

Assessing the Current Challenge to Arafat

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Brief Analysis

Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat is facing a serious challenge to his authority, perhaps the most serious since he arrived in the territories from Tunis a decade ago this month. Yesterday, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) voted by a 43-4 margin to accept the resignation of Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei (a.k.a. Abu Ala), who earlier this week warned he would quit due to the lack of reform in the PA and the lack of authority granted him to halt chaos in the West Bank and Gaza. In doing so, the PLC called for the formation of a new reform-oriented government, a move that could actually serve to strengthen Qurei's position in a power struggle with Arafat. The resignation marks the second time in ten months that a Palestinian prime minister has resigned due to complaints about lack of authority.

European Union (EU) envoy Javier Solana pointedly refrained from visiting Arafat during his current trip to the area, hinting at potential negative consequences for EU relations with Arafat in the event that the chairman does not allow his prime minister to carry out reforms. Moreover, the PLC vote came just days after young Palestinians rioted in Gaza, protesting Arafat's appointment of his cousin Musa Arafat as security chief and adding fire to ongoing demonstrations regarding lack of reform. It also came amid a spate of kidnappings and the Ramallah shooting of Nabil Amr, a prominent reformer and former PA cabinet minister. (Amr is currently hospitalized in Jordan.)

Scope of the Challenge

The significance of the current challenge to Arafat is that it reflects complaints voiced by various parties—both at home and abroad—who were previously supportive of the chairman. The fact that the movement against Arafat is driven by his former supporters, rather than by Israel and the United States, gives it particular potency. One factor driving the challenge is the almost universal revulsion felt by the Palestinian people toward the PA's ongoing corruption and cronyism. Over the past several years, the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research has consistently found that about 85 percent of Palestinians believe the PA is corrupt. This charge was echoed by envoys from the Quartet (the UN, EU, Russia, and the United States), who informed Qurei during a recent visit to Ramallah that donor countries could not contribute additional funds to the PA due to the dearth of promised reform. UN Middle East envoy Terje Larsen—who was once among the closest of foreign diplomats to Arafat, but who has refused to see the chairman since September 2003—echoed these complaints in a recent speech to the Security Council, spurring an angry retort from Arafat's spokesman. UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, who has studiously

avoided publicly criticizing Arafat in the past, echoed Larsen's complaint and defended the envoy.

A second factor behind the challenge to Arafat is the breakdown of law and order in the West Bank and Gaza. This development has arisen amid Arafat's unwillingness to follow the first phase of the Quartet Roadmap for peace, which calls for the PA to place its security services under the control of the prime minister and interior minister. Implementing this measure has been the main goal of Egyptian military intelligence chief Gen. Omar Suleiman in his recent visits to Arafat; so far, however, the chairman has resisted any such dilution of his power. Prime Minister Qurei has consistently decried the current state of chaos, publicly citing it as the trigger for his resignation. Nevertheless, Arafat pointedly refused to provide both Qurei and his predecessor, Mahmoud Abbas (a.k.a. Abu Mazen), with the authority to impose security. According to Arafat's colleagues, the chairman believes—as other Arab rulers do—that he would risk being toppled if he shared security authority.

A third complaint against Arafat is the PA's lack of overall direction after almost four years of violence against Israel. The intifada has not triggered anything resembling the so-called final-status negotiations held in 2000. In a speech to Gaza activists last month, Arafat's main rival in Gaza, Mohammed Dahlan, declared, "We are deceiving ourselves. . . We failed to make peace and to make war. We failed at both. We have to decide now: are we going to have war or peace?"

A fourth factor driving the challenge to Arafat is the generational struggle for leadership, timed as Palestinians position themselves for Israel's withdrawal from Gaza. Palestinians no longer doubt that Israel will indeed withdraw from that territory, and their focus is therefore on filling the expected vacuum. A decade ago, Arafat seized the breakthrough at Oslo to bring his associates from Tunis to rule the PA, marginalizing the younger generation born and bred in the West Bank and Gaza. Many of these individuals had been imprisoned by Israel during the first intifada in 1987. Their frustration over their marginalization has only been compounded since then, particularly amid the misery and violence of the past four years. Qadura Fares, one of the main leaders of the Fatah "young guard" and currently a cabinet minister, took the unusual step of explicitly blaming Arafat for the present crisis. After yesterday's PLC vote, he told reporters, "Arafat is the [one] most responsible for the failure. President Arafat failed and the Palestinian government failed." Moreover, Arafat recently tried to stop local Fatah party balloting in Gaza once it became clear that the prime organizer of this activity, Dahlan, was winning. Dahlan refused to halt the balloting, however.

In light of these different strands of frustration, Arab editorial writers and columnists—who largely supported Arafat in the past—have urged him to either step aside in favor of new leaders or engage in comprehensive reforms. Such calls have been made in leading Arabic newspapers circulated throughout the Arab world, including al-Hayat, al-Sharq al-Awsat, al-Quds al-Arabi, and the Egyptian daily al-Akhbar.

Arafat's Efforts to Withstand the Challenge

Even if the scope of the opposition appears deeper than it has in the past, one should not underestimate Arafat's various techniques for withstanding challenges to his authority. He has been counted out many times in the past, but has nevertheless managed to outmaneuver his rivals and prevail. One of his techniques is to set himself against his Israeli enemies and highlight his iconic pose of defiance. For example, after being criticized internally for letting Abbas resign in September 2003, Arafat shifted attention to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's subsequent threat to expel him from the territories, using it as a rallying cry. Consequently, his popularity rose briefly before returning to its previous levels. Any Israeli statements regarding the current challenge to Arafat will only play into the chairman's hands; Israeli officials should therefore avoid such remarks. Palestinians remain angry with Israel and the United States due to Israeli reprisal attacks against Palestinian security forces and to the perceived lack of engagement with Qurei. Hence, Arafat may again seek to blame his failures on others.

Another technique employed by Arafat is to mollify Palestinian public opinion by making cosmetic changes. Arafat revels in his political instincts and his understanding of the complexities of power in the territories. Two years ago, he declared that he would reorganize the security services but made only slight changes; yesterday, he offered a similar declaration. In a related tactic, Arafat often counters his challengers by appointing loyalist cronies to key posts while quietly deploying others to intimidate critics. The appointment of Musa Arafat is a recent example of the former. As for the latter, Abbas recently stated that he resigned last year because his life was in danger, hinting that the threat emanated from Arafat. Similarly, although it cannot be proven that Arafat ordered the shooting of Nabil Amr (who has long been critical of the chairman), suspicions linger. The last time Amr was attacked came just after he published an article complaining that Arafat missed an opportunity to make peace with Israel in 2000.

Implications for Gaza Withdrawal

Even though not a single settlement has been removed from Gaza thus far, the anticipated withdrawal is already being factored into, and drawing attention to, the future of Palestinian governance. Some wonder whether scenes of chaos will lead Israel to reassess the withdrawal; such a reversal is doubtful given the current popularity of the initiative among Israelis. Moreover, the actual withdrawal remains months away, and much could happen within the PA before then. It is too soon to say whether the current crisis will sweep Arafat from power, merely chip away at his authority, or fail like past challenges. Arafat is betting that his track record of outmaneuvering rivals will hold him in good stead. Yet, the accumulation of so many grievances from so many parties could lead to an erosion of his power, even if the extent of this erosion is not immediately apparent.

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