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המשנה למנהל הכללי

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אל: המוכ"ל
מאת: איתן בנצור

רצ"ב מצא נא דו"ח שיחת שינבאום-ערפאת מה-12 דנא שהגיעני היום.

ב בר כהן,
איתן בנצור

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העתק: שה"ח
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מר נריה - יועץ מדיני לרוה"מ

לגוה פקידה
ש"ת צאק
2.6.94



Stanley K. Sheinbaum

FAX TRANSMITTAL

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Stanley K. Sheinbaum

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MEMO: FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: MEETING WITH YASSER ARAFAT, TUNIS, 7:30 p.m.,
JANUARY 12, 1994

DATE: January 21, 1994

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. K. Sheinbaum", written over the date field.

I spent about an hour and fifteen minutes alone with Arafat at his Tunis office where I had been twice before. The most recent time was when I interviewed him for the *NPQ/Los Angeles Times* Syndication partnership in March 1993 in which interview he issued a call for elections in the territories.

I expected more time with him but the meeting was cut short. (See below.) I had decided to see him because as so many have put it I am one of the few Americans with whom he might talk openly and even listen, and what with the Palestinian/Israeli negotiations on dead center I thought it was worth the trip.

My general plan was two fold. First, I wanted to describe how the dynamics of the situation including some of the things he was doing were creating a situation that was working against him. Second, I wanted to discuss the criticisms of his Palestinian supporters, both friendly and hostile. (Sadly we never got to that.) Prior to the visit I spent several days in Jerusalem to meet with members of the government to obtain their perspectives and then in the West Bank with Palestinians across the political spectrum excluding Hamas. Arafat was most cordial, but I found him very laid back and unresponsive in the first ten minutes or so. There were times when his responses became confused and he would repeat himself especially on matters where I was trying to make a point.

Because the issue of the size of Jericho had become one of the three or four sticking points in the negotiations and because I felt I could use the Jericho question for a broader point I wanted to make I opened with it. I said I did not understand why he was letting that issue help create a sense that he was stalling. In the ensuing six or seven months the PLO would have jurisdiction over the entire area anyway. So why the focus on it now?

Further I questioned his asking for a larger area of Jericho for the interim agreement when that area would include six settlements. Regarding this latter point

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of settlements I pointed out that it was too soon for the Israelis to themselves arrive at a clear position on the three most major items of the overall negotiations, that is, Jerusalem, statehood, and the settlements generally, especially in the West Bank. To keep pressing on the larger Jericho area now when that discussion would force Israel to deal with the settlements issue before they clearly were ready to--or wanted to--and thus were going against the September 13th agreement.

Arafat then took me by surprise when he made it absolutely clear that all he is asking of Jericho now does not include any settlements. Besides which, he claimed--and I was not in a position to argue the point--those really were not settlements, but rather farms in which the Israeli farmers did not themselves live. He pulled out several maps and showed me that the area that he has been asking for did not include the settlements--at least according to his map. My problem then was that almost everything I had just picked up in Israel, both from official Israelis and from Palestinians, loyal to Arafat or not, they all felt that Arafat's Jericho demands did indeed include those six Jericho settlements. I even asked him if he was lying to me. (He did not throw me out of the office.) Nevertheless, I felt somewhat impeached by his claim that he had carefully excluded those settlements from his demands for Jericho now. Further, he said, even if they were settlements in the sense of the Gaza or the West Bank settlements why couldn't the Israeli military be allowed to protect those settlers in the same way that the Palestinians had already agreed to for the settlements in the Gaza. He also said that he was expecting that was to be the arrangement for a good part of the West Bank settlements.

In fact, that led to a discussion of "withdrawal" versus "redeployment". He purported that right along he was not opposed to "redeployment" provided the mission of the remaining troops was to protect those Jewish settlers where it was agreed that the Palestinians could not effectively do so. Ergo in that sense he was for deployment *within* withdrawal, and he made much of that phrase.

With regard to needing a larger piece of Jericho now rather than smaller he also said he had to have room to settle Palestinian refugees. Gaza was no longer possible, it being already over crowded.

Both in the discussion about "redeployment" and in subsequent discussion about the borders and the security checks he constantly iterated and reiterated that his demands were designed to protect the dignity of the Palestinian people. This discussion became almost the main thread and contention point throughout the meeting. I kept trying to explain that what he thought was protecting the dignity of his people was in fact rhetoric that was having the opposite effect. Not only among Israelis, but also among Palestinians there is the constant complaint that his demands for special arrangements at the borders, or for security, were in their minds designed to build into the interim agreement aspects of sovereignty and/or statehood even though the Declaration of Principles made it clear that those kinds of matters

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were for five years hence. I told him that the situation had gotten so that every time he mentioned his demands about security checks, or Israeli troops at the borders, or the various roads he explains it all in the context of the dignity of his people. That very phrase to almost all parties--and I emphasized all-- has come to mean some toehold on sovereignty or statehood now.

In some cases such as Elias Freij, the Mayor of Bethlehem, he explicitly asked me to pass on the message to Arafat using his own name that by thus implying statehood now, sometimes even explicitly, Arafat was jeopardizing the Israeli/Palestinian agreement and the Palestinians would be left without anything. Freij says he remains a loyalist to Arafat, but is clearly worried about this misplaced focus--i.e. dignity rationale.

With the Clinton/Assad summit then a half a week away I tried to impress on Arafat the danger that the Palestinians again could be left behind. There was already talk and some sense that the impending optimism about a Syrian deal was reducing the determination of many parties to complete the Palestinian accord. Even though all parties are increasingly accepting that if a comprehensive agreement--an absolute necessity for the region--is not achieved the increasing demands of Arafat would mark him as the spoiler and would thereby further weaken his bargaining hand. Unfortunately that sort of argument does not impress him.

At another point we got into a discussion about Prime Minister Rabin, and Arafat allowed very strongly that he does not think that Rabin is serious about bringing the Palestinian track to a conclusion. I expressed considerable dismay at his perception of where Rabin is. I made it clear that Rabin was jeopardizing the stability of his government by fighting so hard for the agreement--especially against the Likud elements. The failure to resolve the impasse with the Palestinians could surely mean the downfall of Rabin's government. He just kept disagreeing about Rabin, and none of my arguments seemed to register.

(In fact a number of times especially on this Rabin factor and about Arafat's dignity rhetoric we found ourselves actually shouting at each other.)

I had brought with me a Rabin quote from Monday's *Jerusalem Post* to the effect that if Arafat was as worried as he seems to be that no investment funds were forthcoming from the Europeans, he, Rabin, felt that Arafat should understand that as long as he was injecting demands with implications now for statehood or sovereignty those kinds of monies would never be forthcoming. Oddly, Arafat himself had that very same article on his desk and pointed it out to me as if it were Rabin who was standing in the way of the flow of development monies.

When I later relayed this part of the conversation by phone to Nabeel Shaath, the lead Palestinian negotiator in Taba, he who is as frustrated as anybody, told me that

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what I was witnessing between Arafat and Rabin was part of the circular loop that somehow had been created between the two of them. Obviously, there never had been much love lost between them, but now with the negotiations in progress every time Arafat ups the statehood ante, so to speak, Rabin then applies the brakes in Taba--causing Arafat to get even more angry. Shaath advised not taking this expressed anger about Rabin too seriously. Arafat understands this escalation game, he said.

(On Sunday, the 9th, the day before the resumption of the Taba talks following upon their post-Cairo two week hiatus, I had flown down to Taba via Eilat to see Shaath, a good friend. I only had about an hour and a half with Shaath but he at that moment was preoccupied with the leaks of the reports that had come out about the Cairo meeting two weeks earlier between Abu Mazan and Shimon Peres. Two tentative papers had gotten into the hands of both Arafat and Peres, and each were treating them as if they were the final conclusions of that Cairo session. It was generally felt that Peres had gone to the press too precipitously based on those tentative papers. Then when Arafat renounced those "conclusions" he was charged with reneging on what had actually been agreed to in Cairo. This created a moment of chaos and further tension which complicated the negotiating problem for both the Palestinian and the Israeli negotiators, Shaath and General Shahak. Those two seem to get along quite well but are constantly being thrown off balance by the public exchanges between the Israeli and the Palestinian leadership.)

Somewhere in all this there was an almost tangential comment by Arafat to the effect that he was looking forward to a confederation solution between the Palestinians and Jordan. My inference, not based on other than his perfunctory remarks about that, is that that is one way out of his dilemma which I see as his inability--despite all his demands for statehood--to administer a government of his own as well as a way of possibly coping with the continually deteriorating support from his followers. Maybe, but time was running out, and I couldn't pursue it. It was too vague to be very useful.

I also hoped to have more time with him to discuss the criticism of those among his Palestinian followers who are critical of his leadership. The main thrust of that criticism is his failure to function democratically, but rather autocratically. At the very moment I was about to launch into that subject a somewhat dramatic thing occurred which really broke up the meeting. His Foreign Minister Khaddoumi, who right along has been a leading rejectionist against any accommodation with the Israelis, burst into the room and reminded Arafat that there was a meeting of the PLO Executive Committee supposed to start fifteen minutes earlier. Whether Arafat had remembered that or not it was clear that he was neither pleased with having to deal with that meeting nor with our meeting being broken up. Appropriately--given that it was Khaddoumi who intruded--he is one of the evidences of the stated failure of democratic processes on Arafat's part. His sudden

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increasing reliance on Khaddoumi is used as a major example that not only is he turning to Khaddoumi in general and not to his broader support base, but also even for technical economic matters about which Khaddoumi has little experience.

One cannot resist some amateur and impressionistic psychoanalyzing after such a meeting with Arafat. I caution that less than an hour and a half was involved. I found the man very discouraged as if things were getting beyond his control. My tack of raising those factors which might be making his position even more difficult--intended on my part to make him deal with his problems more seriously--may have served merely to have discouraged him further. In many instances he became non-responsive, and the only manifestation of a genuine reaction was that of anger, especially at Rabin whom he has come to believe is working against the process. We all know that it is one thing to be in opposition without responsibility and accountability, but it is a far more complex role if one is to lead. With his support drifting away I believe he is trying to convince himself that he is on the right course and that the argument that he is defending the dignity of his Palestinian people in the final analysis convinces him, nobody else. It comes down to being a rationale for floundering. He resorted to that dignity argument too often--and resisted my counter-argument that that rhetoric was falling on deaf ears.

Exactly how much of what I had to say actually got through to him is impossible to judge. At the end, however, there was a demonstrative expression of how much he likes to talk with me--and please come back as soon as possible.

WHAT FOLLOWS? The instinctive reaction on the part of many will be to steer an even wider berth around Arafat partially on the grounds that he is not up to handling the situation, partially on the grounds that he was willing to give up too much in the September 13th agreement, or indeed that he did not protect the dignity of his people by doing so. Certainly that's a very limited list among the seeming infinity of anti-Arafat arguments.

That kind of thinking of course misses the major point which is that a consensus has developed that a regional or comprehensive solution is the only way to achieve stability in the Middle East. That should be the priority of priorities. If our aim is for a comprehensive peace rather than seeking opportunity to somehow dump Arafat we should be working instead to stabilize the Palestinians. They, after all, are a key ingredient for the broader problem. We should not get caught up in Arafat being the issue.

One must be particularly careful in analyzing how this dismal portrayal of Yasser

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Arafat plays into that bigger picture. It is almost a truism that the overall problem will not be resolved unless the Palestinian question is sufficiently attended to. The American client is Israel--sometimes against their own wishes--making the Arafat/Palestinian factor all the more critical. Israel has the most to lose if that more limited agreement with the Palestinians is not brought to a final conclusion. Over the long run Israel will remain in a perpetual state of vulnerability if regional stability is not achieved.

Evaluating Arafat and the Palestinians must be undertaken in the context of two dynamics, the first has to do with the Palestinian leadership, and the second is increasingly apparent since the events surrounding the September 13th signing on the White House lawn.

The latter first: Only a few weeks prior to the surfacing of the news of the Oslo agreement Secretary Christopher held what seemed to be a very successful meeting with President Assad of Syria. Observers felt that the probability of a Israeli/Syrian agreement was very high. One question at that time was whether this would impede or help move along the Israeli/Palestinian agreement. There has been an unfortunate ebb and flow of enthusiasm for one of these two potential agreements or the other. Syria in August and now again. Following upon the January 16th summit and the current sad state of the Palestinian track the push for the Syrian agreement is again replacing the Palestinians as the priority interest. One hears much more of this coming out of Washington than from Jerusalem.

However, if a comprehensive peace is indeed a serious goal the prioritizing of either the Palestinian track or the Syrian track serves to undermine the attempt to achieve the broader purpose. Either/or should not be the modus operandi. Rationales for dropping one or the other are a dime a dozen. Now that it is accepted that Arafat is in serious trouble within his own house it becomes very easy to drop him or put aside the Palestinian track. It is too easy given Arafat's faults and extraordinary record of bad judgements e.g. the Gulf War, autocratic leanings, dubious finances, failures in economic planning, etc., to dismiss Arafat as a participant and worse to cooperate with other groups to try to change the Palestinian leadership. But, to repeat, Arafat is not the issue. Not at this moment.

One is reminded of the U.S. dissatisfaction with Prince Sihanouk in Cambodia in the late 60's which led to the American role in replacing him with Lon Nol who looked good on paper--but only on paper. He had no real popular base. Similarly many names being mentioned as alternative to Arafat today do not manifest the kind of popular support so essential for so drastic a move. The choice of Lon Nol in Cambodia was enough to open the gates for the Khmer Rouge, and the murderous years that followed with as many as two million Cambodians dead. The irony today is that Sihanouk is back in the saddle anyway.

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For the Palestinians any artificially engineered shift of power at so sensitive a moment would seriously and negatively impact the movement toward resolving the peace agreement. The mechanisms are too delicate--especially with the comprehensive consideration in mind.

The major thing the U.S. and Israel should be pressing for within the September 13th agreement--even demanding--is that Arafat be made to mount elections in the territories. Fast. He promised that.

Arafat has to be legitimized. If the elections do not accomplish that then who replaces him is a matter for the Palestinians themselves to determine. There are groups e.g. the People's Party, and others, some even formerly Marxist, who might show surprising strength. Hamas of course is a serious danger. How he is replaced is almost of greater import. So elections soon are critical if stability is to be maintained. However, the longer time passes without elections the more splintered the population will be and the more potent Hamas could become.

At the same time U.S. and Israeli policy should also be pressing--and helping--Arafat on structuring economic development mechanisms and obtaining resources from wherever possible. It is fairly clear that Arafat himself has been singularly unsuccessful also at this and his very presence on the scene may very well deter potential investors. There are even rumors that Arafat is making private deals about which one can be suspicious. With elections to be mounted hopefully soon the more that the Palestinians can see occurring positively on the ground as the result of investment in economic development the more positive we can hope the election result will be.

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