

# Arafat Survives for Now, Amid Divided Fatah Opposition

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## Brief Analysis

**W**ith Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei (a.k.a. Abu Ala) rescinding his recent resignation without gaining any meaningful control over disparate security forces, PA Chairman Yasir Arafat can claim to have won the latest round in the power struggle taking place inside the West Bank and Gaza. Arafat's success is partly attributable to his ability to use a variety of methods to outmaneuver his opponents, as he has done in the past. In addition to intimidating foes and mollifying allies, Arafat has skillfully used his iconic status as a symbol of Palestinian nationalism to retain unquestioned political preeminence. Yet, the more Palestinians are able to distinguish between Arafat the symbol and Arafat the leader, the harder it will be for him to divert criticism.

Arafat is also fortunate that his opposition does not appear to be united. All challengers to Arafat cite a commitment to reform, but they have not yet coalesced around an alternative leader. Opposition has emerged from different directions within the mainstream Fatah movement. The first challenge comes from Arafat's principal rival in Gaza, Muhammad Dahlan. Specifically, Dahlan hopes to fill the Gaza vacuum in anticipation of an Israeli withdrawal, believing that failure to act now will undermine his power base in the future. The second challenge comes from Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a group that has perpetrated kidnappings and arson against Arafat loyalists. Their challenge comes amid greater international financial scrutiny of PA security services. The third challenge comes from the Palestinian people themselves, many of whom are complaining about corruption and lack of direction after four years of intifada. In addition to spurring a Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) vote on the issue of reform (which Arafat will ignore), this societal anger has made corruption a part of Arab and Palestinian public discourse.

### Gaza and the Dahlan Challenge

Dahlan, who was Arafat's Gaza security chief before joining forces with reformist Arafat rival Mahmoud Abbas (a.k.a. Abu Mazen) last summer, has chosen Gaza as the focus of his challenge to the chairman, given both his influence there and Israel's intention to withdraw. Dahlan has made clear that, if a direct challenge to Arafat does emerge, it will not be orchestrated from afar but rather mounted by local Palestinians in Gaza who have earned the right to express their views by dint of sacrifice for the nationalist cause. In a recent interview with the Kuwaiti daily al-Watan, Dahlan stated, "We decided to take action. What happened in Gaza is a reflection of our demand for reforms. The secret of the reformists' power is that they carried on their backs both intifadas." During the Oslo years, the Palestinian "old guard" who returned with Arafat from Tunis claimed internally that they were indispensable to the

goal of wresting land from the Israelis. With negotiations having failed and the Israelis withdrawing in the aftermath of the intifada, Dahlan seems to be saying that the old guard has no rationale for clinging to power. Dahlan also declared that 30,000 people will take to the streets in Gaza on August 10 if Arafat does not carry through with reforms. Again, Dahlan did not mention the West Bank, and it is unclear whether his declaration was real or just an idle boast. In any case, unconfirmed reports indicate that Arafat spoke with Dahlan by phone in the wake of these statements, seeking to deflate the challenge to his authority.

Previously, Dahlan had studiously avoided direct attacks against Arafat's leadership. His attacks have become bolder of late, however. In the interview mentioned above, he stated, "Arafat is sitting on the bodies and ruins of the Palestinians at a time when they desperately need a new approach. . . . The Palestinian situation cannot tolerate any more corruption, and there is no escape from implementing reforms that Arafat himself has authorized." He also stated, "The PA received about 5 billion dollars from donor countries that have gone with the wind, and until now we do not know where it went." Although Dahlan did not allege that Arafat took the money, he claimed that the chaos created by Arafat is the culprit in its disappearance: "The failure to organize led to this chaos. . . . It's time that they bring the corrupt to account. . . in a way different from before."

#### A West Bank Challenge Amid Greater Financial Scrutiny

The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades—a group that has conducted multiple suicide attacks against Israel—has recently kidnapped key PA security officials, torched the office of the leading Arafat loyalist in Jenin, and prohibited PA cabinet ministers from visiting a refugee camp. These and other actions have placed the group at the center of the challenge to Arafat. Although the Brigades seem to have taken up the cause of reform, there may be other factors at work as well. For example, Arafat may not be able to pay the group as easily as he has done in the past. In November 2003, the BBC aired an investigative documentary alleging that the PA, with the knowledge and acquiescence of Arafat, was providing up to \$50,000 per month to the Brigades. In addition, the International Monetary Fund issued a report last year charging Arafat with siphoning \$900 million of donor money. This report spurred European parliamentarians to insist that European funding of the PA be audited. Moreover, the European Union (EU) fraud investigation agency OLAF launched an inquiry on the matter. In a rare departure from policy, the EU threatened to withhold all budgetary support to the PA unless all 55,000 members of the security services were paid with salaries deposited directly into bank accounts. This measure, long favored by PA Finance Minister Salaam Fayad but blocked by Arafat, was implemented in April 2004. Previously, many PA security chiefs had received cash in paper bags, to be distributed to subordinates. Needless to say, this system not only gave Arafat full control over money and men, but also allowed him to use the funds for other purposes, such as to pay the al-Aqsa Brigades. One wonders if it is mere coincidence that Brigade members, seeing that other PA security personnel are now guaranteed monthly wages that are not at the whim of corrupt officials, have become more vociferous about reform than they have been in the past now that their own funding has been cut.

#### Societal Criticism

These challenges come amid greater Palestinian dissatisfaction with the corruption and lack of direction that has hurt the Palestinian cause and the prospects for statehood. Polls conducted by the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research show that 85 to 90 percent of Palestinians believe that the PA is corrupt, and only half of them believe that the PA can stem this corruption. Moreover, Arab and Palestinian criticism of Arafat, once unthinkable, has continued nonstop in recent weeks. For example, former Speaker of the PLC Rafik Natshe stated, "We demand that Arafat carry out promises he has made, or explain why he can't fulfill them." Ibrahim Hamami, a prominent diaspora Palestinian based in London, said to Arafat, "You treat the Palestinians like a pair of shoes to be worn or kicked outside as the mood strikes. The solution is for you to pack your bags, take your crooked friends and go somewhere else. Get out of here." In a recent interview, King Abdullah of Jordan himself issued a

thinly veiled criticism of Arafat's failure to move on reforms.

In response, Arafat has tried to maneuver as he has in the past. He sought to mollify Prime Minister Qurei by promising him cosmetic concessions (rather than any outright change) in exchange for a greater role. At the same time, a prominent Palestinian critic of Arafat was recently shot in his own home, resulting in the amputation of his leg. Meanwhile, Arafat loyalists organized a pro-Arafat demonstration in Ramallah. One leading Arafat aide has sought to do what Arafat has skillfully done in the past—change the subject by blaming Israel. Specifically, Hani al-Hassan recently claimed that Israel has hired a Palestinian hit-team to kill Arafat. He offered no evidence to support these allegations, which were clearly aimed at engendering Palestinian sympathy for the embattled leader.

## Conclusion

The taboo of direct criticism of Arafat's control and corruption has been shattered, at a time when Dahlan is posing a challenge in Gaza and when Arafat's control over the security purse strings has been weakened. In light of these developments, it is safe to say that more opposition is likely in the future. Yet, these disparate forces of discontent have yet to coalesce into a single coherent leadership alternative. It remains unclear whether this alternative would take the form of a transitional old guard figure such as Abbas, Fatah young guard leaders claiming to represent Marwan Barghouti (who continues to play a role despite being imprisoned by Israel), or some other figure. Until such a leader emerges, Arafat—who recently celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday—is likely to believe that his position at the helm is not in jeopardy.

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