

After Arafat: Challenges Ahead

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Brief Analysis

The convergence of Yasser Arafat's departure from the scene after four decades of domination and the imminent Israeli disengagement from Gaza (which will include the removal of settlements for the first time since 1967) represents a unique opportunity for Israeli-Palestinian relations. Arafat leaves behind a huge leadership void. With such prolonged centralized control over Palestinian affairs, he was everything in one man. He was the glue holding together all strata of Palestinian society—those living inside and outside the territories, Gazans and West Bankers, older and younger generations of activists, Islamists and leftists. He was the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Palestinian Authority, and the Fatah movement, and he personally controlled political, security, and economic decisionmaking as well as enormous funds.

Many forces are likely to attempt to fill the vacuum and share in the inheritance. There are already signs of the emergence of a collective leadership composed of the veteran Fatah leadership, headed by Mahmoud Abbas (a.k.a. Abu Mazen) and Ahmad Qurei (a.k.a. Abu Ala) and supported by Fatah activists of the intermediate generation. They will divide Arafat's powers and responsibilities among themselves and seek to stabilize their rule based on the collective desire to preserve national unity. Over time, however, the internal contest over spoils and policies is likely to surface and threaten the new leadership. The imminent Israeli disengagement from Gaza, which is deeply dividing Palestinian society, will only add to the challenge.

Breaking with Arafat's Problematic Legacy

The task confronting this new-old leadership is formidable. They are inheriting internal anarchy, polarization, political stagnation, and corruption, compounded by the gloomy atmosphere created by four years of intifada. Currently, they seem intent on breaking away from important parts of Arafat's legacy. Specifically, they hope to reform Palestinian political, security, and economic systems and to halt what they call "the militarization of the intifada," i.e., the use of terrorism, one of Arafat's lifelong tools. Unlike Arafat and Hamas, they view the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza as an opportunity. Yet, although they have better intentions than Arafat, they possess much less internal legitimacy and political power to implement these intentions.

One major immediate challenge is being put forth by Hamas, which, although weakened by Israeli military efforts

that have deprived it of its charismatic leadership, is still a major internal player with ready terrorist capabilities and political ambitions. Hamas fears that the Israeli withdrawal will deny it essential internal legitimacy for the continuation of the "armed struggle"—its *raison d'être*—and seeks to create the impression that Israel is being forcefully pushed out of Gaza. Accordingly, the group sees the fragile post-Arafat situation as a unique opportunity. Mindful of the potential threat that its terrorist capabilities pose to the nascent post-Arafat leadership, Hamas is offering a seemingly tempting deal—agreeing to a ceasefire in return for a share of power. If Palestinian leaders accept this deal, Hamas's power and political influence will be enhanced. If they decline it, they will be confronted with the consequences of a deteriorating security situation.

Next Steps

All parties concerned—moderate Palestinians, Israel, the United States, moderate Arab governments, and the international community at large—should attach high priority to the task of strengthening the new Palestinian leadership and making Israeli disengagement from Gaza successful.

First, it is imperative to stabilize the security situation in order to give the new leadership room to establish itself, as well as to facilitate the Israeli withdrawal. Toward that end, a ceasefire should be brokered. Unlike the failed *hudna* (ceasefire) called for during Abbas's tenure as prime minister in summer 2003, a new truce should be based on terms that are clear to all parties, that eschew any sort of time limit, and that make the Palestinian leadership responsible for enforcing the agreement even among non-obedient factions. In order for this to happen, a U.S. role is warranted.

Second, executive-level elections are absolutely essential in order to grant the new leadership vital internal legitimacy. In addition, parliamentary elections could help uphold the spirit of reform, while elections for Fatah institutions could help revitalize this important backbone of mainstream Palestinian politics. The international community should assist in the preparations and monitoring of any executive and parliamentary elections.

Both before and after elections, the new Palestinian leadership should adopt a different mindset. In particular, it should be prepared to assume responsibility, shape a political platform based on positive rather than negative themes, consolidate control over security, and enforce security requirements sooner rather than later.

For its part, Israel should give the new leadership the benefit of the doubt, as well as the necessary space. Apart from enabling a ceasefire and Palestinian elections, Israel would do well to announce that it is going ahead with its disengagement plan. The government should not accede to suggestions (emanating from both the left and the right) that it freeze the plan until the consolidation of the new Palestinian leadership and then, perhaps, switch to a bilateral framework. Yet, Israel should strive to coordinate the implementation of the plan with a Palestinian partner in order to embolden the new leadership and enhance the chances of successful disengagement. Indeed, the disengagement offers the new Palestinian leadership a major opportunity to institute itself and generate reforms. Israel would also do well to clarify that only a successful disengagement—i.e., one that leads to a cessation of terrorism and an improved security situation—can open the horizon for a renewed Israeli-Palestinian political process. Such a clarification would provide incentives to moderate Palestinian leaders, in addition to giving them ammunition to counter Hamas and other radical factions who thrive on the notion that Palestinians can advance their cause only through the use of violence.

Time to Move Ahead

It is time for the international community to assume an active role in supporting the Palestinian transition and the Israeli disengagement from Gaza, politically, economically, and otherwise. Only the implementation of all of the above measures, and others, can offer a chance of success to this monumental mission. And only the United States stands a chance of making it all happen by taking an active lead role. Washington is the sole actor capable of serving

as the necessary bridge between Palestinians and Israelis and of orchestrating the necessary regional and international involvement. Now is the time to move ahead; the stakes are simply too high to do otherwise.

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