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U.S. Analysts View PLO Chief As Vacillator

Yasser Arafat is a vacillator and a compromiser, "an inadequate personality who has received and seized opportunities to reach a political power level that would not be gained had there been a contest" for leadership of Palestinian exiles.

This is the conclusion of U.S. intelligence experts contained in a secret psychological profile of the Palestine Liberation Organization leader. My associate Indy Badhwar has had access to the secret study, which reflects the best judgment of analysts whose business it is to know why Arafat behaves as he does, and what his response to changing circumstances in the explosive Middle East is likely to be.

The question of peace or war in the troubled region often turns as much on the personalities of a handful of political leaders as on geopolitical events over which they have little or no control. That's what makes the character appraisal of someone like Arafat so important to the president and his policy advisers.

Here are the highlights of the secret Arafat psychological profile:

• Beyond wondering how Arafat manages to maintain a three-day growth of beard at all times, the public probably doesn't realize that his grubby appearance is a calculated effort to "add drama, to make him stand out from his Palestinian colleagues, who generally dress more Western and more conservatively," as the study puts it.

Though his dark glasses "make him look ridiculous to some," a sort of Peter Sellers caricature of an Arab sheik, the analysts conclude that Arafat's "cloak and dagger movements, his striking and unforgettable appearance, his series of changing psychological faces will be admired only because they can be many things to many people."

• Behind the facade lurks a weak, insecure person, torn by indecision, incapable of bold action or original thought, easily manipulated by his associates. As a result, he expends "as much psychic energy in maintenance of his own position as he does on the [Palestinian] cause."

Arafat is essentially an actor, and his true power is hard to determine. "Whether he is fundamentally a figurehead cannot be determined in fact; that he is a person who would quite willingly play that role, the answer is probably yes."

• Arafat is regarded with mixed feelings by his PLO colleagues and other Arab leaders; they have differing assessments of his political power, his ability to plan and recruit, and his effectiveness as a leader.

• When he compromises, it is not from the confidence of strength, but "probably because nuances of the political context escape his mind." The massive amount of information he receives confuses Arafat, who has "less than adequate capacity to organize and interpret it himself." So he sticks to a few simple, familiar themes and leaves the formation of new ideas to others.

• It is oversimplification to describe him as merely "weak, vain, effeminate, crafty and silly," as many have done. "There is more to Arafat than the general summary statement used by most Western writers, but there is less than some of his comrades see."

• Arafat can be "ingratiating, arrogant and petty, but all such behaviors are carefully attuned to a degree of irritation, not to the degree of open attack; if that occurs, he will retreat and compromise."

• Essentially a moderate, Arafat is bound to no particular ideology other than establishing a Palestinian state under his personal control. His real power may lie in control of the PLO's funds, rumored to be kept in Arafat's own Swiss bank account.

• Though undoubtedly a skillful survivor, if a political solution were reached in the Middle East, "and the pressure for the kind of behavior removed from a covert, guerrilla type to one in an elected or appointed position, Arafat would have a very difficult adjustment."

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