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הנדון: מאמרו של זאב שיף, 'התרגיל של ערפאת'

ARAFAT'S STUNT

(Analysis by Ze'ev Schiff, 'Ha'aretz', 8.5.94, p.B1)

After the signing ceremony in Cairo, a Saudi representative said: Now the Israelis will learn for themselves what Arafat used to do to us! In Syria, which wants to see the agreement fail, [officials] rejoiced at Arafat's misfortune. In Jordan, where the government is skeptical about the agreement, there was no surprise at the stunt with Arafat pulled. Among the Palestinians, many understood that their leader was not satisfied with the agreement and that he signed it under protest. Arafat wanted to say to his people that he is taking care of their interests and that he is not put off by the world's powers. .

However, there were those who asked: If [Arafat] is not satisfied with the agreement, then why did he ultimately sign it? Palestinian dignitaries were embarrassed. Abu Mazen even told Egyptians, Americans and Israelis: 'This is embarrassing!' Even though he was on the stage, he was the only one with whom Arafat did not speak.

It appears that it all began at night, with an argument with Rabin. Arafat arrived at the meeting with the hope that Rabin would make a gesture to him. Before the meeting, Israel received an unofficial request regarding Arafat's expectations. The issue which concerned him the most was 'the Palestinian policeman on the border.' The stationing of Palestinian police on the border with Jordan, without an Israel presence in between, has practical, and not merely symbolic, importance for the future. This was exactly what Rabin wanted to prevent at this stage. Arafat clearly assumed that if Rabin rebuffed him on the issue of a Palestinian policeman on the border, he would be compensated by a concession on the issue of the size of the Jericho area to be under Palestinian autonomy. Neither of these things happened. When, as a compromise, a sentence was added to the agreement, stipulating that the Jericho area would be open to further talks, Rabin angrily remarked that the Palestinians could write what they wanted, but he emphasized that he would not change his mind. Arafat left angry, and he apparently then made the decision not to sign the map appendices to the agreement.

Foreigners who spoke with Arafat say that he was worried that he would never reach the second stage, following Gaza-Jericho First. Therefore, each additional kilometer and each small concession are as important to him as if they were the last achievement he will see.

I do not accept the argument that Arafat was surprised when the maps were presented to him for signing. When a leader is surprised in such

a manner, it is clear that someone on his staff should be dismissed, which did not occur. It was Arafat who engineered the stunt, after taking leave of Rabin at 2:30 in the morning. His mistake was that he did not correctly assess what Rabin's immediate response would be, or how Mubarak, Christopher and Kozyrev would behave. It is a fair assumption that he thought that Rabin would not want to ruin the ceremony and would postpone the argument for afterwards. What he did not know was that Rabin's security men had already been instructed to prepare to leave the stage, when then another thing happened that Arafat did not foresee. Mubarak and all the others began to exert a great deal of pressure on him.

Events could have turned out differently. The Egyptians were the ones who determined the order of the signing. If Rabin had been asked to sign first, he would not have thought that Arafat, who would have come after him, would not sign the appendices. From where he was standing, he would not have been able to see what the television cameras saw. The fact that Arafat had not signed the appendices would have been discovered afterward.

We Israelis have already had a strange experience with signings. On a previous document of agreement with the PLO, which Abu Ala'a had signed, we were surprised to find the following words next to the signature: conditional and remains conditioned on further discussions. This affair contributed to heightened suspicions. From this, it can be assumed that, in the worst instance, our people would have discovered that a signature was missing when they received the documents. In other words, during the speeches which were being made.

One way or another, the thumb screws were applied to Arafat as soon as the leaders left the stage for a break. This break prevented Rabin from leaving the ceremony, and the heavy pressure was applied by the Egyptian President. There is someone who is even prepared to swear that he heard Mubarak say to Arafat: Sign, you dog! Within minutes, everyone returned to the stage and Arafat signed what he previously did not want to sign. Even before this unfortunate affair, Mubarak did not have a warm, or even lukewarm, spot in his heart for Arafat. Now, after Arafat spoiled the big celebration, and on his birthday yet, Mubarak will be even more angry with, and feel even more insulted by, Arafat.

What Arafat did has increased suspicions in Israel concerning him, and has weakened the supporters of peace. It also exposes the world to the anxieties and mistrust with which Arafat lives among his people. This is one of the reasons for the fact that the Palestinians are not prepared to accept the keys to the Gaza Strip and Jericho. However, we must not conclude that it is now possible to replace Arafat with another Palestinian personality, whose leadership would be accepted by all, and who -- instead of Arafat -- would immediately and successfully lead the peace process forward.

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