

Assessing Yasir Arafat's One-Hundred-Day Plan for Reform

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Brief Analysis

As President George W. Bush was offering his vision for a post-Yasir Arafat Palestinian state two weeks ago, the Palestinian leader's cabinet was itself unveiling a "100-day plan" for reforming the Palestinian Authority (PA). This plan was clearly designed to both respond to popular demands to fix the PA's broken or stillborn institutions as well as steer the reform process down a nonthreatening, Arafat-controlled course. While it offers promising elements of change, the plan is only likely to strengthen the unacceptable status quo.

General Principles

Approved by the PA cabinet on June 22 and presented to the public on June 26—one day after President Bush's speech—the plan includes a general set of principles, a long list of operational objectives, and very few details. It is undoubtedly a work reflecting Arafat's approach to reform; preambular language says drafting was guided by three previous declarations by Arafat himself but, interestingly, not by the Reform Charter issued by the Palestinian Legislative Council or any of the reform documents circulating in Palestinian civil society. Of the fourteen principles enunciated, seven are directed to foreign governments and international donors, six to a domestic Palestinian audience, and one to "the peace forces inside Israel." This breakdown underscores the fact that, from its outset, the plan seems to have been generated to address international concerns about the PA (and Arafat) no less than internal demands for reform. Indeed, none of these principles addresses "reform" per se, a concept which first receives mention 830 words into the 2,355 word text. As the first principle of the plan states: "The Palestinian Government sets out from one goal—in this plan as in all its programs—which is to foster the steadfastness of the Palestinian people and institutions in the face of Israeli occupation and all forms of terrorism that it exercises, settlements, establishment of separation zones, siege and other measures."

Objectives

In the second section of the document, the plan outlines a set of operational goals under five headings: general, public security, finances, judiciary, and other. The wording of the text appears carefully calibrated to echo all the chords of the international reform chorus, but to do so gingerly and without full recognition of the depth of existing problems. For example, the first objective cited is to "reinforce the separation of powers," suggesting that such separation already exists and only needs modest enhancement. At the same time, the litany of objectives is presented as little more than a laundry list of items to be checked off by some auditing inspector, belying the extent

of major, time-consuming structural change that would occur with the implementation of each item. For example, in the plan the PA commits itself to "create a modern and effective civil service"; to "endeavor to improve [the people's] standard of living"; and to "rebuild infrastructure." Done properly and professionally, these goals will take years to achieve.

Public Security

In this important realm, the seven points enunciated only obliquely address the concerns of reformers or those critical of PA institutions that "traffic in terror," to use President Bush's phrase. Nowhere does the text refer to reducing the number of security services, shrinking the size of the security apparatus, reining in unlawful or extragovernmental militias, or confiscating illegal weapons or weapons-making factories. According to the plan, the Ministry of Interior will be "restructured," "modernized," and put in charge of preventive security, the police, and civil defense, but not, by implication, the Presidential Guard—members of which have also been "compromised by terror." While the plan promises "the utmost attention to the need of the population for safety, order and respect for the law," it offers no suggestion on how to do this. Yet it did recognize two key aspects of the security problems plaguing the PA: "the negative phenomena arising from a lack of discipline within the security services" and the need to "reinforce loyalty to the Authority . . . as a manifestation of loyalty to the country," suggesting that too many security officers split their loyalty to groups like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. No mention was made, however, of any practical measures to be taken against these or similar groups.

Finances, Judiciary, and 'Other'

The ten objectives listed in the financial section are the most straightforward, addressing the need to unify national accounts (i.e., no more private accounts for custom duties or foreign grants); establish a national investment fund (i.e., no more monopolies held by Arafat cronies); create a professional auditing system; and budget expenditures on a transparent and predictable basis. Even here, the plan only promises the prospect of reform, as virtually all these commitments are couched in vague, open-ended terms, such as "develop the process of preparing the general budget"; "develop internal auditing"; "enhance the independence of the Office of the Auditor General"; and "start working on preparing the budget."

In the judicial section, the emphasis is on personnel and the physical plant, less on the operations of the judicial system itself. The main commitment concerns the "appointment of the required number of judges and the building of courthouses, offices of district attorneys . . . and modern prisons." The text does not discuss the role that either the reinvigorated judiciary or the legislative council would play in the "reinforced" balance of powers system envisioned herein.

As for "other" objectives, they run the gamut from the universal (i.e., "to reinforce national, patriotic, religious, ethical, and humanistic values") to the esoteric (i.e., to deal with "the illicit transport and burial in Palestinian territory of toxic wastes by Israel"). On the positive side, this section includes an interesting reference to "renouncing fanaticism in the educational curricula," which is an important admission of an existing problem. On the negative side, the text also promises closer government control over the media, couched in terms of better "public administration and efficiency."

The Next 100 Days

Part III of the proposal is a thirteen-step plan for implementing these objectives over the next three months. Through a series of presidential decrees, administrative actions, legislative submissions, and government orders to ministries, security forces, and regional governors, the PA cabinet committed itself and the ra'is to begin to carry out its commitment to reform. Some are very specific, such as the promise to gazette the Basic Law by July 15; others are amorphous, such as the commitment to "start implementing measures"—not further defined—"that separate powers

immediately." Perhaps of greatest concern to the international community is the speed with which the PA says it wants to pursue elections, with "presidential and legislative elections" scheduled for no later than January 2003 and "municipal elections" no later than March 2003. If held according to this schedule, it is clear elections would occur well before any but the most superficial reforms will have been achieved. Not surprisingly, the document makes no mention of the obvious problem of the PA executive—i.e., Arafat and his cabinet—arranging these elections, rather than a neutral extragovernmental body outside Arafat's control.

Conclusion

The very idea of a "100-day plan" for reform underscores the obstacles to real change. While it is essential to move the reform process as fast as possible to take advantage of the current "window of opportunity," it is nonsensical to believe that after nearly nine years of the PA, substantive reform of government can be achieved in just three months, as this document promises. This problem reflects, in microcosm, the paradox of pursuing reform with the existing Palestinian leadership and underscores the urgency of conditioning any U.S. support for a future political process on both the process of reform and the outcome of leadership change. One without the other cannot produce a PA that merits high level U.S. engagement and assistance.

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