

STATE OF CONFUSION

BY CHARMAINE SEITZ

BIRZEIT, THE WEST BANK

In the spring of 1996, the tiny Palestinian village of Birzeit awoke abruptly to the squawking speakers of patrolling Israeli military jeeps. It was a sound many hadn't heard since the signing of peace agreements between Israeli and Palestinian leaders three years earlier.

An estimated 300 young Palestinian men were blindfolded and herded away by Israeli soldiers. A politically active university town, Birzeit was paying for four recent bombings in Israel by Palestinian militants. Trying to calm the anger of Israeli voters, then Prime Minister Shimon Peres had responded with large-scale arrests and a show of force. Twenty-four hours later, most of the students were quietly returned to their homes, unwitting campaign participants in an Israeli election year.

This spring, Palestinians find themselves doing a similar dance. As non-Israeli citizens, West Bank and Gaza have no vote in the election for prime minister on May 17, but they can have a great affect on the results.



PAOLO COCCO/REUTERS

Yasser Arafat is looking for all the help he can get on May 4.

Continued from page 15 the outgoing Knesset.) In March, Deri was convicted on a string of bribery and corruption charges. His sentence is pending, but most commentators say that—whether or not he is sent to prison—Shas' strength will increase on May 17. Shas has portrayed effectively—for its constituency, anyway—the conviction as an Ashkenazi plot, with Deri portraying himself as a latter-day Dreyfuss.

JIM HOLLANDER/REUTERS



Labor Party candidate Ehud Barak is hoping to do better against Netanyahu than former Prime Minister Shimon Peres.

The government of hard-line, Likud Party Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fell after he signed the Wye agreement last October, promising a further withdrawal from the West Bank and angering his right-wing coalition partners. Since then, he has done his best to bring them back into the fold by starting at least 13 new settlements in the occupied territories, stalling on the withdrawals and reigniting the debate over Jerusalem's status. Netanyahu claims that "what is holding up the implementation of Wye are Palestinian violations."

"We believe that Israeli election campaigns should not be used as a reason to delay implementation of accords,"

responds Nabil Abu Rdaineh, a political adviser to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Since last year, Arafat has been promising his people that he will declare an independent Palestinian state when the Oslo Accords expire on May 4—13 days before Israelis go to the polls. But Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi says that a declaration of statehood would only allow Netanyahu to "revive the politics of

(tags placed on Labor and its ally to the left, the Meretz Party) among the "Russians" translated into massive support for Netanyahu. Judging by recent opinion polls, the immigrants continue to back Netanyahu and his hardline, anti-Arab policies.

Netanyahu's traditional blocs of support—the ultra-orthodox, orthodox and the less-educated, poorer Sephardi masses—have not, it appears, been put out by his succession of lapses and failures in internal

and foreign affairs nor by his obvious untrustworthiness. Netanyahu's foot-dragging during the past three years regarding the Palestinians and his non-implementation of last October's American-brokered Wye Plantation agreement (stipulating further withdrawals in the West Bank) have done nothing to diminish his popularity among Sephardi voters (even though many of them appear more open to compromise with the Arabs than either Netanyahu or his coalition partners to the right). Nor have the defections from Likud of such stalwarts as former Science Minister Benny Begin (Menachem's son) and former Finance Minister Dan Meridor dented the enthusiasm among the party faithful.

fear and ideology" that gave him the slim margin of victory over Peres three years ago.

That puts Arafat in a bind. "Israel will react in the toughest possible way in the event of a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital," Netanyahu said recently. He even has threatened to annex those parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip that remain under Israeli control if a state is declared. But foregoing a declaration leaves Arafat with little to show his people after years of semi-autonomy subject to Israeli whims.

Arafat is looking for an option that will be supported by the United States and other allies, including a possible postponement of the declaration. Drumming up Arab support hasn't been difficult, since many Arab leaders are disgusted with recent Israeli government policy. "The entire Arab world, without exception, will back any decision the Palestinians make regarding their state," Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat boasted recently. Indeed, both Jordan and Egypt have announced their support for a declaration of independence on May 4.

The U.S. State Department has been a tougher sell. U.S. officials are keenly aware that any strong statement against the Netanyahu government could backfire, angering Israeli voters. When Arafat visited Washington on March 23, seeking U.S. assurances of support, he was gently rebuffed and told there wouldn't be a change in U.S. policy. While the European Union has taken a similar tack with Arafat, warning him against the consequences of unilateral declarations, it recently turned up the heat on Netanyahu. When the Israeli government warned EU officials that any diplomatic meetings with Palestinians must take place outside Jerusalem, the EU issued a sharp reply, reiterating its poli-

cy that the city remains a separate entity outside Israeli control. Predictably, Netanyahu used the opportunity to raise the unpopular specter of a Jerusalem divided between Palestinians and Israelis.

While frustrated by their limited options, in truth, Palestinian leaders are reaping the rewards of patience and political moderation. Through diplomacy, Palestinians have continued to insist upon the right to statehood, even though the Oslo Accords never mentioned that possibility. Less than 10 years after Israel refused to officially recognize the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Ariel Sharon, a leading Israeli hawk and settlement advocate, publicly has acknowledged that a Palestinian state is inevitable. If Netanyahu loses this election, it will be because the hard-liners in his coalition accuse him of being deceitful. But the Israeli center increasingly supports a Palestinian state.

"The Oslo negotiating process underway is unfair, slow, and skewed in Israel's favor," Palestinian-Jordanian journalist Rami Khouri recently wrote in his syndicated column. "But it remains the only process that has achieved some meaningful national gains for both Palestinians and Israelis." While many Palestinians still rail against its inequities, the Palestinian leadership is tied to this peace process. For that reason, they will tread lightly on the political tightrope, likely postponing a statehood declaration and diffusing what Arafat has called "live ammunition against the Labor Party." Labor set the Oslo Accords in motion in the first place, and its return to power would offer the Palestinians a better bid for peace. ■

Charmaine Seitz writes regularly on the Middle East.

Indeed, demographics now favor Netanyahu even more strongly than in 1996 (when Netanyahu led Peres by 11 percent among Jewish voters, which was almost offset by the massive bloc for Peres among Israel's 1 million strong Arab minority). But a wild card has entered the race: Yitzhak Mordechai, a retired army general and popular former defense minister under Netanyahu. He leads the new Center Party, which he helped to form in March, along with Meridor and former army chief of staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak. Mordechai, a Sephardi born in Iraqi Kurdistan, can be expected to siphon off enough Sephardi votes to put Netanyahu's victory in doubt.

Polls show that Mordechai probably would beat Netanyahu in a head-to-head contest. The problem is that Mordechai will likely finish third in the first round of elections behind Labor Party leader Ehud Barak (another former army chief of staff), who may well be beaten by Netanyahu in the June 1 run-off. Making matters worse, Likud and its right-wing and religious allies are almost certain to win a majority of the Knesset's 120 seats. Even in the event that Barak or Mordechai top Netanyahu, it's a mystery how either of them could put together a viable coalition government capable of carrying out center-left policies.

It is also possible that the elections will force new elections or, as in 1984, compel the politicians into another Labor-Likud unity government. But such a coalition would struggle

to move forward on foreign policy and defense issues. The last unity government proved incapable of advancing at all toward peace with the Palestinians. Though, under Peres' stewardship, it did manage to extricate the army from most of southern Lebanon.

Of course, given the unpredictable nature of the Middle East, the upcoming elections are impossible to call. The volatile region could deal out any number of unexpected jokers during the coming weeks. A wave of terrorist bombings, which many believe clinched Peres' defeat in 1996, might well affect voting patterns. Similarly, an upsurge of successful attacks by the fundamentalist Hezbollah guerrillas in southern Lebanon could sway support in various directions (though Arab violence against Israel tends to help the right). The actions and statements of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan or the United States may play a role. And perhaps most importantly will be how Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat handles the May 4 expiration of the Oslo accords (see above).

At the moment, it seems likely that Netanyahu and the right will win in June. Their victory—which would probably lead to a definitive suspension or end to the peace process and renewed Israeli-Palestinian violence—will have dire consequences for Israeli society and the entire Middle East. ■

Benny Morris teaches history at Ben-Gurion University.



Young Man in a Scurry

By Doug Ireland

In *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goethe observed that each step one takes tramples the life out of a thousand poor little worms. George Stephanopoulos, in *All Too Human*, tries to convince us that, in the years when his lust for power was at full throttle and he shilled for Bill Clinton's lurches to the right, he was really thinking about the worms all the time.

All political memoirs are self-serving, and this one is no exception. When the ambitious young son of a Greek Orthodox priest turned down a slot with the Peace Corps teaching English in Tunisia to start his adroit scramble up the greasy pole of Washington politics, he did so because he "wanted to do good and do well." This was a typical formulation in the "me" generation that came to manhood in the Reagan '80s; the contradictions inherent in such a goal seem to have escaped him at the time.

With hindsight, George now writes that in politics "the danger is when you stop caring about the difference between being right and being

Indeed, the most vivid and seemingly heartfelt writing in *All Too Human* concerns those internecine wars. Stephanopoulos traces the beginning of his end to the publication of Bob Woodward's 1994 book, *The Agenda*, to which he devotes nearly an entire chapter. George, then Clinton's communications director, had pushed hard inside the administration for cooperation with Woodward, for whom he was a major source—in the hope of sweetening the book's portrayal of how the White House made economic policy. But the strategy backfired. The authoritative detail Woodward gleaned from George and the other Clintonites made for a damning dissection of a president with no core beliefs, a rudderless and reactive White House under the president's wealthy childhood playmate and chief of staff, Mack McLarty—and how the 1992 campaign's neopopulist slogan, Putting People First, was traduced by a governance Putting the Bond Market First. Hillary Clinton denounced George as a disloyal leaker, the president turned frosty, and the resulting "professional insecurity and personal estrangement from the Clintons that followed from the Woodward book all contributed to my dark mood."

"But it was more than that," Stephanopoulos adds. "The power and celebrity I craved were also exacting their price. Certain that every move I made would be reported and every word I said would be repeated, I rarely let my guard down. ... Increasingly, my therapist's office felt like the only place I could store my frustration and sort out my feelings without any fear of disclosure."

Stephanopoulos already had been humiliated when he was replaced as communications director by Republican Reaganite David Gergen, but there was worse to come. After the electoral disaster of 1994, when the GOP took control of Congress (a defeat Hillary blamed on the Woodward book!), Clinton "withdrew from those of us on staff" and secretly turned to Dick Morris. The architect of Clinton's political comeback in Arkansas after losing the governorship, Morris had gone on to become a Republican hired gun for the likes of Jesse Helms and Trent Lott. Hillary, who had maintained the Clintons' ties to



WHITE HOUSE PHOTO

Life is hard for poor George.

Morris even after he had turned his coat, was the midwife for his return.

The first inkling George had that something was afoot came when Clinton began coming up with full-blown revisions of his stump speeches after presidential secretary Betty Currie left yellow post-it notes by Clinton's phone saying that "Charlie" had called:

Charlie was Dick's code name. The president had engaged him to run a covert operation against his own White House—a commander's coup against the colonels. The two of them plotted in secret—at night, on the phone, by fax. From December 1994 through August 1996 Leon Panetta managed the official White House staff, the Joint Chiefs commanded the military, the cabinet administered the government,

All Too Human: A Political Education

By George Stephanopoulos
Little, Brown
456 pages, \$27.95

employed, or fail to notice that you don't know what the difference is anymore." Working for Clinton, the contradictions between the Good George and the Bad George drove Stephanopoulos into depression, therapy and Zoltax—but one comes away from this book with the distinct impression that it was not principle but the loss of power struggles inside the Clinton court that finally pushed him to resign shortly after the president's re-election.