A Democratic Palestine

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Robert Satloff (/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.

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With Fidel Castro now sporting double-breasted suits, the uniform-clad Yasser Arafat could rightly claim to be "the world's last revolutionary." In this regard, as in so many others, Arafat has no heir. None of the contenders to "succeed" him -- if the verb is appropriate to the situation -- wears a military uniform. At Arafat's funeral, the pallbearers will be in either jackets and ties, checkered keffiyehs, or traditional religious garb -- but little khaki.

If history is any guide, worst-case fears about a descent to anarchy in the immediate aftermath of Arafat's death are unwarranted. While "Palestine" is not a state in the legal sense, it does have some of the attributes of the modern Arab state, from which succession lessons can be drawn.

Traditionally, Arab states have had coups and assassinations but rarely revolutions or civil wars. When faced with the prospect of radical change that could bring down an entire ruling system, elites have more often than not found a way to produce suitable (or at least sustainable) successors rather than risk exposing themselves to wholesale political change. Such has been the case in republics, like Egypt, as well as in monarchies, like Saudi Arabia. The counter-case does not exist -- there is no example of an Arab state disintegrating when the leader, even the paramount leader, leaves the scene.

Like most other Arab states, Palestine -- the political hybrid of the Palestinian Authority, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and its sundry constituent groups -- has been highly centralized in the person of the leader. Like other states, it boasts competing and overlapping intelligence and security agencies that are themselves more potent than the regular uniformed forces. While there are thousands of guns floating around the West Bank and Gaza, the vast majority are in the hands of governmental or para-statal organs; the armed units of "opposition" groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad are very small, numbering in the hundreds.

In the current Palestinian case, Arafat's death likely means a "rush to the ramparts" by Palestinian political and security figures, each in his (and they will all be men) own zone of influence in the West Bank and Gaza, and probably working in concert with each other. The objective would be to defend their collective authority while protecting their individual slices of power and influence. A "national leadership" of political and security personalities will probably emerge, with the former playing a more public role at the beginning of the process, progressively ceding real power to the latter. The bywords would be unity, accountability, transparency,

participation, and democracy -- little of which would in fact exist.

As for relations with Israel, his collective heirs will leaven Arafat's legacy with pragmatism. While offering no political concessions that Arafat was unwilling to countenance, they are also likely to go further than Arafat toward meeting Israel's immediate security concerns, lest Arafat's death convince enough Israelis that the cost of decisive military action against the PA is worth the perceived benefits. In the Arafat era, that was not the case, but in the age of his successors, a new approach may take hold.

According to this analysis, the most likely scenario in the immediate aftermath of Arafat's passing is Palestinian political stasis -- neither a collective bloodletting nor a collective sigh of relief. In the near term, this will not lead to much in the way of movement forward (toward either better governance or conciliation in diplomacy with Israel) or backward (toward either full-scale kleptocracy or open warfare against Israel). Getting and keeping power will be the main thrust of post-Arafat Palestinian politics, and there is little that outside powers, including the United States, can do to alter the local dynamic and its outcome.

But with the passage of time, all is likely to change. Optimists believe that the death of Arafat will eventually free Palestinian politics from the stranglehold that the chairman's unique persona has helped keep on it for a generation. According to this theory, Arafat's passing will unleash centrifugal forces that will send Palestinians in different directions: West Bankers and Gazans asserting their own "insider" interests, refugees asserting refugees' interests, and Palestinian citizens of the two key neighboring states -- Jordan and Israel -- asserting their own interests apart from the larger nationalist cause.

On the plus side, this cannot but make the Israeli-Palestinian dispute more tractable. Local politics in the West Bank and Gaza are likely to develop in a more positive way than in recent years. A possible negative side effect of this process is that the assertion of a post-Arafat Palestinian identity within Jordan and Israel may very well complicate politics in those countries. Along with that, the Palestinian cause in general will lose some international visibility, though it may eventually gain more in terms of legitimacy without Arafat as its symbol.

But the more pessimistic scenario also has analytical heft. According to this view, Arafat's double failure -- the failure to cultivate a successor group of leaders and the failure to take advantage of diplomatic opportunities to settle the Palestinian-Israeli dispute -- will leave secular nationalism leaderless and deflated. After an interregnum, the vacuum could be filled by the Islamist alternative, which appears more responsive to popular needs and unburdened with the failed strategies of the past. The result could be that the difficult but at least theoretically resolvable conflict between two nationalisms will be replaced by an irreconcilable, post-September 11 religious war -- leaving the world, remarkable as it may seem, pining for the days of yore.

Although the power grab likely to follow Arafat's death will be beyond their influence, outside actors can affect the outcome of longer-term Palestinian political change. Israel, Jordan, and Egypt will all be influential; to varying degrees, Saudi Arabia and Syria will also have roles to play. What is clear is that the United States could be pivotal, so long as U.S. policymakers learn from the past.

In the aftermath of the signing of the Oslo Accords, U.S. relations with the Palestinian leadership and people changed overnight, and the United States faced what seemed to be a clear, if difficult, decision. This was the choice between emphasizing security (Arafat's commitment to renounce violence and terrorism and work cooperatively with Israel toward a negotiated solution to their conflict) or democracy (the development of sound, stable, representative political institutions that would create a Palestinian polity strong and mature enough to build peaceful relations with Israel). Taking its cue from Israel, Washington chose security. In the end, as has been made regrettably clear, it got neither security nor democracy.

The passing of Arafat will provide that Middle Eastern rarity: a second chance. With Palestinian politics inwardly

focused in the immediate aftermath of Arafat's death, promoting an early resumption of high-level Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy is the wrong approach. Instead, this is precisely the moment for the United States to press forward with a three-pronged agenda.

First, Washington should do all it can to assist Israel in implementing its plan to disengage from Gaza and the northern West Bank. More than anything else, the prospect of Israeli withdrawal from these areas will compel moderate, reformist Palestinians to come out of the woodwork and fight for their interests in the internal Palestinian political contest that looms.

Second, the United States should promote a U.S.-Palestinian agenda that emphasizes democracy, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Elections that were impossible as long as Arafat had a stranglehold on power are now conceivable. This new American approach cannot by itself ensure that the optimistic scenario will take hold. President Bush's promise last week to work for "lasting democratic political institutions" in a free Palestine is a good start. But without a consistent, concerted push from Washington -- the foreign capital that all Palestinians have, for the last decade, cared most about -- the prospects are dim indeed.

Third, the Bush administration should challenge Arabs and Europeans to lend material support to both these efforts. Foreign critics of the president's first term who demand "greater American engagement" -- while still providing broadcast time to anti-peace jihadists, welshing on their financial commitments, or reveling in producing peace plans unrelated to reality -- should have no standing in Washington. But countries that are willing to invest in the success of a post-disengagement Gaza -- politically, economically, and morally -- should find a willing partner in the White House.

In the end, Arafat's death opens up vistas of opportunity for Palestinians brave enough to act. Washington should help them take advantage of this opening. We cannot, of course, force them to do what is in their own interest.

Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is the editor of After Arafat: The Future of Palestinian Politics. ❖

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