

The Arafat Expert

The author of the Oslo accords always knew Arafat was capable of derailing the peace process, but he believed—and still believes—that it's the only option.

THREE AND A HALF YEARS AGO, I WAS RIDING in a small military convoy that was headed into the Judean Mountains outside the West Bank town of Hebron. As the armored jeeps rocked and bounced their way up the steep dirt road, happy, smiling Palestinian children ran alongside waving at us. When we reached Abu Snaa, a hilltop 3,000 feet above sea level, everyone piled out of the vehicles.

As the soldiers talked, smoked, and did their job (they were watching the always explosive town of Hebron for signs of trouble), I thought I was getting a glimpse of the future. This was a joint patrol between the Israeli Army and the newly created Palestinian security force.

This small step toward peace was not without its complications. The Israelis weren't all that thrilled with suddenly having to work side by side with people they suspected they'd probably been chasing through the streets only weeks earlier. And the Palestinians weren't quite used to the idea of cooperating with the very soldiers who enforced the rituals of the occupation.

But everyone was willing to work at it and give it time. The most pressing problem seemed to be the Israeli soldiers' fear of getting shot accidentally by inexperienced Palestinians who were still trying

to remember not to walk around the base with their weapons loaded.

Those small moments of promise and goodwill are gone now, of course, as evanescent as the acrid clouds of black smoke that rise over Hebron and Ramallah and Nablus with each new confrontation. And there are few men who feel as personally disappointed in the collapse of the peace process as Joel Singer, the author of the Oslo accords.

His particular pain is easy to understand: There is no betrayal like personal betrayal. "I posed Prime Minister Rabin's questions for Arafat to the Palestinian negotiators," says the 50-year-old Singer, an Israeli native who's a partner at the law firm of Sidley & Austin in D.C.

"And it was through me that the Palestinians made their solemn promises to Rabin to stop the *intifada*, to stop using force, and that, no matter what, they now believed an end to the Palestinian-Israeli dispute could only be accomplished through negotiation."

Singer is unequivocal in his indictment of Yasser Arafat for the current round of violence. "When negotiation is not providing the desired results, he resorts to violence. It's like he has two switches in front of him. One is marked

WAR and the other PEACE, and he can turn them on and off to maximize his gains."

But while Arafat uses the shadowy militia he controls (known as the Tanzim) to start or put down unrest, it remains unclear whether he's one step ahead of his people or one step behind. "The synergy between Arafat and the Palestinian population is O-negative; it goes back and forth," says Singer. "They basically push each other towards extremism."

An experienced negotiator who helped broker Israel's peace with the Egyptians, Singer got the call from Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and foreign minister Shimon Peres late in the spring of 1993. He flew to Israel immediately and was told by Rabin and Peres that secret informal meetings had been going on for months, and they wanted Singer to gauge whether the Palestinians were serious about making a deal. After two days of round-the-clock meetings with Palestinian representatives, Singer gave his report to Rabin and Peres, and the Oslo process was set in motion.

In the wake of the violence and the fiery anti-Israeli passion that continues to erupt in the streets, the obvious question now is whether everyone—Singer, Rabin, Peres, Benjamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, as well as President Clinton and his Middle East experts—misread both the situation and Arafat's commitment.

Indeed, how is it possible that after seven years of the intimate contact of the peace process that the Palestinian leader continues to blindside and confound both the Israelis and the Americans (and much of the Arab world as well)?

Singer is reluctant to say Rabin and Peres miscalculated. He believes the two men were courageous leaders who took significant personal risks for peace. In Rabin's case it cost him his life, and for Peres it essentially cost him the election when he ran against Netanyahu for prime minister. Saying they were wrong

Making peace: Joel Singer (left) at the signing of Oslo II.



Photograph courtesy of Joel Singer.



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would not only dishonor them; it would be tantamount to Singer's admitting the peace process is now dead, as opposed to seriously wounded. "You must understand that Arafat is the master at brinkmanship," says Singer. "He knows how to play this game."

Singer believes that to even begin to understand Arafat's behavior, Israelis and those in the West need to throw out the usual assumptions. Most people involved in high-stakes negotiations (Singer has wrangled not only with the Egyptians and the Palestinians but the Syrians, the Lebanese, and the Jordanians as well) will try to push things to the limit. Going in, they know where the edge is, and when they reach it, they'll stop and come back.

"But what you have with Arafat is a totally different conception of the rules. His edge is miles beyond anyone else's, and only he knows where it is."

Singer thinks the current crisis can play out in one of two ways. The optimistic scenario is that Arafat will turn back as soon as he reaches the edge (which may have already happened with the cease-fire agreement last week), and then the two parties will slowly begin to work on an agreement again. If this happens, then the conclusion will be reached that Arafat used the violence as a tactical device to get more at the bargaining table.

The darker possibility is that peace is simply not possible in this generation. If this proves to be true, then the experts will all conclude that Arafat used the negotiations as an interim measure between the first *intifada* and this second one to improve his situation on the ground—he used Oslo to play on Israeli and Western naïveté.

But Singer believes that ascribing motivation to the mercurial Arafat, even in retrospect, is as much a waste of time as trying to predict how he'll behave. "I don't think Arafat himself has yet decided which it's to be," says Singer. "I think every day he wakes up playing with the two possibilities, postponing the decision. He will make this decision only at the very end. And his end is far away from where anyone else thinks it is."

Arafat continues to display more craftiness than courage, and ultimately, says Singer, there is little Israel can do to force his hand. "Even the U.S. isn't capable of forcing Arafat to do something, because he doesn't play according to the same rules as everyone else," Singer says. "And so I would advise Barak to do what he needs to do for Israel, because it takes two to tango. And Arafat simply isn't ready to dance." ■