

## After Arafat

**Kenneth W. Stein**

**W**ithin the last five years five major Middle Eastern leaders have passed away, each after thirty or more years in power: President Hafez al Assad of Syria (1970-2000), King Hussein of Jordan (1953-1999), President Zayed bin Sultan al Nahayan of the United Arab Emirates (1965-2004), King Hassan of Morocco (1961-1999), and now Yasir Arafat (1969-2004), leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and of the semi-governmental Palestinian Authority.

After each of the previous four deaths, observers doubted that the succession would be easy—but the successions were in fact relatively smooth. Arafat's departed contemporaries devoted enormous energies to blending tribes, amalgamating divergent ethnic sects, balancing religious groups, and absorbing differing social classes into national identities. With pervasive domestic security organs they enforced their will, suppressed dissent to varying degrees, and maintained personal dominance over the political order. But each of them also developed some "mechanism"—party, parliament, constitutional fabric, or process—that created an allegiance to a collectivity. Though keeping power for themselves, they

stitched together disparate social units into a common national identity with common goals. Diligent preparations guaranteed each one of them relatively stable transitions.

With Arafat, it's different. To be sure, early indications suggested a relative smooth transition in the Palestinian leadership too. But unlike in successions of heads of state—where the very existence and political identity of the state is a given—the Palestinian national movement will now have to decide not only who will steer the movement into its next phase, but even which Palestinians reside in what Palestine. When Assad, Hussein, Sheikh Zayed, and Hassan died, there were no questions about who was a Syrian, Jordanian, or Moroccan. A state with functional institutions ran their countries. Arafat, by contrast, passed away while his national movement was not sure what its final borders might be nor what of its historical past might keep it from settling its future. Succession is not merely about who rules. It is also about what is being ruled and how the rules are made. And while Arafat may have shared the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in explicitly recognizing Israel in 1988, renouncing the practice of terrorism, and signing the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, he never was willing or able to turn these into a lasting peace settlement with Israel.

The nature of the collectivity he ruled allowed Arafat to dominate the Palestinian national movement. His

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autocracy left the movement still unclear about whether struggle or accommodation would be the fuel for its political engine. The constituencies Arafat represented were geographically disparate and philosophically diverse. He was the line that connected the dots between Palestinian dispersion and political diversity.

### Personal Power

Arafat wrapped the cause of liberating Palestine tightly around his own persona; the two were virtually inseparable. A columnist in the Beirut *Daily Star* recently called his rule “near dictatorial.” Whoever criticized him was accused of doing the unthinkable and criticizing the objective of liberating Palestine. Attention accorded him by international leaders was oxygen for his ego and his struggle. Any visit with a foreign leader in Ramallah or in an international capital added prestige and currency to his claims of legitimacy for his unqualified rule. He loved being treated as a head of state; he ran the PLO as if it were a state. Every resolution at the United Nations or some other international body addressing Palestinian issues gave him and his cause a moral boost.

Arafat, like his peers, used patronage and security services to preserve domineering control. But he also cemented the Palestinian national movement around sacrifice, victimhood, and oppression. He was its messenger, emissary, and promoter. The source of his legitimacy was his courage and commitment to sustaining the dream of returning to some or

all of Palestine to Palestinian rule. An external power, most particularly Zionism and Israel, provided ready glue.

Arafat kept the cause alive and manipulated the national movement by practicing classic patrimonialism. He was the law. He set the rules of political behavior and discourse. He decided when tactical or strategic shifts were required to steer the Palestinian Arab national movement around internal opponents and away from external intruders. He made adjustments and shifts in policy as he saw fit, not as others expected of him. He decided when to maintain the struggle against Israel through terrorism, force, or diplomacy.

Being held accountable, either domestically or internationally, was not in his lexicon. The means of his authority was the vast amount of money that flowed to him through his PLO coffers. Exploitation of the purse gave him total control over the national movement. Disbursing funds lubricated his leadership; it kept detractors silent. Public resources were his private domain. Clientelism, power, and influence ran from him and to him at the same time.

Arafat personalized power. Far from blending the disparate geographic and philosophical parts of a diverse Palestinian community into autonomous institutions, he frustrated any such development. He played the geographical dispersion of the Palestinian people and their historic social cleavages along family and village lines to his autocratic advantage. Creating or strengthening political in-

stitutions other than the ones he dominated, such as the PLO or his Fatah Party, would have established threats to his leadership. He had no patience with power-sharing; when events forced him to make such concessions, these were eminently temporary and reversible. A line of succession would have offered prospects to end his rule before he was ready to go. In this divide-and-rule tactic, he was greatly aided—though the Israelis would never admit this publicly—by the targeted Israeli assassinations of Palestinian leaders in earlier years.

While many Palestinians grumbled regularly about his dictatorial style, they rarely confronted him outright and continuously. When there were bitter disagreements about his policy choices or even open rebellion to his rule, he squashed opposition. When challenged from within the Palestinian community, he found ways to threaten, punish, or disregard such voices. Repeatedly in the 1990s Palestinians like Hanan Ashrawi, Saeb Erekat, Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin), Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala), Muhammad Dahlan, Jabril Rajoub, and Feisal Husseini disagreed with his policies, fumed at him, and resigned from their posts—only to return to positions under his direction.

### Egregious Mistakes

Arafat successfully marketed the suffering of the Palestinian people, but did little to help them better their economic lot. Quite phenomenally, he sustained Arab and international support for the Palestinian cause even as

he made egregious political mistakes. His open embrace of Saddam Hussein's 1991 invasion of Kuwait precipitated the expulsion of more than 350,000 Palestinians from Arab oil-producing states and confiscation of their bank accounts. When Arafat refused to sign a previously negotiated agreement with the Israelis in 1994, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, who had lent his prestige to that mediation, became so outraged at Arafat's delay that he blurted out to him, "Sign, you son of a dog!"

Then, although he repeatedly renounced terrorism, Arafat purchased 50 tons of weapons from Iran, as revealed when Israel confiscated the lot on the *Karine A* ship in January 2002, just four months after al Qaeda operatives had mounted their 9/11 attacks in the US. This made him a virtual enemy of Americans, who thereafter deemed him a bedfellow of Osama bin Laden. But even then his leadership of the national movement was so revered that he was never publicly shunted aside to a ceremonial post in favor of the men—Abu Mazin, Farouk Qaddumi, and Abu Ala—who now dominate, for all practical purposes, the PLO, the Fatah Party, and the Palestinian Authority.

Over time, Palestinian elements and Middle Eastern leaders sought to influence, usurp, undermine, or pay no more than lip service to the Palestinian cause, the PLO's prerogatives, and Arafat's leadership. Arafat made a career of fending off these challenges. When Middle Eastern leaders worried more about their own national interests than the Palestinian cause, or

sought to manage Palestinian decision-making, Arafat publicly shamed them for damaging the quest to liberate Palestine.

Arafat came to despise Egyptian President Anwar Sadat for wanting to represent the Palestinians at Camp David in 1978 and for making peace with Israel, but he turned this into a political and financial bonanza for the Palestinian cause and his own rule. Over decades he struggled bitterly with Jordan's King Hussein about who should speak for the Palestinians, become sovereign in the West Bank, or be the Arab custodian for Jerusalem, should any part be liberated from Israel. Throughout the 1990s Arafat's relationship with President Hafez al Assad of Syria was similarly frosty and disdainful as Arafat steered the Palestinian national movement free of the Syrian leader's desire for influence over it.

Arafat's three objectives in rule were constant: to maintain the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; to liberate part or all of Palestine through armed struggle or diplomacy; and to retain his own absolute decision-making powers. Though he repeatedly frustrated American and European leaders, his machinations and steadfastness effectively dramatized the Palestinian cause for more than three decades. Though he pillaged Palestinian funds to stay at the top of the heap, he kept an otherwise fragmented people from falling into political oblivion. He defended the cause passionately, squeezing out every last drop of emotion. He was admired and feared,

loved and criticized. He was a master at pulling strings, all the strings.

In condoning terrorism and refusing to sign an agreement with Israel that would finally end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, he nurtured an Israeli predisposition to mistrust Arab leaders and equate them with the tsars, Hitler, and the Mufti of Jerusalem, who wanted to kill Jews. Israelis had ample reason to mistrust Arab leaders like Assad and Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, but with Arafat their anxiety level boiled over.

### What Next?

Yasir Arafat was the living, breathing symbol of the Palestinian cause. Yet he left a mixed legacy. In the short term his death will hardly facilitate any Israeli-Palestinian treaty or accord beyond, at most, a signed disengagement agreement after Israel's portended withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Formally, Arafat leaves behind the 2003 Palestinian Draft Constitution, in which power in the proposed Palestine state is to be concentrated in the institutions of a parliament and an independent judiciary and is not to be subjugated to the whims of an autocratic president. The proposed presidential duties are to be ceremonial, much like those of the monarch in England or the Israeli president—and very unlike Arafat's own autocracy.

Intellectually, Arafat departs an Arab world in the throes of self-criticism and self-questioning after September 11, 2001. Initiatives for reform and regime change did not emanate from Washington; they were spawned

indigenously in the Middle East. The first spate of articles in Arabic about succession in the Palestinian community came at least as early as 1997. Arafat was increasingly called to task for his failure to run the state in making as he had contracted to do in the 1993 Oslo Accords. Over the last four years public derision of his rule, his cronyism, and corruption have been regular features of the Arab and Palestinian written media. He died as more and more Palestinians in the territories were fed up with his nepotism and stealing from the public purse. The most recent criticism of him came in a raft of articles by Palestinians and other Arabs about the abysmal failure of the 2000-04 *intifada*.

Once municipal and national elections are held among the four million Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, electoral legitimacy will determine who leads, but it will not determine if the Palestinian political future passes through an armed struggle or a diplomatic phase, or repeats Arafat's method of using both. Electoral legitimacy does not confer courage, will, or skill. The status quo has been broken by Arafat's death. But can the three newly identified leaders—Abbas as head of the PLO, Qurei as Palestinian Authority prime minister, and Qaddumi as head of Fatah—all staunch nationalists, make the core compromise about Palestinian refugee return that is now needed?

### Warning to Outsiders

Historically, ever since the 1930s, outsiders have repeatedly tried to re-

present the interests of the Palestinians, giving them hope, but also letting them hide behind the outsiders' hollow voices. Arafat spent his lifetime fighting for Palestinian autonomy against those intrusions—even as his monopoly on leadership stifled younger leaders and blocked them from emerging to run Palestinian affairs.

At this point initiating a renewed high-profile diplomatic process too soon would not permit younger, different voices to challenge the newly anointed leadership. If the Abbas, Qurei, and Qaddumi leaders gain control over Arafat's funds, they too will follow the patrimonialism Arafat used so effectively. Inevitably, the new triumvirate of leaders will argue that they offer the best alternative to secular and radical groups and hope that the European Union, the Bush administration, and the Quartet of these two plus Russia and the United Nations will engage with them sooner rather than later.

Rather than hoping that such mediators could deliver the Israelis to a peace settlement, however, Palestinians must now take the hard decision to seize control of their own destiny and accept that not all Palestinians will be able to return to live in their former homes. In the meantime, nothing should be done to interfere with or delay Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's announced unilateral withdrawal of Israeli settlements from Gaza. Israeli domestic politics are such that Sharon has a window of opportunity for the next twelve months.

The aging Sharon should be given every chance to do what he has promised, in the time frame of the year proposed. Even if with caveats, a majority of Israelis want to see a Palestinian state established. If Sharon's unilateral intention is stalled by waiting for multilateral negotiations and signature, the chances are high that no withdrawal will take place. If the Gaza withdrawal is partially successful, however, a dynamic could be started that would push Israel to consider further withdrawals from the West Bank as well, as long as its demands for national security are respected.

No single Palestinian leader can replace Arafat, have the moral authority to sign an interim or final agreement, and succeed in selling this to the Palestinian people without infighting or even civil strife. For Israel or outside mediators, then, it would be an exercise in futility to wait for a suitable negotiating partner before taking unilateral steps. As the United States found out in the mid-1980s when it was trying to negotiate with an Israeli national unity government, dealing with what will be a Palestinian national unity government would be a sure prescription for delay and no signed accord.

However worthy Arafat's successors might be, all external interference, including high-profile mediation, should be avoided until after domestic churning has shaped new alliances within the Palestinian movement. Nothing should be done to frustrate younger Palestinian reformers who see Arafat's demise as a

chance to challenge their elders in democratic elections. If the reformers are successful, donors must quickly provide funds not channeled through the elite, who would use them to preserve their domains. Hamas and other radical groups notwithstanding, Palestinians too yearn for democratic freedoms and civil society. That was evident during the Palestinian elections in 1996, and the desire has grown since then. If Bush and the EU are seeking Palestinian political reform, they should not choke off the reformers by anointing Arafat's immediate successors. Political engineering from the outside should be limited. Let new leaders earn their place by winning elections, ending violence, and improving the Palestinian standard of living.

Arafat's death is an opportunity for the Palestinians to make tough choices. If they decide not to use the opportunity to sign interim or final agreements with Israel, this would at least be an answer to the open question of a peace settlement. Either way, Israelis will have justified building their barrier to separate the future of the two nationalisms. Israel should not be in the business of controlling Palestinian destiny, and the Palestinians should not be determining whether Israel feels secure. History suggests that at some point American mediation will be required to take the two sides where they want to go but will not go without being pulled by the hand.

Sensitivity to what is happening on the ground will determine when that time comes. It is not here yet.