

Policy Focus

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Special Studies
on Palestinian Politics
and the Peace Process

After Arafat? The Future
of Palestinian Politics

Robert B. Satloff, Editor



The Washington Institute
for Near East Policy

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RESEARCH MEMORANDUM

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IN ARAFAT'S WAKE: TURNING A NEW PAGE IN U.S.-PALESTINIAN RELATIONS

With Fidel Castro now regularly donning double-breasted suits to host visiting dignitaries or to attend international functions, the uniform-clad Yasir Arafat can rightly claim title as “the world’s last revolutionary.” In this regard, as in so many others, Arafat has no heir; none of the contenders to “succeed” him—if the verb is appropriate to the situation—wears a uniform, not even the military and security apparatchiks who manufacture great expectations among Western and Israeli observers. When Arafat dies, the pallbearers will be wearing either jackets and ties, checkered *khaffiyas*, or traditional religious garb—but few, if any, uniforms. As much as any other, this change is emblematic of the potential—as well as peril—that awaits Palestinian politics in the controlled chaos that is likely to follow Arafat’s passing.

If history is any guide, then worst-case fears about a descent to anarchy in the immediate aftermath of Arafat’s death are exaggerated and misplaced. While the Palestinian Authority (PA) is not a state in the legal or formal sense, it does have some of the most characteristic attributes of the modern Arab state, from which succession lessons can be drawn. It is authoritarian, highly centralized in the person of the leader, and festooned with competing and overlapping intelligence and security agencies that are themselves more potent, in many ways, than the regular uniformed forces. While there are tens of thousands of rifles, pistols, and machine guns floating around the West Bank and Gaza, the vast majority are in the hands of governmental or para-statal organs; the armed units of “opposition” groups like Hamas and Is-

lamic Jihad are very small, numbering in the hundreds. In addition, there is no legacy of civil war or large-scale violent confrontation for power in most Arab states. As for succession in the Arab world, traditionally, Arab states have had coups and assassinations but not revolutions, and when faced with the prospect of radical change that could bring down an entire ruling system, elites have more often than not found a way to produce suitable (or at least sustainable) successors rather than risk exposing themselves and their class to wholesale political change. Such has been the case in republics, like Egypt, as well as in monarchies, like Saudi Arabia. The counter-case does not exist—there is no example of an Arab state disintegrating when the leader, even the paramount leader, leaves the scene.

Between Power and Change

In the current Palestinian case, with territory effectively divided by Israeli troops, settlements, and road infrastructure, Arafat's death would likely mean a "rush to the ramparts" by Palestinian political figures and security officials, each in his (and they will all be men, regrettably) own zone of influence in the West Bank and Gaza, and probably working in concert with each other. The objective will be to defend their collective authority while protecting their individual slices of power and influence. A "national leadership" of political and security personalities is likely to emerge, with the former playing a more public role at the beginning of the process, progressively ceding real power to the latter. The bywords will be unity, accountability, transparency, participation, and democracy—little of which will in fact exist. As for relations with Israel, the collective will leaven Arafat's legacy with pragmatism. While offering no political concessions that Arafat was unwilling to countenance, they are also likely to go further than Arafat toward meeting Israel's immediate security concerns lest the disappearance of the iconic Arafat convince enough Israelis that the cost of military action against the PA is worth the perceived benefits. In the Arafat era, that was not the case, but in the age of his successors, a new approach may take hold.

According to this analysis, the most likely scenario in the immediate aftermath of Arafat's passing is Palestinian political stasis—neither a collective bloodletting nor a collective sigh of relief, nor much

in the way of movement forward (toward either better governance or conciliation in diplomacy with Israel) or backward (toward either full-scale kleptocracy or open warfare, no holds barred, against Israel). Getting and keeping power will be the main thrust of post-Arafat Palestinian politics, and there is little that outside powers, including the United States, can do to alter the local dynamic and its outcome.

Longer-Term Dynamics

With the passage of time, all is likely to change. Optimists believe that the death of Arafat will eventually free Palestinian politics from the stranglehold that the chairman's unique persona has helped keep on it for a generation. According to this theory, Arafat's passing will unleash centrifugal forces that will send Palestinians in different directions: West Bankers and Gazans asserting their own "insider" interests; refugees asserting refugees' interests; and Palestinian citizens of the two key neighboring states—Jordan and Israel—asserting their own interests apart from the larger nationalist cause. On the plus side, this cannot but make the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, as we have known it, more tractable. At the same time, local politics in the West Bank and Gaza are likely to develop in a more positive way than in recent years. A possible negative side effect of this process is that the assertion of a post-Arafat Palestinian identity within Jordan and Israel may very well complicate politics in those countries. Along with this process, Palestinianism will lose considerable international visibility, though it may eventually gain more in terms of legitimacy without Arafat as the symbol of the cause.

The most pessimistic scenario also has analytical heft. According to this view, Arafat's double failure—the failure to cultivate a successor group of leaders and the failure to take advantage of diplomatic opportunities to settle the Palestinian-Israeli dispute—will leave secular nationalism (i.e., Fatah) leaderless and deflated. After an interregnum, the vacuum will be filled by the Islamist alternative, which appears more responsive to popular needs and unburdened with the failed strategies of the past. The result will be that the difficult but at least theoretically resolvable conflict between two nationalisms will be replaced by an irreconcilable religious war—and the world will, remarkable as it may seem, pine for the days of yore.

An Opportunity for Washington

Although the power grab likely to follow Arafat's death will be beyond their influence, outside actors can affect the outcome of the longer-term process of Palestinian political change. Israel, Jordan, and Egypt will all be influential; to varying degrees, Saudi Arabia and Syria will also have roles to play. What is clear is that the United States could be pivotal, so long as U.S. policymakers learn the lessons of the past.

In the aftermath of the signing of the Oslo Accords, when the U.S.–Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) dialogue was formally reconvened and U.S. relations with the Palestinian leadership and people changed overnight, the United States faced what seemed to be a clear, if difficult, choice. In short, this was the choice between emphasizing security (i.e., Arafat's commitment to renounce violence and terrorism and work cooperatively with Israel toward a negotiated solution to their conflict) or democracy (i.e., the development of sound, stable, representative political institutions that would create a Palestinian polity strong and mature enough to build peaceful relations with Israel). Washington chose security; in the end, as a result of numerous acts of commission and omission, as well as through the actions and inactions of others, it got neither security nor democracy. There are many reasons for this failure, and a thorough analysis is beyond the scope of this introduction.

The passing of Arafat will provide that Middle Eastern rarity: a second chance. Given that Palestinian politics will almost surely be inwardly focused in the immediate aftermath of Arafat's death, allowing virtually no possibility of diplomatic movement with Israel, that is precisely the moment for the United States to press forward with a U.S.–Palestinian agenda that emphasizes democracy, transparency, accountability, and a healthy respect for the rule of law. At times, this may put us at odds with regional friends—Arab leaders, who fear that a focus on democracy for Palestinians may presage a focus on democracy in their regimes; Israeli leaders, who might see in this new agenda a departure from the traditional (if not pursued in practice) emphasis on security matters. Yet, if it is pursued with prudence and creativity, a new approach to U.S.–Palestinian relations need not frighten America's Arab allies or Israel; after all, every one of them stands to benefit from a stable Palestinian entity at peace with its neighbors. Of course, this

new American approach cannot by itself ensure that the optimistic scenario will take hold once the power-struggle phase has played itself out. Yet, without a consistent, concerted push from Washington—the foreign capital that the current Palestinian leader has, for the last decade, cared more about than any other—the prospects are dim indeed.

* * *

How Washington responds to the passing of Arafat depends largely on forecasts of internal Palestinian political dynamics, in both the short- and medium-term. The three concise essays in this special Policy Focus publication provide just such analyses. Each is written by a close and informed observer of the Palestinian scene: Ehud Ya'ari, Israel's leading television commentator on Arab and Palestinian politics and the author of Arafat's first biography; Adam Garfinkle, editor of the *National Interest*, author of numerous works on Middle East history and politics, and rapporteur of The Washington Institute's multi-year Project on Managing Leadership Change in the Arab World, of which this publication is a part; and Khaled Abu Toameh, senior writer on Palestinian affairs for the *Jerusalem Report* and special correspondent for *U.S. News and World Report*. Rather than work on a single, collaborative project, the authors were invited to offer their own perspective on the implications of Arafat's death for Palestinian politics—that is, what comes next? Their contributions, together with the brief analysis presented above, represent different, though complementary, views on post-Arafat Palestinian politics. It is hoped that all four of these essays will spark both analytical debate on likely developments within Palestinian politics as well as prescriptive debate on the opportunities and challenges that this change will present to U.S. policymakers.

Robert B. Satloff

THE MORNING AFTER

Yasir Arafat will eventually have a replacement, but certainly not a successor. Not one of the multitude of his lieutenants elbowing their way to be recognized as potential “heirs apparent” will be able to imitate the unique leadership role Arafat has played for the past forty years. Fatah, the PLO, and the PA were all designed to fit Arafat’s special management style—making him the exclusive arbiter in every matter, establishing very short chains of command subordinated directly to him, maintaining an elaborate patronage system to which he is closely linked, and, finally, weaving a web of actively rival security and intelligence operations totally under his personal command. At present, Arafat holds the following positions: chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO, president of the PA, commander in chief of the National Security Forces, and minister of interior in the PA. In addition—in an unofficial capacity and through trusted aids—he runs the vast system of economic monopolies and financial investments that sustains much of his political and military activity.

Arafat has succeeded over the years in creating a political culture in which people are permitted to argue *with* him but not *about* him. In other words, one is allowed to differ, contest with, and question the *rais* (president) but not to challenge his authority. Although Arafat is not immune to criticism, his supremacy remains intact. Over the years, he has fashioned himself as a symbol and synonym of the Palestinian cause, the person who led his people from near oblivion and disarray in the 1950s into a national renaissance beginning in the 1960s. Neither has Arafat’s position been much affected by the long series of setbacks, splits, and revolts in his own revolutionary movement. In-

deed, losing important power bases in Jordan (1970–71), southern Lebanon and Beirut (1982), and Tripoli (1984), followed by the expulsion of the Palestinian community in Kuwait (1991), has certainly left its mark on Arafat's standing but hardly weakened the absolute control he enjoys over his constituency.

Current Realities

It is impossible to imagine any future replacement capable of fulfilling the same roles or enjoying a similar type of autocracy—not just because the candidates possess lesser personal skills but because, with the eventual departure of Arafat, the Palestinian scene will immediately be transformed. In losing the dominant centrality that characterizes the present system, the checks and balances also currently in play will no longer function properly. Rivalries are bound to erupt, and a new balance of forces must emerge to reflect the disappearance of an all-powerful leader.

Much also depends on whether the succession process ultimately takes place during a period of military confrontation with Israel or under the aegis of some new agreement. In a climate of military tension, the security apparatuses naturally tend to expand their authority into civilian domains at the expense of the other branches of government, as is clearly visible in the present intifada. Although a new rapprochement with Israel—should it take hold for an extended period—could reinvigorate the prospects for “civilian” personalities, the military (especially the intelligence chiefs) are becoming the obvious choices for a future leadership role, as veteran Arafat colleagues are relegated to the sidelines. Indeed, since the outbreak of the current violent confrontation with Israel, new alliances are being formed under the watchful eye of Arafat, old partnerships are evaporating, and, to a certain degree, the political landscape is being irreversibly altered.

Some of the main features of the current circumstances, as they pertain to the succession struggle, follow:

- *Arafat has triggered a “chaotic situation” in the Palestinian territories in order to avoid initially creating a perception of direct confrontation between the PA and Israel.* To that end, the official PA structure—including the ministries and other organs like the police—

has been allowed to weaken and suffer a partial paralysis (revealing Arafat's willingness to undermine the hierarchy serving him). The decision to allow this deterioration has led to the emergence of a parallel power structure consisting of Fatah's Tanzim forces cooperating with other Islamist and Rejectionist factions, and managed by the joint committees established throughout the territories. In what has become a dual system of power, the lawful authority—a product of the Oslo Accords—is only half functional (but not yet under threat of implosion), while in the streets, a competing authority with “revolutionary legitimacy” has taken charge.

The friction between these two rival powers, although both answer to Arafat alone, is bound to manifest itself in a struggle for succession unless resolved in advance. One strategy being contemplated by Arafat—although it does not seem likely in the near term—would allow the PA to regain credibility and dignity through an anticorruption campaign, accompanied by a purge of individuals at the highest ranks. As a second phase, elections—both municipal and legislative—would be called in order to allow the Tanzim to acquire a much larger share of power in PA institutions.

- *In the meantime, the invisible boundaries between various factions are becoming blurred.* In contrast to the first intifada (1987–93) or to most of the years of “armed struggle” waged from neighboring states, factional discipline is slackening, numerous divisions are emerging within branches, and, most important, new groups are being composed across factional lines with members of Fatah, Hamas, and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine joining together outside the context of their individual organizations. These new cross-factional groups have been carrying out terrorist activity in an ad hoc manner but are also slowly taking on political color; in all the major flashpoints—such as Gaza, Hebron, and Nablus—they are clearly recognizable. Other organizations (including the Lebanese Hizballah) are trying to get a foothold in new organizations like “Popular Resistance” (intended to serve as a front for Fatah).

At present, Fatah maintains a reasonable degree of discipline among its rank and file, but this is increasingly proving difficult; the Tanzim district chiefs are already acting with a great deal of independence. At

the time of this writing, five of these chiefs in the West Bank are considered close to Chief of Preventive Security Col. Jibril Rajoub, while three (including the chief of the Bethlehem district) have chosen to affiliate with Chief of General Intelligence Col. Tawfiq Tirawi. In Gaza, most of the Tanzim branches report to Chief of Preventive Security Col. Muhammad Dahlan, while the Khan Yunis–Rafah branches have become semi-independent under Jamal Abu Samhadaneh. Hamas is fairly well deployed in the Gaza Strip, whereas Hamas in the West Bank has yet to recover from the institutional blows suffered during the three years preceding the current intifada. Still, in the region of Nablus, Hamas has succeeded in nearly matching Fatah's support base.

- *While achieving an independent Palestinian state is still very much the objective of the Palestinian leadership—although not necessarily the immediate one—the likelihood of such a state being controlled by a single, strong central manager after Arafat remains low.* Arafat's personality and track record project the image of one cohesive Palestinian unit; in his absence, the tensions among the regions are bound to present themselves more urgently. This situation will obtain not only between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank—which have no territorial contiguity and have now been totally separated by the closure of the safe passage route connecting them—but also between Mt. Hebron and the Ramallah-Nablus region.

Indeed, today, the PA resembles a confederation of geographical “emirates,” each controlled by its own coalition of local strongmen. They each take orders only from Arafat, making real long-term cooperation difficult to achieve. In some cases, one “emirate” may coordinate policy with other regions or with some central organ, but these alliances are extremely vulnerable and short-lived. The new power that has been acquired by the local coalitions is reflected by the fact that some of the more important security organizations have also effectively split on a geographical basis. For example, Force 17, the special-operations unit wrongly depicted as Arafat's Presidential Guard, conducts itself quite differently in Ramallah—where it leads attacks on Israelis—than it does in neighboring cities. In this context, the intelligence apparatuses are also concerned with their field officers becoming more attentive to the local warlords than to their own chiefs.

Who Will Succeed?

In view of the above realities, the answer to the riddle of who will succeed Arafat may be found in the context of a new formula: instead of one powerful figure at the top of a hierarchy directly subordinate to him, the next Palestinian leader may very well be more of a titular head who will run a weaker central administration, with much of the power remaining in the provinces. Accordingly, in lieu of a battle to take over the scope of authority vacated by Arafat, the eventual “morning after” would revolve around a struggle to determine both the identity of the nominal Palestinian leader and the manner by which control over the “emirates”—acting as the real source of power—would be consolidated.

What is the identity of Arafat’s nominal successor? Only those considered “natural heirs”—the founding fathers of Fatah, Arafat’s long-deceased lieutenants Abu Jihad and Abu Iyad—have ever been seriously considered for the job. Abu Mazen, the co-architect of the Oslo Accords, has lost much of his earlier prestige and has also managed to win the animosity of several important security chiefs. Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) is in a slightly better position as Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, but he does not have a real constituency of his own. Short of a personal power base, he will be dependent on the military. The late Faisal Husseini of east Jerusalem was not a favorite of Arafat’s and, since 1994, had been driven to the sidelines. His death in June 2001 may have deprived some of the Tanzim leaders of their preferred choice, but Husseini would anyway have been hard-pressed to find support in Gaza and its refugee camps. Other candidates, such as Farouq Qadoumi (the “foreign minister” of the PLO), are presently residing in Tunis, having maintained principle objections to Oslo. Since many PA functionaries, as well as Tanzim leaders, have announced their conviction that the Oslo process has exhausted itself, Qadoumi has improved his chances as successor. Abu Maher Ghneim, the experienced “numbers man” in charge of organizational affairs, could also be a candidate in certain circumstances.

As for the power struggle on the ground, the balance of forces in the Palestinian territories does not allow any of the potential contenders to aspire to dominate both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The author’s assessment, as this study goes to print, is that Colonel Rajoub

and his Tanzim allies are perfectly capable of containing even a combination of Dahlan and Tirawi in the West Bank. Dahlan himself would also be able to block any challenger—especially if he mends fences with the military, including Col. Saeb al-Ajez in the northern part of the Gaza Strip and Col. Musa Abu Hmeid in the southern part.

In order to avoid bloodshed or a major internal conflict, these players will probably reach an understanding at least for the initial post-Arafat period. The eighteen-member Central Committee of Fatah will likely be the entity called upon to bestow legitimacy on such an understanding by electing a candidate for the presidential referendum. The candidate chosen, however, will not necessarily inherit all of Arafat's other mantles; the Executive Committee of the PLO may choose to reassert itself in this regard by electing another Fatah leader to act as its chairman, while some of the security chiefs would very much like to take over as ministers of interior and/or defense. There would, of course, be enough jobs available in Arafat's estate for a few others as well.

As the confrontation proceeds, Hamas might have a bigger say—if indirectly—in the future setup. It is quite possible that Hamas support will be solicited by the different rivals within Fatah in order to ensure acceptance by the "street." In short, at this juncture, it seems that none of the contenders will be able to afford to ignore—let alone antagonize—Hamas, at least initially.

SUCCESSION AND PALESTINIAN POLITICS

Before September 28, 2000, it was difficult enough to predict Yasir Arafat's successor as the leader of Palestinian nationalism in its melange of institutional expressions (PA, PLO, PNC, Fatah). Now, many months into the so-called "al-Aqsa intifada," and several months into Ariel Sharon's tenure as Israeli prime minister, it is more difficult still. But the succession issue is no less distant than it was in autumn 2000, and pondering the possible outcomes is no less important. With the Oslo process exhausted, Palestinian nationalism is arguably at a turning point—in its formulation of tactics and goals, in its relationship to fissures in Palestinian society both within and outside the West Bank and Gaza, and in its future relations with Israel, the United States, and the Arab world. At such a turning point, there is no more critical variable than leadership.

The elements of uncertainty that characterized the pre-intifada period are still relevant in any assessment of Palestinian political succession. The changes that have occurred since September 2000—and since Sharon became prime minister on March 7, 2001—are equally pertinent. Together, these factors comprise the basis for analyzing not only a new range of possibilities for the post-Arafat period, but also what those possibilities portend for Palestinians and Israelis, for the rest of the region, and for the United States.

From Oslo to Camp David

Between the inception of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 and the denouement of the Camp David summit in July 2000, the problem of determining Palestinian political succession was fourfold:

- First, Yasir Arafat, as the unchallenged leader of the Palestinians, loomed so large over all Palestinian political institutions that no potential successor could establish *bona fides*. Arafat, as it were, sucked all the political oxygen out of the air.

- Second, a general lack of institutionalization characterized this period. Indeed, Arafat neither designated a successor for any of his various offices nor ratified any formal procedures for succession. For their part, Palestinian judicial institutions were incapable of enforcing what inchoate procedures did exist. Significant ambiguity and potential conflict also existed between respective PA and PLO succession procedures, and it was unclear which would take precedence upon Arafat's exit.

- Third, it became evident that succession could depend on context, particularly the state of Palestinian-Israeli relations at the time of Arafat's demise or incapacitation. All else being equal, a placid situation—particularly a final, formal state of peace between Israel and a Palestinian state—would conduce to an orderly succession, while a roiled situation would not. In either context, Arafat's sudden death or incapacitation might lead to a different set of succession dynamics than a gradually proceeding illness.

- Fourth, the size and degree of influence that external actors might exert was an uncertainty. Most observers assumed that the more stable the general security situation, the less external actors would either want or be able to influence the succession process; the more fractious and violent the situation, the greater their incentive and opportunity to do so. But which actors might enter this dynamic, in which combination, and to what effect never became apparent.

All of these features were related. Arafat's towering stature caused and prolonged the advanced state of political non-institutionalization. The latter increased the significance of differing contexts, which, in turn, made potential outside influence more consequential in an eventual succession process.

Succession, Pre-Intifada

In the pre-September 2000 landscape, Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) seemed the most likely candidate to succeed Arafat, and several elements support this view:

- Arafat reportedly told then-President Clinton in 1998 that Abbas would be his successor.

- According to other reports, Arafat told Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) on the flight to Washington, DC, that Abbas would sign the November 1995 Oslo II agreement for the Palestinians, even though Qurei was the main Palestinian negotiator of that agreement.

- The position of PLO secretary-general, held by Abbas throughout the pre-September period, was widely assumed equivalent to the position of “deputy *rais*.” Abbas chaired meetings when Arafat left the room, for example.

- Many observers inferred the logic of Abbas’s succession to Arafat as head of the PA, since the PA itself was essentially birthed out of the Oslo Accord and since Abbas was that agreement’s chief Palestinian architect.

- Others focused on the possibility that Abbas would succeed Arafat by default. Qurei, the most serious alternative to Abbas as successor, seemed to lack both the ambition and the following for the top post. Farouq Qadoumi (Abu Lutuf) had greater seniority and support within Fatah than either Abbas or Qurei, but the popular response to a 1998 trial balloon suggested that he would not be a serious candidate as long as he remained outside the domain of the PA (Qadoumi is head of the PLO’s Political Department). No other Palestinian politician—the late Faisal Husseini, Haidar Abdel Shafi, Nabil Sha’ath, or Saeb Erekat—was able to carry a sufficient constituency in public opinion polls. Moreover, none of the security chiefs had either the requisite political clout or the ability to transcend the Gaza–West Bank divide. None of Arafat’s relatives, notably security chief Musa Arafat, seemed to be serious succession possibilities either. As a result, assuming that

PA longevity would rule out Hamas or Fatah Tanzim candidates, Abbas seemed the only realistic alternative—despite his own lack of evident enthusiasm or broad support for taking on the job.

Succession in the Intifada Era

Two key changes have become apparent since September 28, 2000, and a third since March 7, 2001; all three are related. First, the assumption that Arafat and Abbas possess virtually the same long-term Palestinian strategy has become questionable. Second, with the onset of the al-Aqsa intifada, an unstable security environment has shifted the internal balance of Palestinian society, which, in turn, has contributed further to the deterioration of the security environment; this shift has undermined the PA's social and political authority and raised that of Fatah and other anti-Oslo Palestinian factions. Third, as of March 7, the assumption that the Israeli government sees the PA as the least objectionable of all its policy alternatives vis-à-vis the Palestinians is no longer a given.

The first change casts serious doubt on whether Arafat actually wishes Abbas to succeed him. The second change, which Arafat himself helped to bring about, casts doubt on the extent to which the choice of successor rests firmly with Arafat or the PA ruling structure. The third change casts doubt on the very relevance of the decision as to who would eventually represent Palestinian nationalism *in situ* in the West Bank and Gaza. Taken together, these changes fundamentally affect the social location of a succession decision and hence its outcome, throwing all previous calculations into doubt.

What Arafat really thinks and wants is, and has long been, a matter of speculation. Senior U.S. diplomats such as Dennis Ross and Aaron David Miller have stated publicly that Arafat “could not” accept a final agreement to end the conflict either at Camp David or later in Taba, just before the February 2001 Israeli elections. By the time of the Taba negotiations, however, many others had come to believe not that Arafat “*could* not” but that he “*would* not” end the conflict. Between late September 2000 and mid-February 2001, many analysts, a significant majority of Israelis, and even some U.S. diplomats associated with the peace process were coming to conclude that Arafat and the majority of the Palestinian leadership saw Oslo simply as a way to

roll back Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. In Martin Indyk's words, they were "not really looking for peaceful coexistence, which is what Israel's objective was in this process." Beyond Arafat's refusal to do anything to halt the violence, comments made during this period by several Palestinian ministers and security officials—Faisal Husseini, Imad al-Faluji, Yasir Abdo Rabbo, Muhammad Dahlan, Muhammad al-Nashashibi, Hassan Asfur, Freih Abu Middein, and others—have suggested strongly that the PLO's long-term goals remain irreconcilable with Israeli security.

And yet, comments of this nature have not been heard from Mahmud Abbas, Ahmed Qurei, and certain others among the Palestinian leadership. Abbas's role in negotiating the 1996 Beilin–Abu Mazen plan suggests that he and others could and perhaps would accomplish what Arafat either cannot or will not. If Arafat indeed stands to one side of an ideological-tactical divide opposite Abbas and certain others, then Arafat may well be antagonistic to the idea of such men succeeding him.

This leads directly to the second change. The origins of the al-Aqsa intifada are a matter for debate. A few believe it to have been utterly spontaneous, others utterly planned, and still others some combination of the two. The first possibility aside, no formulation of the intifada's origins is inconsistent with Arafat's having "pulled a Mao," referring to Chinese dictator Mao Tse-tung's inciting of the Chinese cultural revolution as a way to diminish and bypass the ideologically demobilized formal structures of his government. The inefficiency and corruption characterizing the PA's seven-year existence has made it increasingly unpopular among Palestinians, and a burden to Arafat himself. By encouraging the Fatah Tanzim during the current intifada, Arafat has outflanked the PA structure, even at the risk of fomenting a form of political mobilization that might ultimately erode his own authority. Such a design is strongly suggested by Arafat's alleged support for Palestinian National Council Speaker Salim Za'anoun's February 1 call for a Commission of National Independence, an anti- or post-Oslo effort whose membership and rhetoric clearly favor Fatah over the PA.

Moreover, if Arafat would not, as opposed to could not, agree to end the conflict with Israel, then such support would be consistent

with his own view of long-term Palestinian strategy. After all, the Fatah Tanzim have been consistently anti-Oslo while the PA establishment—Abbas included—have depended on this structure for more than seven years. With respect to succession dynamics, the ceding of so much initiative to the Fatah Tanzim, led by Marwan Barghouti, has made Barghouti a major figure in the succession equation at the expense of the PA structure. This suggests that no PA figure after Arafat would have as much control over what happens in the street.

But a diminution of PA control may cut two ways; Arafat's transfer of political and social capital to the Tanzim has enflamed the security situation, and the protraction of that situation has further fueled Palestinian social mobilization. On the other hand, while support for the intifada was strengthened in the immediate aftermath of Ariel Sharon's rise to the premiership, an undercurrent in Palestinian society is now pointing in the opposite direction. At first, only in the broader Arab press did one hear the view that the current intifada was neither a genuine bottom-up movement nor particularly wise strategically. More recently, however, some Palestinians in the territories, journalist Daoud Kuttab among them, have wondered aloud about having spent so many lives for no evident gain. Growing, if still muted, dissent questions a program of deliberate, violent escalation with Israel that has wrecked the Palestinian economy (and thus sidetracked the building of a viable state), sent the Israeli electorate hurtling rightward, and poisoned the Palestinian image before a new U.S. administration.

The third change concerns Israel. If Israelis now overwhelmingly believe that the PA/PLO is either unwilling or unable to end the conflict (either reality has essentially the same consequence), then the rationale for tolerating Palestinian incitement and violence is sharply undermined. The only two restraints preventing Israel from destroying the PA/PLO infrastructure in the territories are concern about international reaction—including the political impact in Egypt and Jordan—and fear that whatever follows the PA could be even worse for Israeli security than the status quo.

The Ehud Barak government seemed unable to admit the possibility that it might have misconstrued Arafat's long-range intentions and hence misjudged his tactical vicissitudes. Ariel Sharon and his government, on the other hand, seem disposed to view Arafat with the

lowest and most skeptical expectations. With Israel Defense Forces chief of staff Shaul Mofaz warning that “a terror state” is forming alongside Israel, the possibility that Israeli forces might drive the PA establishment into exile once again (probably to Baghdad) and reoccupy selected areas of the West Bank (most notably Jericho) no longer seems far-fetched.

No Israeli prime minister has a record of caring less about international public opinion than Ariel Sharon, although his “policy of restraint” suggests a more subtle approach than history would necessarily suggest. But the question of what Israel would inherit if it destroyed the PA requires delicate analysis. Most Israeli decisionmakers believe that Arafat cannot possibly wish for a full-scale war for three reasons. First, PA forces—with or without the Tanzim—could never hold out against Israel in a serious fight. Second, there is also little prospect that Arab armies would come (successfully or otherwise) to Arafat’s defense. Third, there is even less of a chance that the United States would lead an effort to internationalize the “protection” of Palestinians with an international force. Such reasoning argues against driving the PA into exile, because the more radical elements taking its place might presage chaos and perhaps even regional war.

Short of a large war, Arafat could still retain the initiative to use violence and judge for himself the threshold of Israeli patience for an essentially unlimited period. Israel might tolerate such a state of affairs for a while—if it thought the final outcome of such jousting and will-testing might be an end to the conflict. But living with such a PA in perpetuity is not politically sustainable if so few in Israel now believe that genuine Israeli-Palestinian peace is possible. Israeli decisionmakers might therefore reason that if a larger war with the Palestinians is inevitable, then better a war against a Palestinian side led by the rag-tag and poorly trained Tanzim than one led by the 40,000-strong PA security forces. In the latter case, with Arafat sitting in Gaza as a virtual head of state, the PA could count on much internal, pan-Arab, and international support. In the former, Arafat would be sitting in Baghdad urging the Tanzim on to slaughter and self-destruction.

The chaos of such a post-PA war, however, might not last long. As suggested above, significant elements of Palestinian society do not appreciate PA rule, do not grant the wisdom of Arafat’s Tanzim war,

and still have much to lose from protracted violence (and even more to gain economically and politically from the conflict's end). Some strata of Palestinian society, with a competent leadership, may even be willing to end the conflict with Israel short of invoking the PLO's interpretation of the "1948 file." Surely the Jordanian and Egyptian governments will not benefit from eternal intifada and have much to gain from a different (more limited, political) Palestinian approach to Israel. So, obviously, does the United States.

Implications for the Post-Arafat Era

This analysis leads to four succession possibilities:

- First, if the optimists are correct in believing that Arafat really does desire peaceful coexistence with Israel as a Jewish state—on terms that an Israeli government can accept—then Mahmud Abbas, or someone like him within the PA structure, could well be Arafat's successor. History would then look back on the al-Aqsa intifada—and all that has been said and done during this heady time by many Palestinians—as a final spasm of revolutionary romanticism before the pangs of realism prepared the ground for compromise and conciliation. It would of course be necessary to "demobilize" the Tanzim under these circumstances, but such an action would be the PA's responsibility, not Israel's.
- Second, if those who believe that the PLO never intended to be a genuine partner for peace are correct—or that, intentions aside, the dynamic of the peace process did not transform the PLO into such a partner—then a pre-Oslo type of successor from within the PLO would be most likely. Fatah and the Tanzim would play a major role in such a constellation of forces, and it is within the realm of possibility that Farouq Qadoumi would return to the territories to reign over that disposition. Such an outcome, however, depends on Israel. If the current Israeli government, or some centrist successor government, elects not to tolerate this kind of scenario, then the PA leadership, along with that of the PLO, could find themselves in Baghdad.
- In such an eventuality, whether Arafat were alive or not at the time, political power within the West Bank and Gaza would quickly, if

messily, devolve to the “street”—to the Tanzim and to Islamist militants of various stripes. This is the third possible outcome. Almost certainly, such a development would presage a bloody interlude from which Israel would emerge as victor. That interlude might, but need not necessarily, also trigger a wider regional conflict.

In the longer run, from such a crucible there may arise an “insider”-based Palestinian leadership that could, in due course, find its way toward making peace with Israel. In other words, what is today a growing undercurrent in Palestinian politics could become a dominant force (in the West Bank and Gaza, at least) once the futility of Palestinian maximalism has been conclusively demonstrated. Before Oslo, most analysts of Palestinian society tended toward the view that only Palestinian insiders, not the PLO, could reach peace with Israel, because only the insiders would be capable of conceding the 1948 demands. For more than seven years, that conclusion has been viewed as having been overtaken by events; perhaps in retrospect it will be justified.

- A fourth possibility remains: the protraction of uncertainty. Arafat’s capacity to sustain ambiguity is impressive. He may thus decide to maintain a status quo that has become more or less frozen, with Israeli-Palestinian and PA-Tanzim dynamics still in awkward limbo. That reality would be defined by a low but continuous level of violence and no final-status negotiations in sight, but with neither side interested in a significant escalation of violence. Parallel but separate efforts toward unilateral separation on the Israeli side and independent statehood on the Palestinian side might be one feature of this fourth alternative. Another might be a limited resumption of Israeli-PA security cooperation and an easing of strictures on the Palestinian economy, which would relieve both sides. Arafat could thereby avoid any final decision, and Sharon would get his long-term, tacit “arrangement” short of peace.

What might a succession scenario look like in this circumstance? If genuine PA moderates do exist, their success would be unlikely with so much power resting “in the street.” Neither would Barghouti or Qadoumi have an easy time with PA structures and security forces still intact. The security chiefs themselves would remain formidable, but

none would likely come out on top. Hamas might make an unsuccessful bid for power. A multivalent competition leading to internecine violence could develop, or so could, for that matter, a compromise on collective leadership. Egypt and Jordan might play a role, but so might Syrian and Iraqi intrigue and financing. In other words, as was the case before September 28, the outcome would be uncertain at best.

Implications for the United States

Clearly, the first scenario is the simplest and most desirable for Washington, but it is also the least likely. The evidence simply does not favor the assumptions and beliefs of the remaining Oslo optimists. The second scenario is inherently unstable and would almost certainly lead to the third. Moreover, the United States, as an ally of Israel, cannot favor—and should not abet—a situation in which Palestinian rule in the West Bank and Gaza is committed to harming vital Israeli interests. The third scenario, despite its potentially peaceful conclusion, is fraught with multiple uncertainties, unpleasanties, and dangers. In any case, because it cannot accommodate Palestinians and Palestinian nationalism outside of the West Bank and Gaza, it represents at best a partial solution to a long-term problem.

The fourth scenario, the most likely, essentially fails to solve anything and leaves a context for succession with a very wide range of possible outcomes. U.S. diplomacy might have the most influence under these circumstances, although Washington would be forced to maintain a difficult balance: refusing to aid a Palestinian program designed to injure an American ally while avoiding complete severance of U.S. contact with the Palestinian side. In the end, the United States will—as it did with Oslo—take its lead from Israel as to the timing, substance, and level of engagement with the post-Arafat leadership, whomever it may be.

In the face of these options, one can only wish the Bush administration luck as it deals with Palestinian politics, post-Arafat. It will need it.

STEPPING INTO GIANT SHOES

On a visit to Amman in the early part of 2001, Yasir Arafat stopped by to see his private doctor for a routine checkup. At the end of the exam, when the doctor gave Arafat what is reported to be a “clean bill of health,” the seventy-three-year-old Palestinian leader turned to his bodyguard and said with a big smile, “You can now tell them that, by God’s will, I’m going to be around for some more years.”

By “them” Arafat was clearly referring to his close circle of officials and advisors, and this cynical remark illustrates the manner in which Arafat relates to confidants. Although he may not question their loyalty, he is fully aware that many of them are anticipating the day of his passing. He also knows that some of those closest to him are already engaged in a high-level, behind-the-scenes succession struggle.

Today, it is almost impossible to find a PA official who is prepared to discuss the issue of succession publicly. The Palestinian media—controlled entirely by the PA—never airs the topic, and it is simply taboo for many Palestinians. One Palestinian cabinet minister said that he sees no reason why the Palestinians should embark on a debate about the post-Arafat era: “The President is as strong as a horse and he might live long enough to participate in the funerals of many of us. In Islam, we believe that life is in the hands of Allah and He takes them any time he chooses.” Of course, Arafat’s inner circle may simply be afraid of discussing succession, hoping to avoid being seen by the *rais* (president) as a threat. “No one dares to raise the subject,” explained a senior advisor to Arafat. “Of course this is not a healthy situation, but no one has the guts to talk about it.”

One-Man Rule

When the PA was established in 1994, many Palestinians hoped that it would become a democracy, unlike the totalitarian and authoritarian regimes that occupy the Arab world. In the best case, their hope was that the “Old Man”—as they affectionately call Arafat—would learn a lesson in democracy from his enemy, Israel. Since 1967, the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—known as the “insiders”—have come to learn a lot about Israel’s political system. Palestinian newspapers are full of translations from the Hebrew press, and stormy debates in the Knesset receive wide coverage in the Palestinian media. These insiders have seen Israeli prime ministers suffer humiliating defeats in free democratic elections, cabinet ministers being tried and sent to jail for corruption and sexual abuse, and senior government officials paying a high price for mishandling public funds.

Unfortunately, the PA has failed to take much from these examples and is now anything but democratic. As far as many Palestinians are concerned, the past seven years of Arafat’s rule have proven worse than they had ever imagined. And in the eyes of many Palestinian intellectuals, the PA—dominated by the “outsiders” (the term used by Palestinians to describe those PLO veterans of Beirut and Tunis who returned with Arafat after the signing of the Oslo Accords)—is functioning more as a monarchy than as a proper government with law-abiding institutions.

Some Palestinian political activists argue that the al-Aqsa intifada, which erupted in September 2000 following a controversial visit to the Temple Mount by then-Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon, is directed against the PA as much as it is against Israel. Many ordinary Palestinians are enraged by reports of corruption and misuse of public funds among the top PA brass, namely the “outsiders.” The criticism emerging from the streets and alleys of the refugee camps and villages, however, is voiced against almost everyone in the PA but Arafat. Leaflets distributed by various Palestinian factions accuse many high-ranking PA officials of corruption and collaboration with Israel, but Arafat is always spared—not because the authors of the leaflets are afraid of Arafat, but because Arafat is still seen as a symbol and “godfather” of the Palestinian revolution. “He’s untouchable,” said one Palestinian academic from Ramallah. “He can afford to do what others can’t.”

Indeed, no “second-in-command” exists in the Palestinian leadership; Arafat holds all the reins of power. He takes even the smallest decisions independently, refusing to delegate and thereby empower a subordinate. For example, a Palestinian from east Jerusalem who seeks financial assistance to pay a debt to the Israeli municipality must apply to the *rais* in person. Arafat also makes most of the important appointments in the PA; he rotates officials frequently in order to reward followers, to keep appointees from becoming too powerful, or to demonstrate his own authority. In one case, he was even asked to “appoint” a receptionist at one of the ministries.

A Post-Arafat Benchmark

When the first intifada broke out in 1987, Arafat and the PLO were caught by surprise, but they quickly rebounded, joined the bandwagon, and began issuing instructions from Tunis. Today, Arafat has once again found himself being led by his own people; the masses in the streets are setting the tone and practically dictating policy to the PA vis-à-vis the peace process. As in 1987, Arafat and the PA leadership were surprised by the degree of violence in the Palestinian streets that erupted in September 2000. “We never imagined that Sharon’s visit to the Haram al-Sharif would lead to another intifada,” admitted a commander of one of the PA’s twelve security organizations. “Frankly, we thought the protests would last for a day or two, maybe even a week. Those who claim that the PA planned the intifada don’t know what they are talking about.”

Arafat’s successor, too, will have to listen to the voices from the street. Today, the majority of Palestinians are convinced that the peace process with Israel is dead, and the death of the peace process means the death of the Oslo Accords and other agreements signed between Israel and the PA. If the Palestinians were prepared to “forgive” Arafat for making “far-reaching” concessions to Israel by signing the Oslo Accords (only a historic figure like Arafat could have sold his people a solution based on the establishment of a Palestinian state on only part of the land occupied by Israel in 1967), Arafat’s successor will have to demand that the negotiations with Israel start from the point at which they stopped at the Taba negotiations in January 2001. At Taba, Arafat turned down the most generous proposal ever offered by Israel: all of Gaza, more than 96 percent of the

West Bank, land swaps with territory inside Israel, control over Arab suburbs in east Jerusalem, and parts of the Old City. No leader will be able to sell a deal to Palestinians that includes less than what Arafat was already offered, and any future successor will find compromising on Palestinian demands and national aspirations even more difficult. This time, Palestinians believe that they have paid a very heavy price—hundreds killed and thousands injured—and that they can therefore accept nothing less than full Israeli withdrawal from the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip, with east Jerusalem as the capital of a sovereign, independent Palestinian state.

An Internal Focus

But Arafat's successor will face very serious challenges at home before finding time to talk about the peace process. In many ways, the current situation is similar to that which prevailed in the West Bank and Gaza on the eve of the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Then, like now, the Palestinian population was feeling the burden of the intifada, and many were openly talking about the need to find a solution. The first years after the establishment of the PA were the best the Palestinians could have hoped for from an economic point of view; for the first time since 1967, they had their own banks, stamps, police force, and elected legislators.

Now, the al-Aqsa intifada has destroyed most of the significant achievements made by the Palestinians during the past seven years. The economy is worse than ever, unemployment is estimated at more than 60 percent, and many PA institutions have stopped functioning. Moreover, the streets are controlled by various armed groups with often conflicting interests. Arafat's successor will therefore be faced with the immediate tasks of rebuilding the economy and rallying the various political and national organizations and factions solidly behind him. This will include finding a way to rein in dissident Fatah gunmen and members of the security forces who have joined the armed struggle against Israel and are taking an active role in the intifada.

Pretenders to the Throne?

It is difficult to predict whether there will be a smooth transition after Arafat's passing. If all goes according to plan, Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala), as Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, will serve as

acting president of the PA for at least sixty days, during which new elections will take place (as stipulated by Article 90 of the Palestinian Electoral Law). But holding free and democratic elections could prove nearly impossible if Palestinians are still at war with Israel and most Palestinian cities and villages are surrounded by Israeli troops and tanks.

Qurei (b. 1937) who is also one of the architects of the Oslo Accords and a staunch supporter of the peace process, will likely exploit this situation by seeking to consolidate his power for a term exceeding the mandated sixty-day period. For this, he will need the backing of most heads of the Palestinian security forces as well as the leaders of the mainstream Fatah organization. Even more important, he must enjoy the support of the current intifada generation. Qurei's consolidation of power would signal the continuity of rule by the "outsiders" and guarantee that future diplomacy follows the Oslo path.

But other candidates are mentioned as possible successors. The most prominent among them is Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen), who is often referred to by foreign journalists (not by the Palestinian media) as the "number-two" man in the PA. Abbas (b. 1935) is general secretary of Fatah and a member of the organization's Executive Committee. Like Qurei, he is not a charismatic figure and has no political machine of his own. Nor does he have a following in the refugee camps or among the grassroots leaders.

For either to succeed in a succession struggle, Qurei and Abbas will have to convince Palestinians at the popular level that they are prepared to fight corruption and distribute power more widely. But in order to ensure the support of Fatah, they will also have to rid themselves—at least temporarily—of a pragmatist image vis-à-vis the peace process with Israel. Indeed, Fatah, which is spearheading the al-Aqsa intifada and launching most of the armed attacks against Israeli soldiers and settlers, is expected to play a major role in determining the identity of the future PA president. The uprising has driven Fatah toward endorsing a hardline policy with regard to the peace process, and many of its leaders have declared that they no longer regard Israel as a peace partner. Since the beginning of the current round of violence, Fatah has strongly opposed both a return to the Oslo formula and the resumption of security cooperation with Israel.

Of course, any potential successor will also need the support of Arafat's security forces, but most of the police chiefs have political ambitions of their own. One of the most prominent, Col. Jibril Rajoub—head of the all-powerful Preventive Security Forces in the West Bank—is said to have told friends that he sees himself as Arafat's successor. Rajoub (b. 1953) is viewed as a pragmatist with close connections to Israel and to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

Arafat's Ghost

The talk about a "civil war" erupting in the post-Arafat period is strongly dismissed by most Palestinians, including the Islamic opposition. "Israel would like to see Palestinians killing one another, but we will not present it with this gift," said Mahmud Zahhar, a Hamas leader in Gaza. Indeed, thanks to the ongoing intifada and the "external threat," Palestinians are more united than ever. Earlier this year, for the first time since the PA was established, Arafat invited Hamas and Islamic Jihad officials to attend weekly sessions of the Palestinian cabinet. On the ground as well, there is growing evidence of cooperation between the Islamic fundamentalists and Arafat loyalists—including members of the security forces—in staging guerilla attacks against Israel. Still, the first few weeks or months after Arafat's departure will most likely be characterized by some kind of tension or confusion in the West Bank and Gaza—a situation that will have a negative impact on the peace process and Palestinian-Israeli relations. The new Palestinian leader will need some time to establish himself and will focus much of his attention on consolidating power at home.

With the rise of Ariel Sharon to power in Israel, the possibility that Arafat will become the first president of a Palestinian state now seems more remote than ever. Sources close to Arafat say he has come to accept that he will not witness the establishment of the State of Palestine. Indeed, Arafat told a visiting Arab member of the Israeli Knesset after Sharon's election that he would prefer to be remembered as a leader of the Palestinian revolution rather than the president of a tiny and poor state on less than 50 percent of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Arafat has no natural successor, however, and whoever does follow him will be stepping into giant shoes. In the eyes of most Palestin-

ians, no other Palestinian leader or official will ever equal the *rais*. As one Palestinian political analyst put it, “Arafat’s shadow will continue to loom over the heads of the new leaders for many years. He’s like Ayatollah Khomeini, whose spirit, long after his death, continues to hover over the heads of Iranians.”

The way things look today, one cannot but conclude that the current situation will prevail in the post-Arafat period. Sadly, the Palestinians cannot expect to see a more democratic regime than the one established by Arafat and his technocrats.

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