

Arafat's Death Can Breathe Life into Peace Process

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Yasser Arafat has dominated the Palestinian national movement for the past 40 years. He has been a fixture on the landscape of the Middle East. He came to embody the Palestinian cause and was determined that no other Palestinian figure could emerge as a possible alternative to him.

Not surprisingly, Palestinians fear life without him.

The fear is not only emotionally driven. True, he has been an icon and father figure for the Palestinian people. That alone will create a profound sense of loss. But there is a very practical side to Palestinian foreboding. Without Arafat, there is no figure who has the authority to prevent a violent struggle to succeed him.

Paradoxically, the fear of chaos and even civil war will probably produce what most Palestinians least expect: stability, at least in the near term. Different Palestinian factions -- whether in Fatah, Hamas or Islamic Jihad -- will not want to look as though they are responsible for a descent into fratricide. As a result, violence during the transition is likely to be contained.

What the people want

The good news is that the Palestinian public will want elections. Already, 67% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have registered to vote in difficult circumstances for the upcoming local elections to be held in the municipalities. While many leading Palestinians favor holding elections, the ground will need to be prepared among Palestinians, the Israelis and the international community in order for them to take place in a timely manner or even at all.

One unfortunate reality about the Middle East is that good things neither materialize on their own nor are they self-implementing. If we want to take advantage of the moment to help pave the way for a stable transition for the Palestinians and a new leadership far more likely to be more responsible than Arafat, we will need to begin speaking about elections and what it will take to make them successful.

That will require President Bush and his senior representatives to take several steps:

- First, we should emphasize publicly and get the Europeans to join us in calling for elections and making it an expectation of the international community. The greater the sense of international expectation, the more those

Palestinians pushing for an electoral mechanism to manage succession will gain leverage.

- Second, begin a dialogue with Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia and leading members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, such as Kadura Faris. The dialogue should focus on what Palestinians must do to hold elections, what help from the outside they will need to do so, what conditions on the ground will be necessary for conducting them, and so on.
- Third, organize three-way discussions among ourselves, the Palestinians and Israelis. It is time to resume such discussions, and with Arafat no longer an obstacle, there is no reason not to hold them. In the first instance, the three-way discussion should address the kinds of steps both sides will need to take to create an environment in which the elections can be held. (Certainly, this can and should also be a forum to discuss how to manage the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza so it creates a new opening and not an explosion at the time of withdrawal.)
- Fourth, discuss with the Europeans and others what it will take to ensure free and fair Palestinian elections for new leadership. The role of international monitors and supervision should be considered, bearing in mind that developing a consensus on this issue will not only build momentum for the elections but will also raise the costs to Hamas of fomenting violence.

Hopes for a new era

Though Arafat's death will create emotional upheaval for Palestinians and the risk of a violent struggle to fill the void, it may also create circumstances that make the emergence of a new era possible.

Having sought an alternative to Arafat, the Bush administration must now act to create an environment in which those Palestinians most committed to coexistence have the best chance to lead the Palestinian people to a more hopeful future.

Dennis Ross is counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*, and former U.S. envoy to the Middle East under Presidents Clinton and George H.W. Bush. ❖

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