

Close the Chapter on Arafat

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Jun 27, 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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After charting a bold new path for Arab-Israeli peace, President Bush needs to quickly close a loophole through which Yasser Arafat could emerge as the popularly elected leader of the Palestinians. Otherwise, Bush's Monday speech could amount to little more than a brief detour on the way to creating a new terrorist state in the Middle East.

The president issued a stinging indictment of the current Palestinian leadership -- i.e., the unnamed Arafat -- and called on Palestinian voters to go to the polls early next year to choose "new leaders, not compromised by terrorism." However, in a glaring lacuna, he did not specifically say their terrorist pasts had disqualified Arafat and his close colleagues from participating in any U.S.-backed political process.

Indeed, contrary to what many national news outlets reported, he did not specifically call on Palestinians to remove Arafat. Not surprisingly, Arafat -- the opportunist par excellence -- immediately sought to capitalize on Bush's gentility. With a straight face, he embraced the speech, endorsed new elections and expressed bemusement that anyone would infer that the reference was to him when Bush denounced Palestinian leaders who had "trafficked in terrorism."

More surprising have been statements by some U.S. officials suggesting that Arafat could emerge from elections as the legitimate, accepted leader of the Palestinian people.

"We will see what they [the Palestinians] decide they want through these elections," Secretary of State Colin L. Powell said Tuesday, "and the United States will respect whatever they say as a people when these elections are held."

Surely, certifying Arafat's leadership through an election was not Bush's intent. A lifetime of terrorism and corruption, with the terrible coda of his personal involvement in the organizing, financing and praising of suicide bombings over the last two years, cannot be compatible with the president's call for a Middle East infused with the "universal hopes" of dignity, prosperity and freedom. In fact, no true democratic election can take place with Arafat's control over the machinery of the Palestinian Authority in the months leading to an election.

Bush, therefore, should act now to fix this problem by revoking the legal waiver he and President Clinton have routinely issued since 1993 that permits the United States to deal with the Palestine Liberation Organization and allows the PLO to have political offices on U.S. soil. This would effectively suspend U.S. ties with Arafat and his close

colleagues.

There are three groups it is especially important to ban from political life in the months leading to an election and to prevent from appearing on the ballot or from serving in subsequent leadership positions: Palestinian Authority officials formally accused of corruption by the Palestinian legislature, heads of PA security organizations and members of the PLO Executive Committee.

At the same time, Washington should inform its European and Arab allies that it will not recognize a Palestinian election in which Arafat participates, so if they are keen on helping Palestinians achieve statehood they should hasten Arafat's departure from power well before plans for a Palestinian election take shape.

Bush deserves great credit for offering Palestinians and Israelis the prospect of a hopeful future, post-Arafat.

It would be a shame if Arafat were himself atop that new Palestinian state. ❖

Los Angeles Times

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