

# Yasser Arafat makes triumphal return to Gaza and Jericho

by Dean Andromidas

The four-day triumphal tour of Gaza and Jericho by Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), marks one more milestone on the rough road to peace between Palestinians and Israelis. It marks the success of the peace process initiated by Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Arafat, with the backing of President Bill Clinton—a peace which is premised on a broad-based economic development program not only in the Palestinian territories, but in the region as a whole.

The tour's success demonstrates that the forces working to derail that process have been stymied. The Palestine National Authority has been inaugurated, with Arafat as its president, and if the authority manages to obtain crucial economic resources, it could pave the way for the formation of a truly autonomous Palestinian state.

The fact that the foreign-financed Israeli opposition failed in either preventing Arafat's arrival, or mobilizing significant national forces, also represents a clear setback for the opponents of Middle East peace. Nonetheless, the World Bank, which holds the purse strings to over \$2 billion in financial aid committed to the Palestinians, continues to block sufficient funds for even the day-to-day functioning of the authority, let alone the start-up of major development projects.

## 'Peace of the brave'

Speaking before 70,000 Palestinians on the first day of his return to Gaza after 27 years of exile, Arafat developed the theme of national reconstruction: "I want to remind you that we have a big mission ahead of us—a big mission to build this homeland, to build our institutions, and to rebuild the institutions that Israeli occupation destroyed." He went on to pay homage to the Palestinians who died at the hands of the Israeli gunman in the Hebron massacre of last February, and declared that his arrival was only the beginning: "We are going from here to the mosque [in Hebron], going to Nablus, and Jenin, and Tulkarm, and Qalqilya, and Bethlehem, and Beit Sahur, and Beit Jala, and Ramallah, and then shortly to Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Jerusalem! to pray there." The list is of the most important towns and cities in the West Bank. He went on to say, "Peace has many enemies,

and there are many attempts to sabotage and destroy the peace of the brave. This is the way we are all requested to defend this peace because this peace is for all of us—Israelis and Palestinians."

Commenting on Arafat's visit, Israeli Foreign Minister Peres, who was the key Israeli mover behind the peace pact, said, "From the depths of my heart, and without hesitation, I wish them well. This visit marks the implementation of the autonomy agreement; we were serious when we signed the Cairo pact."

Following a July 3 cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, in his more pragmatic language, likewise vowed that the peace process "will continue," and that Israel has "an interest in strengthening the elements among the Palestinians that want the accord."

## Foreign-backed opposition falters

The Israeli opposition had vowed to bring 250,000 people to Jerusalem to demonstrate in order to stop Arafat. But in fact they only mustered 10,000-20,000 people—far less than the 50,000 they were able to mobilize right after the Oslo agreement was signed last October. Comprised mostly of the Israeli settlers' movement, the opposition is backed primarily by foreigners, the most important of which are in the circles of the Canada-based Hollinger Corp. and the U.S. Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of B'nai B'rith. In the evening of the second day of the tour, 3,000 demonstrators rampaged through East Jerusalem, attacking Palestinians and damaging houses and automobiles throughout the area. Another noisy demonstration held in front of the prime minister's offices chanted "Death to Arafat" and "Rabin is a traitor." The demonstrators attempted to seize buildings, and scores were arrested.

Emerging from their cabinet meeting on July 3, the ministers charged that the demonstration was a "call to revolt." More telling was the latest poll conducted by the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar Ilan University, showing that 59% of all Israelis back direct and public negotiations with the PLO—the highest proportion since the signing of the agreement.

## Economic fight is crucial

The sabotage of the economic underpinnings of the agreement continues to be the Achilles' heel of the accord—a fact known quite well by the World Bank, which persists in obstructing the process. In another speech in Gaza, Arafat lashed out at the World Bank's stonewalling: "I completely refuse any controls by anybody on Palestinian autonomy, except by the Palestinians themselves. We didn't finish military occupation to get economic occupation." He charged that despite over \$2.4 billion pledged by international donors, "All promises from the donors have evaporated."

Arafat was seconded by chief PLO negotiator Nabil Shaath, who told reporters, "All the international offers are only ink on paper, and haven't been implemented. My feeling is they are just promises, promises, promises." He pointed to the double-dealing tactics of the World Bank, and referred to promises only made in June. "Last time in Paris, we were promised \$42 million, but suddenly the World Bank sends an employee telling us, 'We decided to give you \$10 million, because we have a budget problem.' The World Bank is asking me to make my people pay taxes, the same as the Jews were taking from me"—a reference to the Israeli taxes that the Palestinians had to pay to the Israeli government.

The criminality of the World Bank was underscored by Arafat, who told reporters that Gaza alone needs at least \$30 million a month just to survive. With almost 1 million inhabitants, Gaza is the most densely populated place on the planet, where most people live in poverty, and where unemployment is over 50%. Arafat said the World Bank policy would be forcing his people into "starvation."

While it is now being claimed that the Israeli secret services are helping to keep Arafat alive, the Israeli government's apparent continued support for a role for the World Bank will prove to be far more dangerous than the threats of assassination by would-be Israeli or Palestinian rejectionists.

The World Bank continues to use the lie that the PLO has not shown the "expertise" to handle the funds. This lie flies in the face of the fact that many of the key members of the new National Palestine Authority are in fact some of the most successful businessmen in the entire region, heading banks, industrial firms, construction and trading companies in the region. Four example, Nabil Shaath heads one of the leading economic consulting firms in the region, the Egyptian-based Team Consult.

In response, wealthy members of the Palestinian diaspora have formed the Palestine Development and Investment Co. (PDI), currently based in Amman, Jordan. It includes members of leading Palestinian families, such as the Shoman family, the owners of Arab Bank, one of the area's largest; the son of Said Khouri, an owner of Consolidated Contracting Co., a construction company; and Kamal Shair, head of Dar al Handasah, a leading engineering and urban development consulting firm. The company hopes to mobi-

lize \$1 billion to invest in light industry, agriculture, housing construction, tourism, and banking.

Germany has meanwhile become the first European government to open an economic and technical office in Palestine. The office will coordinate development projects, and will aid and assist German companies interested in investing in the Palestinian territories. This move follows a recent agreement between Arafat and the German Daimler-Benz industrial giant for assisting the Palestine National Authority. The office is already drafting a master plan for the development of infrastructure, including roads, railways, and water treatment.

## ADL changes tactics

But the opposition to durable, development-based peace in the Middle East, has been far from idle. At the end of May, an ADL delegation led by its National Director Abe Foxman was in Israel for a "fact-finding" mission, and met with Prime Minister Rabin, Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin, and the leader of the opposition Likud party, Benjamin Netanyahu. Although they did not meet this time with former defense minister and Henry Kissinger crony Ariel Sharon, they did address a group of parliament members in a seminar on "anti-Semitism."

One result of the visit was a signed commentary by Foxman in the Hollinger Corp.-owned *Jerusalem Post* charging "LaRouchites," among others, with anti-Semitism. Foxman knows all too well that he is lying, and that his real target is LaRouche's "Oasis Plan" for economic development, based on regional infrastructure and massive development of nuclear energy for electricity and desalination of water. LaRouche's plan has helped shape the policies of both the Palestinians and Israelis.

Following the ADL visit, open assassination threats were leveled by the settlers' movement against Arafat. Prior to Arafat's arrival, a massive campaign of "Wanted Dead or Alive" posters was conducted against several leading political figures, including former Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren. Furthermore, the Jerusalem riots marked a new level of violence not seen in the past in Israel, which underscores the danger of assassination of not only high-level Palestinians, but Israelis as well. Aharon Domb, the spokesman for the settlers, addressed a letter to Prime Minister Rabin stating that the mood among the settlers is that "the only solution to this government . . . is political murder." This is believed to be directed at Rabin himself.

On top of this, Ariel Sharon announced his candidacy for prime minister in the 1996 elections. Sharon, architect of the disastrous 1982 Lebanese war and darling of the ADL and Hollinger Corp. circles, now spends most of his time in the United States, Canada, and Europe raising millions of dollars for the opposition. It is believed that he plans to build his political base out of the settlers' movement in order to become a deciding factor in the upcoming elections.