

# The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events  
impacting the world's financial markets*

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## **A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED MARCH 26, 1997**

### **Middle East Tensions Likely To Escalate**

**Mark L. Melcher**

Because of the tragic terrorist attack in Israel last week, I thought I would take a stab this week at predicting where things might be heading there. I know that many readers won't agree with my forecast, and with the premises that support it. But I also know that I am going to be asked what I think is going on. So here's what I think is going on.

For starters, let me say that I firmly believe that Israel's Arab and Iranian neighbors will never make genuine peace with her. It may be that a majority of the population surrounding Israel sincerely wants peace. I have no way of knowing whether this is true or not. But I think it is undeniably true that a large and ruthless group of individuals, including the leaders of such important nations as Iraq, Iran, Syria and Libya, not only do not want peace with Israel, but are powerful enough to prevent those who do from achieving it.

In fact, the ability and willingness of these individuals to intimidate any person or government in the region that does not share their hatred for Israel has been well documented. This is demonstrated every day by the willingness of the leaders of the so-called "moderate" Arab regimes to continue to finance, and give protection and cover to, radical terrorist organizations, and to forswear active participation in any formal peace process.

Indeed, I think it is logical to assume that the only thing that keeps these people and their supporters from launching a direct assault on Israel is Israel's military strength, and to a lesser extent America's long standing guarantee that it would pitch in help if need be. Foreclosed, for the time being, from all-out war, radical Islamists regularly resort to the most heinous terrorist acts, including a constant string of suicide bombings like the one in Tel Aviv last week.

In a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences last March 13, Harvey Kushner, from the Department of Criminal Justice at Long Island University, pointed out that almost 200 Israelis died as a result of suicide attacks in the 30-month period following the signing of the Oslo accords. Population-wise, this would be the equivalent of over 10,000 deaths in the United States, or 60 Oklahomas. In one nine-day period, Kushner pointed out, four separate suicide bombers in Israel killed 59 people.

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And more are coming. Steve Emerson, one of America's leading experts on Islamic terrorism opened his testimony on March 12 last year before the House International Relations committee with the following narrative:

"Last December, Hamas [which claimed 'credit' for last week's terrorist attack] held its annual rally in a Gaza stadium. More than 70,000 people--an overflow audience--attended. As Hamas leaders took the podium one after another, making incendiary speeches against the peace accords and calling for jihad against the Jews, the fervor of the crowd mounted. Cries of 'Allahu Akbar! [God is Great]" and 'Mawt lil-Yahud! [Death to the Jews]' greeted the speakers' chants. But the most meaningful moment of the rally was neither a chant nor a cry. It was a silent procession of a few dozen young men dressed in white shrouds. They looked like ghosts set against the huge crowd. They were future suicide bombers who had vowed to end their lives in a larger effort to kill as many Jews as possible."

With this in mind, I cannot help but agree with those who feel that the 1993 Oslo agreement between Israel and Yasir Arafat's PLO was a change in Arab strategy, not a change of heart. Were it otherwise, I don't believe Arafat would be alive today. The most obvious evidence of this, in my opinion, is Arafat's unwillingness to keep the promise he made in Oslo to eliminate the clauses in the Palestinian Authority's charter calling for the destruction of Israel. How, one wonders, could the Clinton administration, or anyone for that matter, expect the Israelis to trust someone who subscribes to a document that pledges Israel's destruction?

Norman Podhoretz put it this way in an excellent article in the December issue of *Commentary* entitled "The Tragic Predicament of Benjamin Netanyahu." When the PLO signed the Oslo accords, he and others who were distrustful of the process believed that:

"Instead of relying on the old hope of destroying Israel in one fell military swoop, the Palestinians were now putting their faith in the 'strategy of stages' (also known as the 'phased plan'). It was a strategy that called for them to establish first a foothold, and then a state, on as much territory as they could get the Israelis to surrender; and finally to use it as a base for future terrorist or other military operations in which, on one pretext or another, the whole Arab world would join in a mighty effort to achieve a final solution of its Israel problem.

"In positing that this was what the Palestinians were up to, we could rely on no lesser an authority than Yasir Arafat himself. On the very day that the Oslo accords were signed on the White House lawn, Arafat spoke from Washington on the radio to his people in Amman, Jordan, and told them that he had just taken the first step in carrying out the 'strategy of stages.' In the ensuing three-and-a-half years, in addressing Western audiences, he usually showed a face of moderation, but when speaking in Arabic he consistently looked forward to the jihad, the holy war, that would some day sweep away the unnatural abomination of a Jewish state from the territory sacred to Islam."

If Podhoretz is correct, and I believe he is, then it would be a mistake to get too hung up, when looking into the future, or explaining the present, on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to proceed with construction of a large housing development in East Jerusalem.

For my part, I agree with the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial last week that Israel has every right to build in East Jerusalem, and that instead of complaining about it, the Clinton administration should be chastising Arafat for refusing to fulfill his obligation to actively discourage violence.

But, as I said, I don't think the housing controversy has much to do with either the recent outbreak of violence in Bethlehem, the terrorist attack in Tel Aviv last week, or with the future of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Indeed, I think there is reason to believe that if Netanyahu had halted work on the housing development, Arafat would soon have found another excuse to "take to the streets" and Hamas would have found another way to rationalize its terrorist activities.

Much more important to the understanding of the current situation, and by extension to the business of forecasting what lies ahead, than the housing project, is the fact that Netanyahu is losing the diplomatic battle, and by extension the worldwide public relations battle, with Arafat.

The importance of this development can hardly be exaggerated. In my opinion, Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy is best described as a distortion of Clausewitz' famous assertion that war is a continuation of politics by other means. In the Middle East, diplomacy is a continuation of war by other means.

To the surprise of just about everyone. Arafat is proving to be a master diplomat and ambassador-at-large. Largely through his efforts, it appears that the majority view among opinion leaders in the United States today is that Netanyahu is a bad guy, who is inexplicably doing everything he can to destroy the "peace process," and that Arafat is showing, in the words of White House spokesman Michael McCurry, "admirable restraint" in not directly threatening that bloodshed would result if Israel dared continue construction. Here's the way Ehud Ya'ari put it in his "Neighborhood Watch" column in the January 9 issue of the *Jerusalem Report*.

In the top minds of the Israeli intelligence community, Yasser Arafat has been undergoing a rather dramatic image change of late. In private conversations, undertones of suspicion are even more detectable, to the point of outright pessimism. Few of those authorized to read the classified material still adhere to the former perception of a sad character in a simple beach house in Gaza who, in his old age, has concluded that it is better to take the little that is being offered him than to hanker after the dreams of his youth.

During the merry days of Oslo, Israeli officials loved to imitate Arafat. The negotiators and their uniformed advisers vied with each other in mimicking the apparent misery of the man--the pleading, tearful tone in which he addressed them; his struggle with the English language; and what they interpreted then as obsequiousness. No longer! They all understand--and some will even admit--that they were blinded by appearances. Arafat now enjoys a healthy dose of respect on the part of the professional PLO watchers of Israel . . . .

Sometimes it seems that Arafat is learning what makes Israel tick quicker than we are learning about him . . . . Some of the best brains in Israeli intelligence believe that Arafat is heading for a huge confrontation down the road. He is equipped with neither a clear road map nor a timetable, but a strategy that has just one meaning--reclaiming the option of a post-Oslo confrontation . . . . The problem, says a senior intelligence officer, paraphrasing Dr. Kissinger, is not that we don't understand Arafat, but rather, that we are starting to understand him only too well. It seems that the era of misreading is coming to an end. The lack of trust displayed in recent months reflects not only the results of Netanyahu-style diplomacy, but also a more thorough professional reassessment of assumptions made in the past by people who are prepared to learn from their mistakes.

This brings us to the "tragic predicament of Benjamin Netanyahu" as described by Podhoretz; namely that the Israeli PM finds himself the inheritor of a "peace process" that is fundamentally flawed because it demands that Israel give up the West Bank and the Gaza, and in doing so a huge measure of security, in exchange for a guarantee of peace from people who, even if they are sincere (which is questionable) do not ultimately have the power to enforce the guarantee.

Netanyahu must either honor the Oslo accord, which he surely feels will not bring peace but a war in which Israel will be at a terrible disadvantage, or dissolve the "peace process," which would likely lead to war anyway. This "tragic predicament" has, inevitably, led Netanyahu to make innumerable political and public relations errors. The result is that support for him from his own Likud party is paper thin and growing thinner. Nearly as important, is the fact that he is under almost daily fire from the Clinton White House, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and a substantial and highly influential portion of the American Jewish community.

Underlying this combined assault on Netanyahu is the apparent belief that it will lead either to his downfall and replacement by a Labor government, or the formation of a national-unity government with Labor, bringing Shimon Peres, a strong backer of the Oslo accord, back in as Foreign Minister. Either way, under this scenario, the "peace process" would be restored, Israel would eventually return to its pre-1967 borders, Arafat would have his own country, Israel's Arab neighbors would be content, and they'd all live happily ever after.

I think this is poppycock. I think the much more likely outcome of a weakened Netanyahu, will be very big trouble in the region. As I said last December in my end-of-the year "Fearless Forecast" piece, history teaches us that when Israel's enemies sense weakness, they strike. It's that simple. Anyone paying attention to the region has known for months that Arafat and his radical allies were going to test Netanyahu's political power and acumen somewhere sometime soon. And now they're doing it.

The danger, indeed the likelihood, in my opinion, is that this "testing" will not lead to a coalition government, but to a prolonged escalation of violence and bloodshed, which will raise the very real specter of full scale war in the region.

I know that many Americans scoff at such a possibility because they believe that Israel's superior military capability makes war unthinkable for its enemies. The problem is that this assumption is increasingly being called into question by Arab military leaders. For example, in the above-

mentioned *Commentary* article, Podhoretz quotes a former Egyptian chief of staff as saying that "the combined weaponry of the Arab states today exceeds that of Israel. If all these weapons were directed against Israel, the Arab states could defeat Israel."

It isn't a question of whether this individual's assessment is accurate. The question is whether the Arabs believe it to be. If they ever do, the region would quickly become very dangerous. The same applies to the U.S. commitment to come to Israel's aid in case of war. It isn't a question of whether we would actually do it, it is a question of whether the Arabs believe we would. If the Arabs ever get the feeling that we wouldn't, and recent White House actions toward Netanyahu lend credence to this view, the region would become very dangerous very quickly.

When considering whether it is true, and will always remain true, that Israel is invulnerable militarily, it is worth considering a paragraph I wrote way back in an April 24, 1991 piece entitled "Bush's Fatal Attraction To Middle East Diplomacy Bodes Trouble For His Presidency."

"Israel is smaller than either New Hampshire or Vermont. On most world maps, it is too small to have its six letter name written within it. Its population is less than five million. It is surrounded by nations with combined land masses of millions of square miles and with greater combined populations than the United States. And most of these countries, at one time or another, in one way or another, with guns, tanks, terrorists, or oil money have tried to destroy it.

Syria is run by as big a butcher as Saddam Hussein and is nine times as big as Israel with three times as many people. Iraq, where Saddam still rules, is 20 times as big as Israel with even more people than Syria. Iran, which is ruled by religious fanatics desperately opposed to Israel's existence, is 80 times bigger than Israel with almost 50 million people."

I'll close with another quote from Podhoretz's *Commentary* article, one that I used in my end-of-the-year "Fearless Forecast" piece. I believe now, as I believed last December, that it perfectly sums up the very dangerous situation that exists today in the Middle East.

Discussing the possible triggering of "mini-wars" like the one that erupted last September when Israel opened a new exit to an archeological tunnel in Jerusalem, Podhoretz warned that "one of these might then escalate, bringing the big war envisaged by the 'strategy of stages' ahead of schedule and even before the actual establishment of the Palestinian state. But early or late, that big war will come. And everyone will say that it was caused not by the premature hopes of Rabin and Peres, or by the evil dreams of the Arab world, but by the policies of Benjamin Netanyahu, which will have been based on a sober expectation of the jihad ahead and will have been designed to avert an Israeli defeat."

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