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Arafat and the Fog Machine

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PARIS—For nearly two decades journalists, officials from any number of governments and well-meaning intermediaries have been trying to coax a clear commitment out of Yasser Arafat to make peace with Israel. A new round of coaxing has ended with yet another burst of fog from the chairman, who coyly says that he will trade his authoritative view on peace only in return for a meeting with a U.S. government official.

It should be clear by now that Arafat is part of the Palestinian people's problem, not part of their solution. To pursue him breathlessly in the hope he will modify by a comma (or perhaps even a subordinate clause) the PLO's tortured and inadequate formulations for Middle East peace is to play a mug's game. Worse, it helps postpone the day when a genuine peace effort can be mounted.

The theory seems to be that a clear and unequivocal declaration by Arafat will shame the Israeli government into reversing its refusal to deal with the Palestine Liberation Organization. If Jerusalem does continue to ignore the PLO, then the United States and other governments will be willing at last to pressure Israel on the Palestinian issue.

But Arafat's unparalleled record of error, failure and myopia as leader of the PLO discredits any statement he could make about the Arab-Israeli crisis as it exists today. He lacked

the vision and courage to make such a statement when it would have mattered, in the year or so after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war.

Instead, he chose to go to the United Nations wearing a pistol holster and subsequently to squander the best chance of a generation for a peace that would have recognized Palestinian political rights. He preferred the delights of being a warlord in Lebanon and keeping the PLO and its treasury united under his rule to running the risks and facing the splits that peacemaking would have brought.

Arafat urged Palestinian intellectuals like Said Hamami (assassinated in London in 1978) and Issam Sartawi (assassinated in Lisbon in 1983) to voice the PLO's desire for peace with Israel, while he remained more ambiguous and alive.

Without quite realizing it, I witnessed the beginning of this pattern 15 years ago when Hamami introduced me to Arafat with assurances that the PLO leader was about to break with the rejectionist line and declare that the PLO was ready to live in peace with Israel. This might

even come in our conversation, hinted Hamami, whom I had come to know and like in Beirut.

But it did not amount to much. For small talk I stumbled through my few words of Arabic, and Arafat responded in his then equally sparse English. (The chairman's heavily accented but increasingly supple command of English these days on the television talk shows is a sign of his current priorities.) My attempts to draw him out on Israel caused him to turn on the fog machine full level, much to Hamami's dismay.

The latest flurry of the small cottage industry that analyzes Arafat's Delphic utterances on peace and security was triggered by a written statement attributed to Bassam Abu Sharif, who left George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine last year to join Arafat and become a spokesman for him.

The Palestinians "see no way for any dispute to be settled without direct talks between the parties to that dispute, and we feel that any settlement imposed by an outside power will not stand the test of time," Arafat's

aide wrote in language that echoes Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's stand on peace negotiations.

Arafat would surely have signed off on the document before it was released. But characteristically, he refused to acknowledge these views as his own when asked about them in Belgrade. That, he said, was a matter for discussion between him and an official of the U.S. government, which has refused to deal with the PLO since 1975.

Shamir has incorrectly dismissed the incremental changes in the statement as "nothing new." It is accurate, however, to dismiss the nuances penned by Bassam Abu Sharif on Arafat's behalf as "nothing significant," because they are made against the background of Arafat's history of deception and tactical retreat.

Shifting nuances will not break the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate. Only bold change initiated by the Palestinians is likely to do that. Replacing Arafat would be one step in that direction. So would the renunciation of the Palestinians' National Charter, which continues to call for the destruction of Israel.

Forming a government-in-exile that gives West Bank and Gaza leaders more of a voice in running the PLO is the best way to dump both the chairman and the charter. And it would set the stage for a real dialogue to replace the false starts of the Arafat era.