

22/12/2001

Arafat clearly overplayed a weak hand ... and lost

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IT IS understandable that Muslims around the world celebrated this Hari Raya Aidilfitri with mixed feelings as a result of what is currently happening in Afghanistan and in the Middle East.

The image of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat giving his Hari Raya message amidst the bloodshed and destruction surrounding him must have been particularly painful to see. The sense of utter helplessness somehow seems to get transmitted to all corners of the Muslim world and to those with a natural inclination of sympathy for the underdog.

Such a sense of helplessness was only compounded by another United States veto against the eminently reasonable United Nations resolution to have international monitors dispatched to the scene immediately. Typically, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and other Muslim organisations would meet in emergency sessions and adopt more ineffectual resolutions.

Clearly, everyone feels a need to act but unless actions are seen to be helpful rather than merely providing temporary and moral succour to the Palestinians, they would be mere exercises in futility.

It is interesting to recall a fateful meeting between Arafat and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1993, in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War, details of which were recorded in Datuk Zainuddin Maidin's book, *The Other Side of Mahathir*.

The book recounts Arafat telling Dr Mahathir how the Palestinians were then shunned by most of the Arab world as a result of his (Arafat's) support for Iraq and how the West was pressuring him into an accord with the Israelis. Dr Mahathir's advice to Arafat was "The PLO must change their attitude to adapt to this reality."

In a hostile environment, clearly someone who is weak must quickly adapt or die. Thus was launched what later became known as the Oslo peace process. Arafat survived ostracism by fellow-Arabs to live another day. But was he just making a tactical retreat with Oslo or was it strategic new thinking on his part?

Then came Camp David with an outgoing US President determined to salvage a badly tarnished personal legacy by brokering a final peace settlement between the reluctant Palestinians and the eager Israelis.

On hindsight, it is clear Arafat overplayed a very weak hand and badly miscalculated. His Israeli partner then was the dovish Ehud Barak who needed a peace deal very badly in order to stand any chance of warding off the political right in an upcoming election. Arafat must surely have known that rebuffing Barak would play right into the hands of that arch anti-Palestinian hawk, Ariel Sharon, who made his opposition to Oslo abundantly clear by that provocative visit to Al-Aqsa Mosque during a tense moment. Why didn't Arafat rise to the opportunity then to erase any doubt about his peaceful intentions, grab what was on offer by the Israelis, maybe wrangle another concession or two from the US and live to fight for more another day?

If Arafat had accepted even half a loaf then, would he not now be spared such personal humiliation and having his and his people's fate held hostage by extremists both within Palestine and in Israel? This is a lose-lose proposition for everyone and all the consequence of Arafat refusing or unable to countenance the prospect for peace.

Imagine how much more credible Arafat would have been today to demand

all of what the Palestinians feel is their due if he had not walked away from the chance to move the peace process forward. Conversely, imagine how greatly his actions and their consequences had aided the Israeli cause. Sharon, who hesitates to step foot in Europe lest he be hauled up by some court to answer charges of genocide of Palestinians, went on to become Israeli Prime Minister. And just as a US President finally musters enough courage, post-September 11, to publicly utter "Palestine" by name and to prepare to face down Sharon by urging him to do likewise, an ill-timed bombing in Israel reduced the US President to offering a smugly vindicated Sharon sympathy instead.

It has to be recognised that playing the blame game has not gotten the Palestinians very far. Neither will seeking to win sympathy and influence from the one nation in any position to make or break the Palestinians' future - the US. If the US is not even particularly inclined to always pay heed to the views of its Western allies in Europe, is there reason to hope it will heed the call of Muslims who, after all, many ordinary Americans now blame for what happened on Sept 11? No one can or should blame the Americans for it.

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