

A Window of Opportunity

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Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has bestrode the Middle Eastern terrain for so many decades that it is hard to imagine the landscape beyond his death.

Beloved by some for bringing the Palestinian issue to world attention and hated by others for his embrace of terrorism, Arafat has defined the Palestinian issue for better and worse. Many will debate his legacy, but the more urgent task is to understand that with his passing from leadership, we are on the threshold of a new era. It is an era that is not foreordained.

The United States may not be able to determine the contours of the post-Arafat era, but it can help nudge it in a favorable direction. This is particularly possible, since we are at a "plastic moment" in the Middle East.

Arafat's passing from the scene comes as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has diverged from his past practice and has agreed to pull out of Gaza and evacuate all the Jewish settlers there. Moreover, it comes after a U.S. election, when it is natural that every re-elected administration revisit past practices, policies and personnel.

President Bush's decision in 2002 to make clear that Arafat was beyond American diplomatic engagement since he was incorrigible in support for terrorism was the correct decision. Yet, this implicitly put a burden on supporting Palestinian reformers as an antidote to Arafat's recidivism. It is arguable that this opportunity was missed by all -- including Palestinians, Israelis and the United States -- during the brief "Ramallah spring" in the summer of 2003, when reformer Mahmoud Abbas (a.k.a. Abu Mazen) briefly was premier before being effectively sidelined by Arafat.

Now it looks as if there might be a second bite of the apple, and this creates an important opportunity for the Bush administration. Without major fanfare, over the last week or so, Abbas is assuming his duties as head of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Arafat's absence. Therefore, the first of two U.S. challenges is to find a way to effectively support Abbas without giving him a made-in-America "bear hug." This won't be easy, but it is attainable. Failure to act is likely to be filled by Hamas and other terror groups, who may have an interest in triggering a spate of suicide attacks to provoke an Israeli military retaliation, which would ensure there is no window of opportunity.

The United States should also urge its European and Arab friends to be out front in backing an emerging collective leadership, namely Abbas working alongside Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia, as well as some of the younger guard. The younger guard is divided and therefore does not have the base to move forward now. Rather, it

seems they may have a strong interest that the two older leaders -- respected for their experience -- hold the reins during this transitional period. This could stave off a succession struggle between key figures of the younger generation -- especially important now, at least until the Palestinians get organized and hold their first election since 1996.

The task won't be easy, because Arafat was a master in playing off those rivals who were dissatisfied with his authoritarian style of rule. Due to the emergency of Arafat's passing from the scene, however, this is the best opportunity in a long time to see that the Palestinians work together to immediately stabilize the situation as a collective leadership under Abbas, before heading to an election that could clarify future leadership.

The United States can play a behind-the-scenes role by ensuring international support for a post-Arafat leadership as it occurs in a stable manner, but it also has a second goal: to ensure that the Gaza pullout is done in a way that strengthens -- not weakens -- Abbas. This means urging Israel to work with the post-Arafat Palestinian Authority as it plans its withdrawal.

In other words, by making sure that the Gaza withdrawal is not unilateral, but achieved bilaterally with the PA, this will ensure not only a smooth handover, but also will bolster the new leadership's legitimacy as well as revive the trust between these two peoples, shattered as a result of the last four years of terror and violence. Moreover, coordination is the best hope for Israel, for it does not want to revive the image of the hastily executed pullout from Lebanon in 2000, when the rejectionist Hezbollah took credit for the Israeli exit. Confidence-building measures can exist on both sides -- the PA receiving credit for obtaining an Israeli agreement to a ceasefire with Palestinian factions of every stripe, while signaling to the Israelis that inciting violence and "suicide martyrdom" in the state-run media will stop.

Arafat's passing from the scene is the best hope to revive the stalled Middle East peace process. The actions taken by all sides, including the Bush administration, at this critical juncture can help shape this new reality. The opportunity for a second Ramallah spring should not be missed.

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