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## After Arafat: Succession and Stability in Palestinian Politics

By Barry Rubin\*

"Reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated," Mark Twain once wrote. The same applies to Yasir Arafat, who has been reported ill with maladies ranging from exhaustion to disabling, or even fatal, illnesses.

Since Arafat refuses to allow one, there is no number-two Palestinian leader. And there is certainly no natural successor to him either. Long before Arafat's health became controversial, the West Bank's most popular joke showed how determined he was to have no understudy. Since Arafat was building a five-story house, the story went, he told lieutenants they could have four-story homes. But each time one of them began work on the third floor, Arafat became so nervous that he ordered them to stop construction completely.

That anecdote is well-based on fact. So are the tales about how all PA activity stops when Arafat is out of the country, or is even away from his office for the day. He holds all the reins of power in his own hands, personally making even the smallest decisions. Among subordinates, Arafat prefers loyalty over competence. Like Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, he prefers men who are sleek and fat -- corrupt, slothful, careerists or the satiated wealthy -- to be less threatening than energetic men with lean and hungry looks.

Consequently, Arafat's physical condition is an even more important political issue and potential crisis than the fate of most national leaders. Whatever befalls the chairman of both Palestinian Authority (PA) and Palestine Liberation Organization

(PLO), the Palestinian movement's leader for 30 years, and a man call -- albeit prematurely, at best -- Palestine's president will have a big impact on the Arab-Israeli peace process and regional politics.

Sixty-eight years' old, badly injured in a 1992 plane crash, chronically overweight, and having fainted at a September Cairo meeting, Arafat may live a long time but is not a great actuarial risk. Yet contrary to many media reports and rumors, competition over the succession is very limited since Arafat is going to punish anyone showing that he is seeking the post.

Whether or not the specific rumors of Parkinson's disease or other maladies are true, post-Arafat Palestinian politics are now on the horizon. The outcome depends to a great deal on the timing of Arafat's demise and future events. For example, the fact that Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini lived long enough to decide to end the war with Iraq or that Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad defied predictions of his death to start negotiations with Israel while rejecting a peace agreement prove this point. But even though Arafat's successor cannot yet be identified or the main candidates' chances rated, this issue reveals a great deal about Palestinian factions and power centers.

The 1993 Israel-PLO agreement began a comprehensive, if still incomplete, transformation of Palestinian politics:

-- From a revolutionary movement engaged in a war to the death against Israel to a state-in-the-making negotiating a compromise with Israel, seeking a West Bank/Gaza state rather than trying to destroy and supplant

Israel. Having once refused to make peace with Israel, the Palestinian leadership now demands that Israel makes a compromise negotiated peace settlement.

-- From dependence on violence as its main instrument, to an interest in usually, if not always, blocking other Palestinians' terrorism against Israel.

-- From the PLO, a weak umbrella group riddled with the Arab states' surrogates and representing all Palestinians, to the PA, a more centralized and purely Palestinian structure representing West Bank and Gaza Palestinians, as the main national institution and leadership.

-- From exile outside its claimed homeland, to a return including the physical transfer of many leading figures and a shift in its power base, constituency, and priorities.

-- From viewing the United States as a principal enemy, to becoming in some sense a U.S. client.

Geographical transplantation has also made the movement -- despite continued friction and potential confrontation -- more dependent on Israel, Western financial and diplomatic support, as well as on its own ability to manage or even improve the lives of over two million Palestinians it rules. The leadership's options are far more constrained than many outsiders understand. To view this dilemma, one need merely sit in Arafat's Gaza office and hear Israeli fighter planes flying near-by, listen to his own remarks about the PA's total dependence on Israeli-generated electricity, or consider the damage to the Palestinian economy caused by Israeli "border" closures after terrorist attacks.

Equally, despite January 1996 elections establishing a Palestinian Assembly and the creation of governmental structures resembling a state, Palestinian fortunes are tied to Arafat's decisions and characters even more than before. This is true because historically Arafat had little or no direct control over most of the PLO member groups. The organization's

dispersion in multiple states, interference by Arab regimes, and rampant decentralization loosened Arafat's control even over his own Fatah group.

Arafat developed a style of leadership suited to these circumstances, in which his eccentric blend of weakness and whimsy helped him survive the severe tests he faced. Constantly indecisive and refusing to impose his power on the many Palestinian groups and factions, Arafat was the very opposite of a dictator giving orders and enforcing discipline with an iron fist. Ironically, though, this style also helped preserve a loose but overriding sense of unity while also ensuring his own popularity and legitimacy across the political spectrum. With Palestinians so divided in most other ways, Arafat became the only universally accepted symbol of nation and movement.

As if to make up for all those years of presiding over the anarchic PLO, Arafat now controls almost every decision as well as personally selecting each appointee to PA jobs of any importance. He transfers and switches officials frequently if he thinks someone is becoming too powerful, wants to reward another follower, or simply wishes to demonstrate his power.

Arafat more easily monopolizes decisionmaking than other Middle East leaders because his entity is smaller and less populous while, of course, his sphere of control is more limited than that of an actual state. But his rejection of institutionalization and refusal to create a clear chain of command -- of which the refusal to name a chief deputy is one symptom -- also inhibits continuity, efficiency, economic development, democracy, and discipline.

The resulting regime, however, is far from a Syrian or Iraqi style tyrannical regime. Arafat's models seem to be his Arab neighbors, Egypt and Jordan. The PA can be more accurately described as a paternalist, populist and pluralist dictatorship. Speech is relatively but not totally free.

There is a multi-party parliament and elections, but the opposition is only allowed a share of participation and never control over the government. Opposition activists and parties are offered inducements to let themselves be coopted. The buying off of Hanan Ashrawi with a junior ministry and Arafat's splitting of Hamas are case studies in that art.

The media often avoids reporting about problems, even ignoring parliamentary complaints about the PA's performance. Newspapers are frequently closed down for brief periods of time to teach them to obey the PA's preferences. But, basically, only Arafat himself is totally exempt from criticism.

In maintaining these delicate balances, the three pillars of Arafat's PA are legitimacy, patronage, and -- of the least relative importance -- repression.

Legitimacy. Arafat's three decades of virtually unchallenged leadership and status as founding father of the Palestinian-state-in-the-making is an enormous political asset for him, making Arafat the only imaginable Palestinian leader. His role as the PA's chief executive has further entrenched him. And, of course, his recognition as Palestinian leader and diplomatic partner by Israel, the United States, and Arab states further reinforces this primacy.

There is an additional, highly important factor. Palestinians' fear that internal conflict might bring civil war and another catastrophic defeat is an effective restraint on internal political forces. The opposition is quite aware of the suicidal self-inflicted violence during the 1937-1939 uprising and the fratricidal splits which helped bring about the Palestinians' catastrophic 1948 defeat. It does not want to appear responsible for challenging Arafat or undermining Palestinian interests. A case in point was Hamas's temporary retreat from terrorism in 1994-1995, when its violence

was seen to be slowing Israel's withdrawal from West Bank Palestinian towns.

Patronage. Arafat's control over the purse-strings -- increasingly from taxation but far more from foreign aid -- gives him the power to reward or punish every Palestinian. Those who cooperate get jobs, contracts, and necessary permits for themselves and their families. Opponents get nothing, or even face sanctions against their businesses, families, and career prospects. This system involves corruption, but sometimes corruption -- especially if the benefits are spread widely -- is an effective tool in political base-building. Ambitious individuals, the Palestinian middle class and even Hamas' leaders have too much to lose if they antagonize Arafat, and too much to gain if they support him.

Repression. Given the regime's revolutionary populism during its early days, this factor has been the least important. Still, Arafat has tens of thousands of soldiers -- officially labelled police -- to enforce his will. Such power, of course, is most effective when its threat deters disobedience. While few are tried by a court and sentenced to prison, taking dissidents in for questioning and using physical pressure or verbal threats on some of them effectively makes the PA's point about what might happen to those persisting in their activities.

The opposition has no control over any part of the government or the military forces. Only by an armed uprising could they hope to gain power and they know that a rebellion has no chance of succeeding but instead would simply give Arafat both a rationale and popular support for crushing them.

At the same time, his permissiveness toward Hamas -- leaving its infrastructure alone and not conducting propaganda against it -- has made that group less willing to confront Arafat.

During February and March 1996, Hamas carried out anti-Israel terrorism

against Arafat's wishes, yet unimpeded by his passivity. Seeing the damage these attacks were doing to the peace process (ironically, they were a major factor leading to the election of Benjamin Netanyahu's conservative government in Israel), Arafat finally stopped them.

In contrast, during the summer of 1997, Arafat gave Hamas the green light to carry out a limited number of attacks which he mistakenly believed would increase his leverage in the peace process, putting pressure on Israel and encouraging international intervention. As events showed, though, this was a dangerous strategy since these attacks undermined Arafat's position. Such violence could lead Israel to abandon the peace process or to destroy the PA, as well as turning the West against Arafat. Generally, then, Arafat has an interest in restraining Hamas, and has been able to do so when he wishes to exercise such control.

Although Hamas does have significant support, it is very much in the minority. While popular backing for anti-Israel terrorism has gone up and down among Palestinians depending on the peace process's current situation, backing for Hamas itself has dropped sharply -- the most accurate Palestinian public opinion polls seems to show by 40 percent -- between 1993 and 1997. It should be underlined that far more Palestinians approve of Hamas's killing of Israelis than support it as a political movement. Meanwhile, Arafat's regime has steadily consolidated control if not always popularity. (See Khalil Shikaki, "Palestinian Public Opinion, The Peace Process and Political Violence," *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 1998, and also a comprehensive list of articles on public opinion data in *MERIA News* 1998, Issue 3, January 1998.)

Consequently, there has been a sharp debate within Hamas. One line of argument -- paralleling the PLO's original 1948-1974

strategy -- demands armed struggle without end to sabotage the peace process and destroy Israel. This is especially but not exclusively, prevalent among Hamas leaders outside the PA-ruled areas.

The other approach -- paralleling the PLO's 1974-1988 "two-stage" strategy -- urges that Hamas become a partly loyal opposition. This view was expressed by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, released in October from an Israeli prison, who said he is working with the PA "to lay the foundations for Palestinian national unity." (Cited, *Middle East Mirror*, October 10, 1997) The idea is to go along with Arafat to obtain a Palestinian state, then try to take over that country in order to make it an Islamic state and a launching pad in renewing the struggle against Israel.

The problems of other opposition groups originating from the PLO (the Communist Party, Democratic Party, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine) parallel those faced by Hamas. Hamas's even more militant rival, Islamic Jihad, is small and divided into numerous factions. Iranian backing makes it vulnerable to charges of foreign loyalties. The radical nationalist groups which historically disregarded Arafat's leadership in the PLO have only marginal popular support. Moderate, pro-democratic forces are weak and divided. And Arafat has so skillfully circumvented and frustrated the Palestinian Assembly that his greatest potential challenger there, Haydar Abd al-Shafi, resigned.

It is important not to be misled by the very real grumbling among Palestinians, understandably dissatisfied by the PA's bureaucracy, corruption and incompetence, as well as by the peace process's slow pace. Disillusion with a revolution -- especially one which has had to so much reduce its goals -- is not surprising. But neither is it a sign that the regime will be overturned. Such

unhappiness can also be heard among intellectuals and the general population in every Arab state and in Israel, too. Yet this discontent is not organized, and the PA retains a great deal of legitimacy, popularity and power.

In short, then, Arafat remains the only conceivable leader of the Palestinians. Palestinians recognize that battling Arafat would be very unpopular. Splitting the Palestinians is seen as weakening their chance of succeeding in negotiations, as well as "giving Israel an excuse" to stop the peace process altogether. Arafat's rule is increasingly consolidated; and he has the weapons of both reward (patronage, money, honors) and punishment (exclusion from commercial or job opportunities and political office; arrest or imprisonment).

Although Arafat's successor cannot yet be identified, the power groups that will produce him are well-defined. The next leader will not come from the opposition. Moreover, the PLO's founding generation, all close to Arafat's age, is passing from the scene. The two most likely heirs, Abu Jihad (probably the only man Arafat ever saw in this role) and Abu Iyad, have already died violently. Arafat lacks an inner circle able to produce a consensus, establishment candidate. And the intifada generation is far from ready to assume power.

The old PLO as such is no longer capable of doing so either. It is important to remember that the PLO's leadership has come overwhelmingly from those who were 1948 refugees from lands which became part of Israel. Remarkably few important figures in the PLO originated in the West Bank or Gaza, the lands where a Palestinian state is taking shape. In general, the 1948 refugees have more difficulty in coming to terms with a compromise solution than do natives of the West Bank and Gaza.

This historic establishment is represented by Faruq Qadumeh, an unreconstructed hardliner very popular in

the organization. He is a member of the PLO Executive Committee and vice-president of the Palestinian Economic Council for Development & Reconstruction. Qadumeh opposes the peace process and is close to Syria. But by staying abroad, he has become isolated and irrelevant. Any candidate to succeed Arafat must be active within the PA arena.

In the five years since the Oslo agreements, the Palestinian leadership has been transformed. Many of the PLO hierarchy's most important people have been pushed aside and the political -- though not military -- heads are almost all local people.

Consider some statistics:

Of 18 members of the PLO's Executive Committee, its highest body, in 1991, only 5 of them are in important posts today [PA Chairman Yasir Arafat, chief negotiator Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazin), Minister of Information and Culture Yasir Abed Rabbo, Abdallah Hourani, in charge of refugee affairs, and Ministry of Finance Muhammad Nashashibi].

Of 18 members of the Fatah Central Committee, only 6 are still leading figures [Arafat, Abu Mazin, Minister of Social Welfare Intisar Abu Wazir, Minister of Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation Nabil Sha'th, Minister of Education Yasir Amr, and parliamentary speaker Ahmad Qrie'h (Abu Ala)].

That means that just 9 of 34 people who qualified as in the top Fatah or PLO organization a few years ago have transferred that status into the PA structure.

Among the Palestinian Legislative Council's 88 members (89 if you count Arafat), aside from Abu Wazir, Sha'th and Amr, only about 9 others were significant figures in the exiled PLO. A similar picture appears on examining the Arafat's cabinet.

So who is in the new Palestinian political elite? One strong characteristic is that they were overwhelmingly West Bank and Gaza residents who stayed there unless

deported by Israel. Arafat has done far better at using these "insiders" than might have been expected in 1993.

The most common background are those from the notable, property-owning families forming the West Bank's and Gaza Strip's traditional aristocracy. Names like Shawa and Masri show this sector's presence. As managers of family business interests or mayors who were nominally independent, they were friendly to Fatah. While clearly Palestinian patriots, they are not social radicals or among those eager for violent upheaval.

This seems to be Arafat's favorite group. In the cabinet, those with the strongest local bases include Maher al-Masri (Nablus, economy and trade); Jamil al-Tarifi (Ramallah, civil affairs), and Abdel Jawad Saleh (Ramallah-al-Bireh, agriculture). All three of these men were among their towns' biggest vote-getters in the January 1997 parliamentary election. Many others among Arafat's lieutenants, however, have good pedigrees but are very dependent on his favor, being technocrats or very unpopular politicians.

This leaves three main categories of successor:

The weakest is the technocratic alternative represented by Abu Alaa, speaker of the Palestinian Assembly. In "constitutional" terms, he is Arafat's designated successor, at least for 60 days after Arafat's demise when new elections are supposed to be held.

Abu Alaa's orientation toward economic development would please some among the West Bank/Gaza commercial elite -- the "notables." He might also be favored by democratic oppositionists and the young highly educated middle class. As elsewhere, though, this type of candidate, who seems so appealing to Western correspondents, is far less attractive to the masses and power-brokers. Someone of this category, lacking either a charismatic

connections with the populace or a political machine of his own, is not likely to win an election.

In contrast stands Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazin). He has impeccable PLO credentials, being the secretary and third Fatah member (along with Arafat and Qadumeh) of its Executive Committee. But, in contrast to Qadumeh, Abu Mazin transformed himself by returning to the West Bank and becoming the chief Palestinian negotiator with Israel. Abu Mazin is not a charismatic figure and has no political machine of his own. Like Qadumeh, he was born and grew up in a town now part of Israel. Yet he is far more representative of the new PA-era Fatah movement.

The Fatah activists who stayed in the territories (unless deported by Israel) owe their public and political prominence to personal rank and services in the organization. This group is conspicuously absent from the cabinet. Arafat's failure to give jobs or access has made them angry. Some of them even had to enter parliament as independents after they were left off his personal slate. Their leader is Marwan al-Bargouti, head of the Fatah Higher Council on the West Bank. They are leading members of Arafat's party but have almost no influence on his policies.

But Fatah is still by far the most important political movement in the PA area and has a strong interest in uniting around a single candidate for the leadership. The Fatah officials have the inside track in choosing Arafat's successor and are bound to play a more important role in the post-Arafat era. Ultimately, they control the political infrastructure and can mobilize the PA's supporters.

Their logical candidate is the only leading figure at the top of the PLO and Fatah organizations who now plays a leading role in the PA: Abu Mazin. There are, however, other possible candidates for

that role, including Faisal al-Husseini. But Arafat has already reacted to the possibility of these two men's potential candidacy by trying to reduce their power.

The Palestinian military is the other key power center. Col. Jibril Rajoub, head of Preventive Security in the West Bank, is the man most often mentioned as having political ambitions and prospects. But there are a dozen other officers -- for example Rajub's Gaza counterpart, Col. Muhammad Dahlan and Public Security Commander Maj. Gen. Nasir Yusuf -- who might consider themselves Arafat's successor.

It is worth noting that these soldiers come from the regular units of the Palestine Liberation Army and were not involved in the pre-1993 terrorist campaigns. Consequently, they favor order and discipline, feeling uncomfortable with irregular or opposition-controlled terrorist units which act on their own and ignore the dictates of the central government.

Rajoub has especially expressed such law-and-order sentiments, occasionally making implied criticisms of Arafat for allowing too much latitude for the violent opposition. At the same time, though, Rajoub has tried to subvert Israeli control over east Jerusalem and made clear his support for militant actions to create a Palestinian state.

At any rate, because Rajoub has so many rivals and was too obvious in campaigning for the leadership, he was suspended from the PLO's Central Council for six months in January 1998. While Arafat supports this punishment, the maneuver was carried out by Fatah political figures who do not want any officer to become too powerful.

By creating so many competing units and constantly shifting commanders, Arafat has made it harder for any one of these officers to promote his own candidacy. Abu Mazin clearly is in the best position to follow Arafat into office since most

politicians will back him while most officers will not follow Rajoub or any other individual. Moreover, his accession to power could be smooth while any officer's attempt to grab power could lead to civil war, also bringing into the conflict both Hamas and other groups allied with the anti-military group.

Since Palestinian officers know that a coup attempt is likely to fail in a disastrous way, and cannot even agree on a candidate among themselves, they are likely to be patient. Of course, there does not have to be a conflict between these two Palestinian centers of power. They might well unite with each other -- or around a specific candidate -- based on the need to cooperate against perceived opposition, Israel, and foreign Arab influence.

Perhaps the most likely long-term outcome would be rule by a blend of politicians and officers, a combination of Fatah and fatigues. After all, the Fatah politicians will be the ones to control future promotions of officers who have shown themselves to be loyal. If officers do seek to rule a future Palestine state some day, they are more likely to be as retired officers in civilian garb -- the Egyptian pattern -- or as the power behind the throne.

What would be the effect of Arafat being disabled or deceased? Timing is a key factor here, with the years 1999 and 2000 as the turning point. If Arafat were to die as president of an independent Palestine, succession would be fairly institutionalized; if he passes away during the negotiations or a major crisis in the peace process, the result would be more disruptive.

All three of the main current candidates are pragmatists, determined to continue the diplomatic process and ready to make peace with Israel. Psychologically, they are less flighty than Arafat; operationally, they are more realistic and have a low opinion of ideology. In this sense, the succession would reinforce the

long-term Palestinian trend toward a more moderate stance. It might distribute power more widely and lead to a more efficient decisionmaking process.

At the same time, though, Arafat's successors would retain the current leader's goal of an independent Palestinian state with east Jerusalem as its capital. Like Arafat, they might be willing to make small concessions on territory and other matters but only if the main aim can be thereby achieved.

Already, there is much speculation in Arab circles about foreign influences on the succession battle, including wild rumors that the United States and Israel are manipulating it. Suha, the leader's wife, claimed that Arafat's death would trigger "a destructive war," fomented by Israel. (al-Majallah, November 16, 1997)

In fact, though, outside powers should have very limited leverage over who becomes the next Palestinian leader. The mere suggestion that someone is an Israeli or American candidate could be enough to destroy their chance of success. Instead, unless Arafat eventually does clearly designate a successor, his heir will be chosen by internal coalitions. Moreover, the candidates' personal or political differences are far too limited to trigger violence. But Suha Arafat's reaction -- like that of other Palestinians -- does reflect a characteristic Palestinian sense of weakness, fear of internal divisions, and difficulty in envisioning a post-Arafat Palestinian politics.

None of Arafat's likely successors are anyone's puppet. The candidates do need to assure the United States and Israel that they would keep the PA's commitments, at least as well as Arafat did. But each of them is determined to preserve Palestinian independence against external forces, be they Western, Israeli, or foreign Arabs. The old possibility of the PLO becoming a

satellite of Iraq, Syria, or some other radical Arab regime is no longer a serious threat.

Some Palestinians also see the debate over the post-Arafat era to be an opportunity for promoting greater democracy. Marwan Kanafani, an advisor to Arafat and Palestinian Assembly member who sometimes shows his independence, remarked, "We need a democratic apparatus in order to prevent problems arising in the days following Arafat's departure." Another Assembly member, Hatam Abd al-Kadar, added, "Democracy must reign in the post-Arafat period." (Jerusalem Post, November 19, 1997.)

Even a relatively smooth transition would, however, do some real potential damage to the peace process and Palestinian interests

-- The need for a new leader and ruling team to establish itself would delay progress in the already sluggish talks for months or even a year.

-- An uncertain situation and a less accepted leader would produce more internal turmoil, including an increase in attempted terrorist attacks against Israel by militant Hamas factions and other groups.

-- Long-term feuds could begin between the West Bank and Gaza; among such historically competitive towns as Nablus, Hebron, and Ramallah; and between "insiders" (indigenous residents of the West Bank and Gaza) and "outsiders" (1948 refugees returning from exile) over the distribution of power and resources.

-- Especially significant is that the exclusive control over political decisions by those residing in the West Bank and Gaza will widen the gap between the PA and those Palestinians living elsewhere in the Middle East. In Jordan, this means that local Palestinians will continue to feel more dependent on King Hussein, and hence less willing to go too far in opposing that government. But in Lebanon, Palestinians

would be more likely to reject the PA and move closer to radical Islamic movements.

Finally, a successor to Arafat would simultaneously be more challengeable but also tougher. His weaker legitimacy would make his regime more vulnerable to opposition challenges but this very problem would make the new leaders readier to use force against rivals if necessary in order to retain power.

The bottom line is that Palestinians feel insecure and fearful in starting to think about the need to find a successor for Arafat. Yet it is a task that can and will be accomplished eventually. As many countries have discovered throughout history, replacing the founding father is the true test of their ability to survive.

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