Dear Ariel and Yasir

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

From: George W. Bush

To: Ariel Sharon and Yasir Arafat

I'm writing you both urgently because I fear your conflict is deteriorating so far and fast that it's going to undermine my ability to sustain the war against Osama bin Laden.

Ariel, let me start with you. I'm still not sure you understand that America is now under attack. We're fighting for our self-defense. We are fighting to maintain the free and open society that is the basis of all that is good in America and Israel. And when your friend America is at war for its survival, there is only one question Israel should ask: How can we help?

We're not interested in debating with you whether or not Arafat is your Osama bin Laden, as you've been saying. Clearly, you can't make up your own mind. After all, you've been secretly negotiating with Arafat, and have sent your own son, Omri, to meet him several times. I've never sent my daughters to meet bin Laden.

I know exactly who Arafat is. He's like many of the Arab leaders in my coalition. He's a corrupt, authoritarian, impossible figure, easily influenced by his "street," who is...
awful to deal with — but whose domestic opponents are even worse. He's part of the problem and part of the solution.

What worries me is, who is Israel? I have no problem with Israel retaliating against Palestinians who murder Israeli civilians. No one can object to that. When your snipers assassinated the Palestinian terrorist who organized the suicide bombing of the Tel Aviv disco, my spokesmen made clear we had no problem with that. But there's a red line for us. And the red line is if you try to use this situation, as some in your cabinet are urging, to destroy the Palestinian Authority and end Arafat's control in the West Bank and Gaza.

If you do that now, and if total chaos erupts in the territories or, worse, Islamic radicals take over, which then forces you to reoccupy these areas, and that inflames the Arab-Muslim world, you will be seriously undermining our coalition against bin Laden. And whoever undermines that coalition undermines us.

I fear, Ariel, that your American friends and your ambassador — do you even have an ambassador here? — have not conveyed to you how serious this war is for America. I know the Palestinian radicals are trying to goad you. I know you were working for a cease-fire before they killed your minister. I truly appreciate that. But don't let the assassination of your minister goad Israel into doing crazy things. That is exactly what the terrorists want.

Ariel, don't you get it? We know bin Laden didn't attack us to liberate Palestine. We know the roots of this story are in the anger of Arab citizens at their own bad regimes. We know the roots are with the fanatics who want to twist Islam into a religion of anger and martyrdom. These truths are too big to hide — unless you get in the way and make Israel the story. Get off the radar screen! Our resolve is now being tested by our enemies — we don't need it tested by our friends. If you do — especially after Americans start dying in Afghanistan — it will seriously damage the special U.S.-Israeli relationship.

As for you, Yasir, you say you want to join the world's non-smoking section — those who oppose terrorism. Well, then don't come near me smoking cigars. I made clear that I'm ready to support a Palestinian state, but if you're not supportive of us in this war, you can forget about that.
If your people want to throw stones at Israeli soldiers, that's your business. But if you won't crack down on Palestinians who blow up Israeli discos or assassinate Israeli ministers and take some of the pressure off Sharon, as I have asked him to take it off you, then I'll assume you're on the side of bin Laden and the Taliban — just another thug who harbors terrorists. And please don't tell me you can't control your own people. You've sold us that carpet one too many times. If you won't, Congress eventually will force me to cut off all aid to you, put you on the terrorism list and use all our means to delegitimize you. And why not? The cult of martyrdom and suicide that you have recklessly allowed to grow among Islamist Palestinians is not just a threat to Israel and to you. It's now a threat to us.

For so many years, boys, it's always been about you. Well, now it's about us. I need you both to postpone your war now. If you won't do that for us, we'll assume you're against us.