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MIDEAST ACCORD: THE SCENE; The Drama Continues To the End

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Judging from the tape marks on the stage showing Yasir Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin where to stand and from the 12-foot-tall polystyrene sphinx and model of the Great Pyramid behind them, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt appeared to be vying for a Tony award for stage direction

Never one for small gestures, Mr. Mubarak spared no expense to create a scene of peace and harmony as the leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel waited to sign a long-awaited agreement putting the Gaza Strip and Jericho under Palestinian rule

Flanking the leaders were delicately sculpted statues of Isis, the Egyptian goddess of fertility, in whose hands was a dove about to fly away. Pink carnations festooned the stage, and little blue lights twinkled gently on and off in the stage's dusky background

All of a sudden, however, Mr. Mubarak's elaborate stagecraft seemed for naught. The reason: Mr. Arafat departed from the script by refusing to sign six maps that were annexes to the 186-page agreement. Size of Jericho Zone

Mr. Arafat was worried that signing the maps would commit the P.L.O. to accept a particular size for the city of Jericho, even though he and Mr. Rabin had agreed orally around 2 A.M. today that the size of the Jericho zone -- and two disputes about border guards -- would still be subject to negotiation while the rest of the pact was being put into effect

The first clue that something was amiss came when Mr. Rabin went to the gilded Louis XIV table on stage to sign the agreement. He discovered that Mr. Arafat's signature was missing from the maps, and he knew that no Arafat signature on the maps meant no agreement

It was not until Mr. Rabin summoned his Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, to examine the signature-less maps that the 1,500 people in the Cairo International Conference Center, including President Clinton's Middle East

team, realized that Mr. Mubarak's careful staging had taken a surprise and .unhappy turn

Mahmoud Abbas, a senior P.L.O. official, gave the address he was scheduled to give. But the carefully demarcated line of dignitaries on stage -- Mr. Mubarak, Mr. Arafat, Mr. Rabin, Mr. Peres, Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Russia's Foreign Minister, Andrei V. Kozyrev, started acting like unruly schoolboys. Stage Whispers

During the Abbas speech, Mr. Peres started whispering with Mr. Mubarak. Then Mr. Mubarak whispered to Mr. Arafat, and soon Mr. Peres was talking .with Mr. Arafat

In what seemed like a serious breach of protocol, Nabil Shaath, the P.L.O.'s chief negotiator, suddenly strode onto the stage, apparently to ask Mr. Arafat what was going on. Mr. Shaath next went to the table to look at the maps, and then he talked to Mr. Peres. A minute later, Mr. Christopher interposed .himself between Mr. Arafat and Mr. Shaath to talk

.Mr. Mubarak was fuming that Mr. Arafat had rained on his party

As Mr. Mubarak steamed, Mr. Rabin grew red in the face, and was said to have summoned his motorcade. Opposite Mr. Rabin, Mr. Arafat glowered, and moved a leg nervously as if he were digging in. Christopher's Impatience

Several officials at today's ceremony speculated that Mr. Arafat, who many Palestinians say has compromised too much with Israel, might have balked to show the Palestinian people how tough a negotiator he is. One official attributed Mr. Arafat's foot-dragging to "his difficulties in coming to closure" .on thorny matters

Through all this, Mr. Christopher seemed to grow increasingly impatient. Later he told an aide that he was thinking: "I wish someone could call time-out. The game is in progress and they're trying to call audibles on the line, and ".what they really need is a huddle

At that point Dennis Ross, the Administration's chief negotiator on Middle East matters, walked onto the stage and whispered to the parties that they .should declare a recess

The audience was stunned when it was suddenly announced the parties would take a short recess. The feuding leaders moved stage left and disappeared. Four minutes later they were back. During that short intermission, Mr. Arafat is said to have asked Mr. Rabin for a letter in which he promised to discuss the size of Jericho and the two border issues. The Israeli leader said he had

already promised to negotiate those matters, but if Mr. Arafat wanted such a letter, he could have it

That settled, Mr. Arafat went back to the gilded table to sign the map, and Mr. Rabin followed suit

Eloquent as usual, Mr. Peres began his address by saying: "We had a dream before we had a map. Now we have a map and a dream together

He then turned to Mr. Arafat and said, "Our partner in a very difficult journey, we did it