

# After Arafat?

## The Future of Palestinian Politics

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### Brief Analysis

**A**rafat does not have a designated successor, and none of the contenders for his mantle will be able to take over all of his functions and responsibilities. The Palestinian Authority (PA) revolves around Arafat and his leadership style; thus, in the immediate wake of his death, the PA will malfunction. Centralized government and strong management, as prescribed by the drafters of the Oslo Accords, will unravel. Real power will be distributed to different actors in different regions and to varying degrees. Despite the likelihood of initial confusion, though, it is doubtful that anarchy or civil war will ensue, or that Hamas, the Islamist opposition to Fatah, will take over.

Two parallel power structures have been established by Arafat: (1) the lawful structure of the PA, including its different military and security organs, which are nominally bound by different agreements with Israel, and (2) the extra-legal structure, represented by the Fatah Tanzim, run within the territories by a younger generation of Fatah activists who enjoy "revolutionary legitimacy." The leaders who are well known in the West do not necessarily represent the power on the ground. After Arafat, a core coalition will have to be formed between these two power structures, especially between the Tanzim and the military and security forces.

None of the potential successors have the ability to effectively take control of both Gaza and the West Bank. Upon Arafat's passing, one coalition would likely form in Gaza, headed by Muhammad Dahlan. Control of the West Bank may be distributed in three pieces: in the area between the Hebron Mountains and Bethlehem; in the central West Bank area north of Jerusalem, including Ramallah; and in Samaria, including Nablus. The *primus inter pares* in the West Bank is Jibril Rajoub, head of the Preventive Security Apparatus, but even he will not be able to control all three of these sub-regions. In addition, Hamas will not be in a position to challenge the system of fiefdoms, but each of the regional coalitions will have to solicit tacit acceptance from this group.

To maintain unity, the Central Committee of Fatah might elect a titular figurehead—perhaps a founding father of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) movement, with credentials and prestige—to serve as a replacement for Arafat. Some candidates are "outsiders," such as Farouq Qadoumi, while others are "insiders," such as Sari Nusseibeh, Arafat's recently appointed representative in Jerusalem.

Cairo and Amman will also have influence in the succession. In Jordan, there has been a dramatic departure from

the policy pursued by the General Intelligence Directorate ever since General Samih Buttkhi left as head. The new policy is to try to win influence in the West Bank as a self-defense measure. Similarly, while Egyptian intelligence is hesitant to get more involved in Gaza now, Egypt will undoubtedly have a say in who controls Gaza; Egypt is too close to Gaza for comfort.

For Israel, the next Palestinian generation may be more inclined to make a permanent-status deal, which will not be possible so long as Arafat is in power. In the echelon of PA officials below him, there are people more realistic than Arafat. Many Palestinian officials have already made it clear to Israel, the United States, and the international community that they would have preferred it if Arafat had pursued different tactics at Camp David and afterwards, though few would have actually counseled him to accept Barak's offer.

KHALED ABU TOAMEH

There is little discussion in Palestinian media or official circles about the post-Arafat era; people are hesitant to bury him while he is still alive. Arafat is a phenomenon, and it will be hard to fill his shoes. Many in the Palestinian "street" are fatalistic about succession; they assume that the United States, the international community, or Israel will choose a successor, because they feel that the choice will not be the product of popular will or public elections.

If Arafat dies during a time of continuing violent struggle between Israel and the Palestinians, the Palestinians will maintain their unity. If the problem with Israel settles down, though, problems within the PA will arise. A power struggle is already going on behind the scenes, creating subtle tension among security leaders. The daily confrontations and nightly shootings—some between various security forces—are evidence that Arafat is the only thing keeping intra-Palestinian tensions from erupting. With Arafat's passing will come a new phase in Palestinian history, entailing the weakening of those "outsiders" who came from Tunis with Arafat and the rise of local, "insider" leadership.

Faisal Husseini's death in April 2001 created a vacuum in Jerusalem. Arafat asked Sari Nusseibeh to represent the PA in Jerusalem and carry out diplomatic relations, but unlike Husseini, Nusseibeh is not responsible for Orient House, does not pay for workers, and does not get involved in daily affairs in Jerusalem. Fatah has warned Arafat that pro-Jordanian forces were gaining influence there and that he must take action. There are signs that Jordan is trying to revive its lobby in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Jordan is concerned about what will happen to its own population once Arafat dies or a Palestinian state is established, and is keen to prevent any mass movement of Palestinians eastward.

While there is no direct evidence, there are rumors in the territories that Fathi Arafat, the head of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society and Yasir's brother, might be a surprise candidate for succession. He physically resembles the chairman and might satisfy a yearning for continuity, since Yasir does not have a son.

ADAM GARFINKLE

Arafat is such an extraordinarily powerful figure that he deflates discussion among Palestinians on succession. The PA lacks institutionalized procedures for succession; it is a process bereft of any documents or precedent, competing with PLO and Fatah processes that are equally untested and bereft of any legal foundation. Succession is also context-dependent. The manner in which Arafat dies is important; for instance, if he is incapacitated before his death, he may choose a successor at the last minute. The level of conflict with Israel matters as well. If there is a stable ceasefire or final agreement with Israel, succession will take place in a secure, benign environment, and familiar figures like Abu Ala and Abu Mazen are likely to be candidates. If the situation is roiled, tense, and violent, then more hard-line candidates like Qadoumi may be prominent.

Many countries have a stake in the outcome and may play a role. Despite the benign neglect of Arab leaders regarding the future of the Palestinians and their leadership, many Arab states want to reduce the potential for

chaos. Yet, if Israel does not think that a peace settlement is possible and sees no reason to tolerate further violence, it may try to eliminate the PA as an institution, with power then devolving to the street via Tanzim or Hamas. That eventuality would likely be disastrous for Palestinians. However, there is a slight chance that dismantling the PA opens a pathway for more pragmatic elements in Palestinian society to come to the fore.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jacqueline Kaufman.



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