

Arafat Visa issue again Vexing U.S.

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Thomas L. Friedman

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Palestinians Are Weary

By telling the P.L.O. at a meeting in Tunis two weeks ago that Washington wants Mr. Arafat to focus on "substance" and not on "symbolic acts," the Administration was trying to signal the P.L.O. chairman that the last thing Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d wants now is to be faced with a visa request from him, officials said.

"If the United States has a dialogue with the P.L.O., then there can be no legal, moral or political basis for it to deny Chairman Arafat a visa," said Clovis Maksoud, the Arab League representative at the United Nations. "It is his right to address the United Nations, not a privilege to be granted by the United States. If the visa is denied, we will go to Geneva, and I don't think the United States would want to go through that embarrassment again."

Full Text (922 words)

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The Bush Administration is bracing for what it fears could be a new diplomatic crisis over whether to grant the P.L.O. chairman, Yasir Arafat, a visa to attend a forthcoming session of the United Nations this fall.

A senior Palestine Liberation Organization official said in an interview Friday that Mr. Arafat was "seriously considering" applying to the United States for a visa.

American Jewish organizations for the last month have been quietly lobbying Administration officials against granting Mr. Arafat an entry permit, on the grounds that he has not been cooperating with American Middle East peace efforts, and

recently, has again talked about the "armed struggle" against Israel.

The Arab League has indicated to Washington that it believes there is no basis to deny Mr. Arafat access to New York so that he can present his proposals to the United Nations, should he so choose. Special Session in Geneva

Last November, the United States denied Mr. Arafat a visa, saying he had not renounced terrorism. The move was criticized by the Arab world, the Soviet Union and the United States NATO allies, and the General Assembly convened a special session in Geneva to hear the P.L.O. leader.

In December, Mr. Arafat's declarations were accepted by the United States as a renunciation of terrorism and recognition of Israel's right to exist, leading the Reagan Administration to begin a dialogue with the P.L.O.

The Bush Administration would now have great difficulty denying Mr. Arafat a visa on the ground of supporting terrorism without also being forced to say that he is no longer living up to the requirements of the American-P.L.O. dialogue. This would lead to a halt in the talks, which the Administration does not want. But for the Bush Administration, to grant the visa at a time when it feels that the P.L.O. is not cooperating with its diplomacy is viewed as equally unappealing.

"It is going to be a very tough call," said a Mideast policymaker when asked how he would respond to an Arafat request. "Nobody has made up their mind yet. We're going to be damned if we do and damned if we don't." Palestinians Are Weary

The signal from the P.L.O. that Mr. Arafat is likely to apply for a visa comes at a time of increasing exasperation within the Palestinian organization with the American talks.

Mr. Arafat told a news conference in Amman, Jordan, on Tuesday that he was frustrated with the American insistence that the P.L.O. encourage Palestinians in the occupied territories to enter into negotiations with Israel about elections, and then fade into the background. So much so, the P.L.O. leader said, that he was considering convening a session of the Palestine National Council, the Palestinian parliament-in-exile, to review the results of its decision last November to pursue a moderate peace policy based on a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem.

"Patience has limits," said Mr. Arafat, who insists that the P.L.O. must have a role in any negotiating process with Israel

and that the outcome must be an independent Palestinian state.

American Jewish leaders have been meeting with Administration officials to let them know that without a sign from Mr. Arafat that he is willing to accept Israeli election proposals and "live up to his commitment to end terrorist attacks against Israel," they would unanimously oppose Washington's granting him a visa, said Malcolm I. Hoenlein, executive director of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

"Mr. Arafat has not as yet earned the privilege of a United States visa," said Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "Rather than move the peace process forward, the rhetoric of hate and violence has increased." Baker in the Middle

By telling the P.L.O. at a meeting in Tunis two weeks ago that Washington wants Mr. Arafat to focus on "substance" and not on "symbolic acts," the Administration was trying to signal the P.L.O. chairman that the last thing Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d wants now is to be faced with a visa request from him, officials said.

Under the treaty governing relations between the United States and the United Nations, Washington is required to provide admission to all those invited to the United Nations. However, the United States accepted that agreement subject to a reservation that the United States can deny someone entry to safeguard national security. It was under to this reservation that Mr. Arafat was denied a visa by Secretary of State George P. Shultz.

Despite Mr. Arafat's December declaration that he renounced all forms of terrorism, some legal experts believe that he still can technically be denied a visa on the basis of previous behavior, or some of his statements in the last year referring to the need to continue pursuing an "armed struggle."

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