

# U.S. Must Weigh In:

## Arafat Has Got to Go

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In June 2002, President Bush boldly called for "new Palestinian leadership" as a precondition for U.S. support for Palestinian statehood. That revolutionary declaration recognized that no positive change in Palestinian politics or the peace process could occur with Yasser Arafat at the helm of the Palestinian Authority.

Regrettably, instead of addressing the issue of what to do with Arafat directly, the administration opted for an elaborate, costly and time-consuming effort to circumvent Arafat and promote an alternative yet subordinate leadership in the person of the gentlemanly Mahmoud Abbas, Arafat's longtime lieutenant.

Arafat, however, remained the indisputable behind-the-scenes power, capable of pulling off a putsch last week against the reformist Abbas when it served his purpose.

Subtlety, maneuvering and adroit diplomacy may be useful skills on the floor of the U.S. Senate, but they are not appropriate to the rough-and-tumble winner-take-all politics of the Middle East.

If the Bush administration wants to salvage its Arab-Israeli initiative, it must now base any further U.S. support for Palestinian statehood on Arafat actually stepping aside. Just as it told Liberia's Charles Taylor, the Philippines' Ferdinand Marcos and Haiti's Raul Cedras, Washington now should tell Arafat that, for the good of his people, he must go.

On Thursday, Israel characterized Arafat as a "complete obstacle to any process of reconciliation" and said it would "work to remove this obstacle in a manner, and at a time, of its choosing." Although an Israeli expulsion of Arafat would be legitimate, it would be far better for the United States to secure Arafat's exile through diplomacy rather than for Israel to achieve it through force.

First, the United States should consult with Arab and European allies. Creating a united front on this initiative, to the degree that it is possible, is preferable than going alone.

Second, the president should dispatch a bipartisan team of senior U.S. leaders to see Arafat. They should be people respected in Arab capitals, viewed as sympathetic to the Palestinian cause but committed to the president's new approach.

They need to deliver the following message, firmly and without equivocation: For the United States to support the Palestinian people's desire for statehood, Arafat must resign all positions in the Palestinian political hierarchy and accept permanent retirement, outside the West Bank and Gaza or any contiguous state.

If Arafat so acts, then the U.S. should lift all restrictions on direct aid to the Palestinian Authority.

Moreover, Washington should mount an international effort to support a new reformist Palestinian leadership, especially by providing assistance to security forces committed to rooting out the terrorists that so undermine the Palestinian cause.

Third, the White House should work privately with Israel to ease the transition to a post-Arafat Palestinian leadership. Though Abbas placed some blame on the Israelis for failing to match his reformist efforts with concessions of their own, Arafat's counter-coup against him validated the wisdom of Israel's stay-put approach. No Middle Easterner ever ensured his security by betting on a weak reed, after all. A post-Arafat regime, however, would deserve different treatment.

Arafat, of course, will balk. But if the U.S. makes it clear that the choice is Arafat or statehood, and never statehood with Arafat, there is at least a reasonable chance that Palestinians (and their Arab and European backers) will opt for realism. Pressure will build for Arafat to go.

Forcing Arafat into exile will not bring peace overnight. Indeed, it will be likely to usher in several months of instability and violence, as terrorists and other rejectionists try to claim Arafat's mantle. They will almost surely lose, but the process could be bloody.

When the dust settles, however, a major hurdle will have been overcome. From Tunis -- or Paris -- Arafat will continue to meddle in Palestinian politics, but his faraway voice will grow faint over time.

If Washington supports another Palestinian premier subordinate to Arafat, however, then the future will be bloody anyway, with nothing to show for it. ❖

Los Angeles Times

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