill Clinton have sown has massive holes in it. Arafat would be taking an enormous risk if he settled for it. The possibility of his being murdered to "protect the honor of the family" cannot be ruled out.

This kind of interpretation underlines the fact that the Palestinians feel they are waging an unavoidable war. But what are the goals and means of that war? Lacking a real army and lacking any chance of persuading the Arab states to go to war against Israel, the Palestinians have no military option - not even a Lebanese-style one. Apparently, they have decided on a Kosovo-style option, with Israel cast in the role of Yugoslavia and with the goal being the generation of massive international pressure that would force Israel to withdraw from all territories occupied in the wake of the Six Day War and to dismantle every Jewish settlement in those territories.

In Kosovo, as in Kuwait within the context of the confrontation with Iraq, and as in other examples from the past decade, the West came to the conclusion that it would have to exert pressure, including military pressure, on the aggressor nation because of the combination of two factors. The first was the intolerable suffering being inflicted by a regular army on civilians, as revealed in all its ugliness by world media. The second was the threat to vital Western geopolitical interests.

These two factors are at Arafat's disposal. Tens of thousands of Palestinian youths are prepared to die at any moment in front of the television camera and the Palestinian issue could create such unrest in the Arab states that the stability of the pro-Western regimes of certain key states in the Middle East could be seriously jeopardized. That unrest would constitute a grave threat to the West because it could destabilize the world's crude oil industry and could reverse the progress of the West's pet project: globalization.

This line of interpretation would stop people from seeing Arafat as the village idiot of the Middle East. Instead, it would cast him in the role of a determined, realistic leader who knows how to make effective use of the meager options available to him. Furthermore, this line of interpretation would confirm Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz's assessment that Israel must now look forward to a protracted struggle: The Palestinians' decision to rely on gunfire is a strategy and is neither a passing fancy nor an attempt to commit collective, national suicide while taking their enemies down to the grave with them