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The Palestinian Leadership after Arafat

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The Palestinian Leadership after Arafat

For over a generation Arafat has played a pivotal role, both symbolic and practical, in Palestinian politics. On the symbolic level Arafat represents for his people the achievements of independent Palestinian representation and international support for the Palestinian cause. At the same time, however, he is perceived as the standard bearer for the cause of the Palestinian refugees of 1948, epitomized by their demand for the right of return to Israel proper – a demand that is virtually irreconcilable with a peaceful settlement with the Jewish State of Israel. As a national symbol, Arafat has become an indispensable asset for the Palestinian national movement, and as such has succeeded in imposing the agenda and the interests of the Palestinian diasporas (*al-kharej* or the “outside”) on the local West Bank and Gaza population (*al-dakhel* or the “inside”).

Even before the second Intifadah broke out, there had been popular protests against the autocratic but incompetent government, absence of rule of law, gross corruption, and economic deterioration that had come to characterize the Palestinian Authority. In many ways, the second Intifadah was no less a rebellion against the historic leadership than it was an outbreak of frustration against Israel and the deadlock that had become the peace process. As the internal violence in the West Bank and Gaza escalates and Arafat’s control weakens, a political vacuum and sense of impending national cataclysm are already spreading throughout the PA. Criticism is voiced openly more than ever since the establishment of the Authority, including direct criticism of Arafat himself. In a sense, the current state of affairs is the “twilight” of the Arafat era in Palestinian politics and, as such, adumbrates the situation which may emerge after Arafat vacates the stage.

Nevertheless, until now no local leader has dared to challenge Arafat’s leadership or to propose himself as an alternative leader. Even Arafat’s harshest critics are cautious not to attempt to depose or harm him, though this may be the understandable result of a natural “stick to the devil you know” mentality and apprehension of the unknown. Given Arafat’s symbolic and practical position in the PLO and the PA, his disappearance would create a political vacuum the Palestinians have no standing procedures to deal with.

Arafat’s central position in Palestinian politics raises the question of what sort of Palestinian leadership might take over after his demise, and what may be the patterns of Palestinian politics in a post-Arafat era. A change of leadership may take a number of shapes: orderly transfer of authority, be it during a period of escalation of violence or when there is a lull in the violence and negotiations with Israel are taking place; gradual transfer of authority as a result of an incremental decrease in Arafat’s physical capacity; or disorderly takeover of power in the wake of a power struggle after his death.

Various attempts have been made to categorize the Palestinian leadership. The more traditional distinction was made between senior figures with ideological affinities to Fatah or to the Islamic or Leftist/Marxist movements, and those with political affiliations to foreign countries, Arab or otherwise. Since the formation of the Palestinian Authority, however, a more widely accepted categorization has developed which makes a distinction between:

- The “Founding Fathers” – the Old Guard made up of the diasporas elite that had gone through the experiences of the PLO in Amman, Beirut and Tunis. Few of these founding fathers of the Fatah or PLO remain, and none among them possess Arafat’s leadership qualities or can control the power levers in the field as he can; and
- The “Young Guard” of the “inside” – made up of “graduates” of the first Intifadah and of Israeli jails. Though these local heroes represent the reality of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza, they lack a national leadership capable of transcending the multitude of existing factional and regional interests. Such an embryonic leadership seemed to have taken form during the 1970s in the wake of the elections of local mayors (1976); however, these local leaders chose to accept the authority of the PLO diasporas leadership and had no pretensions of leading the West Bank and Gaza independent of them or their struggle. The first Intifadah later gave rise to a national leadership in the West Bank and Gaza that served as the basis for coordination between regions and factions. This leadership disappeared after the formation of the Palestinian Authority, due both to Arafat’s *divida et impera* leadership style and Israel’s security measures, primarily cutting the West Bank off from Gaza and instituting closures within the West Bank.

Before the Oslo Accords, Palestinian civil society enjoyed an influential role in local Palestinian politics. Intimate contact with Israeli democracy has had a paradoxically democratizing influence on the Palestinian intellectual elite, many of whom would admit their preference for an Israeli-type democracy over the autocratic regime type prevalent in the Arab world. Their calls for a political ideal of democratic national institutions, protection of civil rights and rule of law, and their (albeit low-keyed) protests against civil rights violations by the Palestinian Authority, reflect this preference. By taking over many of the erstwhile functions of voluntary organizations and taking control over much of the civil society, however, the PA under Arafat has effectively strangled this sector. The formal institutions of democracy in the PA – such as the Palestinian Legislative Council – also have little or no weight.

The “prison graduates” from the secular mainstream enjoy a great deal of public

admiration both because they have recently suffered for the cause and are relatively free of corruption (in contrast to the incumbent PA leadership). It is noteworthy that these former prisoners are frequently more moderate or pragmatic than their colleagues, especially those from Tunis. This may be attributed to their knowledge of Hebrew and firsthand acquaintance with the complexities and sensitivities of Israeli society.

Another important group is the wealthy business class. This group includes senior PA officials who have monopolistic control over services and imported goods, Arafat's financial aides who have access to a great portion of the public treasury and Arafat's personal wealth, the old wealthy families from the West Bank and Gaza, and Palestinians from abroad (especially Jordan and the Gulf) who may invest in the area. This last group has refrained from investment in the PA because of its instability, but in other circumstances, it may play an important role in both the economic and political fields.

It appears, therefore, that when Arafat finally leaves the stage, the curtain will also fall on the generation of the Old Guard of the Palestinian national movement. This changing of the guard will signal the transfer of the leadership to the leaders of the West Bank and Gaza, since the diasporas has no second generation inside the PA.

Any analysis of the Palestinian leadership after Arafat must differentiate between two aspects of leadership and rule: political leadership which will continue to represent the Palestinians in the international arena and vis-à-vis the Arab world; and de facto leadership on the ground, which will run the day-to-day lives of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The two are quite different and it is doubtful that the Palestinians could produce one leader or set of leaders who would be able to play both roles.

It is unlikely that Arafat will nominate a successor. Even if he falls ill his lieutenants in the PA would probably act to ensure their own survival in the post-Arafat era, but they will also take care not to be perceived as anticipating Arafat's demise. Upon Arafat's death, they will all have an interest in an orderly formal succession, but being aware that this is only formal, they will prepare themselves for the true succession. It is quite probable that "black horses" – local leaders unknown today – will appear out of the leadership vacuum and form the backbone of a new multi-polar leadership.

Islamic groups do not represent more than thirty percent of the public, but they act as a state within a state inside the PA and enjoy much public approbation as an efficient, disciplined, well-organized, and relatively uncorrupt sector. If strong leadership does not take over the PA from Arafat, the Hamas may emerge as the only force on the ground with the control, direction, and tools necessary to appeal to the public. The situation may become even more complicated if a generational change takes place within the Hamas as well. The younger generation of the Hamas is less likely to accept transfer of the exclusive representation of the Palestinian people to Arafat's successors, and will

probably demand their piece of the leadership.

The historic changing of the guards and ensuing crisis in the legitimacy of the PA leadership may also create public unrest within the Palestinian public. In the absence of a strong civil society which can lead such unrest, however, the Islamic movements, primarily Hamas, will be the main beneficiaries. This is the Achilles' heel of Palestinian society – the decline of traditional elites and the subsequent shift of sources of legitimacy and authority from traditional “soft” sources (age, family, economic status, knowledge etc.), to violent coercive power.

Upon Arafat's death his formal and informal functions might not all pass on to one individual, and some may fall into desuetude. Even now, there is talk within the PA of a triumvirate solution, and it is quite possible that the present Presidential system, tailored with Arafat in mind, will become anachronistic. Members of the leadership may prefer to nominate a figurehead president as part of a move to transfer authority from the presidency to the prime minister, and to introduce a real parliamentary system. One may also expect that the post of PLO Chairman, which symbolizes values and concepts that are gradually losing their appeal, will continue to decline. It will also be difficult to transfer Arafat's “military” functions, as there is no organized hierarchy that a successor can take over.

Consequently, the prognosis for the PA seems to be based on the following points:

- Fragmentation of Palestinian politics and society will mean that any potential leader will have to lean on a coalition of economic, regional and family interest groups, as well as on military force, which will be the most decisive element.
- If no central leadership emerges, one may expect the emergence of a class of local warlords, who will raise or lower tensions according to their own local interests. Fatah itself may split – if not formally, at least de facto, into local factions.
- Hamas, having lost its senior leadership in Gaza, will become more oriented to their own diasporas leadership, and possibly less attentive than before to the need of the local population for a respite from the consequences of terrorism.
- The list of potential leaders will remain open, and should take into account the appearance of a black horse, especially from among local Fatah leaders, which despite the strengthening of Hamas, remains the most powerful force in the West Bank and Gaza capable of supporting a new leadership.
- The danger of anarchy will be mitigated by the deep cultural aversion to *fitna* (civil war) and the sense that such conflicts will only play into Israel's hands.

- The expected weakness of the Palestinian leadership may bring about a deeper involvement of individual Arab states and the Arab collective in Palestinian politics.
- Israel's fence, once it is completed, will have economic and political, as well as security, implications. Regarding security, it will reduce the capability of terrorists to infiltrate Israel and will channel some of these efforts towards settlements and IDF forces in the territories. Economically, it will reduce the infiltration of illegal workers and exacerbate the economic situation in the West Bank. Politically, it will be perceived, whether Israel declares it or not, as a border drawn up by Israel for a future settlement of the conflict.
- Anarchy in the Palestinian Authority areas may revive the debate over the introduction of international forces. Such a demand will have legitimacy as a follow-up to Arafat's policies, and his successors may feel that such a presence would provide them with some coercive force vis-à-vis local warlords, as well as international legitimacy.

While Israel cannot dictate developments within the Palestinian body politic, it does not have the option of detaching itself and standing aloof. Any steps Israel takes – and will have to take in the future – will have a long-reaching effect on the formation of the Palestinian leadership. Any attempt to “crown” a Palestinian leader would probably be counterproductive, and would brand such a leader as a collaborator.

The levers available to Israel for influencing the formation of a new Palestinian leadership are in the security, political, economic, and humanitarian spheres. The security levers relate to Israeli decisions to use force, to threaten the use of force, or to refrain from using force. These include redeployments in the West Bank and Gaza, removal of roadblocks and closures, transfer of areas to the Palestinian Authority, renewal of arrangements for safe passage, or conversely, military action to put pressure on the PA or against the Hamas. The wide variety of political levers available include removal of illegal Israeli settlements and dismantling of others, freeing Palestinian prisoners (and/or allowing contact with senior prisoners about to be freed), allowing elections (general and/or local), practical gestures from Jerusalem, and optimistic declarations regarding the PA leadership. Any of these gestures may strengthen a leader who is already in place, but they have little or no effect on the struggle for the leadership.

The economic levers are, in fact, the main channel through which Israel can influence the formation of a new Palestinian leadership, and not only provide gestures to an already chosen leader. Israel could wield influence through international organizations operating in the West Bank and Gaza, dependency of the Palestinian economy on Israel's,

transferring or not transferring taxes to the PA, channeling resources to areas where more acceptable leaders are located (perhaps after holding local elections), issuing work permits, boosting economic activity by removal of closures, or channeling development projects. However, such exploitation of economic levers would be restricted by security and by Israel's own domestic economic interests, as well as humanitarian and political considerations. The goal of all of this should be to break the present monopolistic system and encourage the emergence of an economic elite with a vested interest in stability.

It is safe to assume that Arafat's demise will accelerate the fragmentation processes already noticeable within Palestinian society. This does not mean that an agreed upon political leadership will not be elected, though there is great risk that such a leadership would probably be cut off from the real control in the PA. Israel would not benefit from the absence of an effective Palestinian leadership; in fact, such a situation would make serious ceasefire talks more difficult and final settlement negotiations even more so. Israel will find itself in a dilemma: it will be under pressure to offer gestures of confidence building to a partner who is both incapable of "delivering the goods," and is not a valid address for deterrent messages.

While blatant attempts by Israel to create an acceptable Palestinian leadership will not bear fruit, in the circumstances described here Israel will not have the option of sitting on the sidelines and claiming neutrality. The very fact of Israeli military presence and day-to-day security exigencies will have an effect on the leadership struggle. Therefore, Israel should prepare for such an eventuality as best possible by having a balanced choice of tools available. The short-term tools derive primarily from Israel's military control and decisions to take military action or to refrain from it. However, building a viable Palestinian leadership which will both desire peace and stability, and be capable of working towards these goals, is contingent on real economic reforms within the PA, cutting economic power off from the terrorist elements, reviving the traditional economic elites, and translating positive economic power into political power. This calls for toppling the monopolies and injecting into the system new local economic forces. In such an endeavor, Israel may find allies in the Western world and even among the Arabs.

The first Intifadah gave rise to a growing "narrative" of the "inside" that gave precedence to the goal of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, and seemed to push aside the old 1948 narrative with its inherent insolubility. But when the PLO elite settled in the West Bank and Gaza on the tails of the Oslo accords, its standing commitment to the solution of the "Problem of 1948" was re-imposed. The passing of the Old Guard may also open opportunities to reverse this trend and eventually to develop a negotiation process on the basis of solving the "Problem of 1967."