

Palestinian Politics and the Peace Process

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.



Brief Analysis

During the period when his movement's goal was the destruction of Israel, Yasser Arafat developed a style of leadership that allowed him to deal effectively with the Palestinian people and the Arab countries. That style was for all power to be centralized and personalized, although non-dictatorial. This leadership style allowed Arafat to keep his movement together. He did not alter this style after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, with the result that he lost a number of valuable opportunities in the post-Oslo era.

During 1993 to 1996—a period sometimes characterized as "the window of opportunity"—Arafat faced some extremely difficult problems with very limited resources: making the transition from a revolutionary movement to a state-in-the-making, building embryonic state institutions, handling the interim process with Israel, maintaining relationships with the Arab countries and the United States, and balancing the range of internal forces, which included silencing opponents while keeping together his own alliance of "outsiders" and "insiders", radicals and moderates.

Arafat made a series of mistakes during this period that lessened his credibility and halted progress in the peace process. At certain moments, such as early 1996, Arafat permitted (or at least did not do enough to prevent) a level of anti-Israel terrorism that was clearly unacceptable. Plus, Arafat was not conciliatory enough toward Israel both in negotiations and in his public statements. Furthermore, repeated statements made by the Palestinian Authority (PA) during negotiations with the Labor government, stating that there are no differences between Labor and Likud, indicate that Palestinian leaders failed to appreciate the Rabin/Peres government. These miscalculations by Arafat ultimately contributed to the election of the Netanyahu government in 1996.

The PA System

Arafat modeled his governing system after Egyptian and Jordanian regimes, which allow room for some pluralism and a limited opposition. This system has remained relatively stable: Arafat has stayed in power, he has merged the "outsiders" and "insiders" with relatively few problems, and he has kept the support of the United States. On the other hand, the regime is extremely centralized, and there have been severe problems with corruption and human rights violations.

The Palestinian Authority's approach toward opposition has been to treat differently three major groups:

Past collaborators with Israel: Those who cooperate with Israel are treated most harshly and are often killed—sometimes after being kidnapped, at other times simply disappearing after being called to the police.

Democrats: Human rights activists are arrested selectively and briefly, and can usually remain active after their release if they tone down their rhetoric.

Radicals: After terrorist attacks, extremists (especially Hamas and Islamic Jihad) are arrested for several weeks or months in order to discourage such activities and to placate U.S. and Israeli concerns. They are often sentenced to prison terms and then quietly released.

The Future

Faced with a likely stalemate in "final status" talks, Arafat has three options:

- An all-out battle with Israel would not only lead to a loss for the PA, but it would also destroy Arafat's leadership of the PA.
- A declaration of independence in May 1999, when the interim agreement under the Oslo accords expires, is something Arafat has threatened to do. Although Arafat already declared Palestinian independence in 1988, he may hope that a re-declaration will evoke global recognition of Palestine as a state and put pressure on Israel. However, a declaration of independence would also be a violation of Oslo, and would therefore be an additional proof of Arafat's intransigence.
- Patience, although it may be unattractive, is the best alternative. If Arafat waits, the current process will eventually lead to a state. Plus, patience will give him the opportunity to engage in state-building and preparation for independence.

Although the peace process is presently deadlocked, both Israel and the PA need and want the process to continue. This sentiment has begun to take root in the Arab world as well. Arab states used to refuse to deal with Israel at all; now they are demanding that Israel make peace (on their terms, of course). These underlying regional trends point to an eventual resolution of the conflict. Short-term progress is also likely—in two or three months, a decision will be made on further redeployments. The biggest problem will be in the mid-term, that is reaching an agreement between Israel and the PA on final status. Right now, the Palestinians and the Israelis are too far apart in their expectations to reach a compromise. While the United States can be useful as a bridge between the parties, ultimately the United States cannot impose a final settlement.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Tahl Colen.

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