

The Future of the Palestinian Leadership

Abstract

When PA leader Yasser Arafat eventually leaves the stage, a new chapter will be opened in Palestinian political history will entail new realities and bring to the fore new forces and fresh dynamics. First and foremost, Arafat's departure will signal a changing of the guards from the "old guard" Diaspora leadership of the PLO to the "young guard" leadership from the West Bank and Gaza. However, how effective will this new generation of leaders be? The present trend towards internal fragmentation of the Palestinian Authority, exacerbated by Israeli security measures may devolve any future political leadership of true control on the ground – control which will devolve to a multitude of local warlords – each in his own territory. Under such circumstances, Israel will lack a clear Palestinian interlocutor both for deterrence and for political negotiations, and will have to invest more assets vis-à-vis a plethora of local elements. At the end of the day, however, building a viable Palestinian leadership, which will both desire Peace and stability and be capable of working towards these goals, calls for economic reforms within the PA, 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 among Israel's moderate Arab neighbors.

Executive Summary

(This paper is a summary of a paper in Hebrew)

The Situation

For a generation Yasser Arafat has been a central figure in Palestinian politics – both symbolic and in practice. As a symbol, Arafat represents in his people's eyes a series of national achievements for all Palestinians: independent Palestinian representation, international support and the struggle against Israel. However, at the same time, he symbolizes the "sector" of the refugees of 1948, epitomized in the demand for the "Right of Return". The dependence of the WB/Gaza public on his leadership meant that these "sectorial" demands became incorporated into the political agenda of conventional political opinion in the West Bank and Gaza. During the first Intifadah, the WB/Gaza gave birth to "local heroes" who were seen as authentic representatives of their public's interests and it seemed as if a local narrative was developing which could set aside the insoluble "Problem of 1948". However, the Oslo accords revived the old narrative of the "outside" and again pushed aside the growing narrative of the "inside". On the practical level, Arafat has full sway in the PLO and the PA and his disappearance (not his expulsion – in which case his influence may even grow) will create an actual vacuum of authority that Palestinian society lacks any tested tools to fill.

Arafat's centrality in the Palestinian political fabric raises the question what will the Palestinian Leadership and the patterns of Palestinian politics look like in the post-Arafat era. A leadership change may take a number of forms: it may be orderly; it may be during a period of violence or during a time of peace negotiations; It may also be gradual as a result of an impairment of Arafat's functioning or the result of a violent struggle after his death. In any case, any analysis must take into account the differentiation between a political leadership, which may represent the Palestinian

national interests in the international arena, and a de-facto leadership, which will dictate the day-to-day lives of the Palestinians on the ground.

The existing Palestinian leadership may be defined as belonging to the "founding generation" of the Diaspora (leaders of the PLO from the days of Beirut and Tunis) or to the "young guard" of the WB/Gaza, ("graduates" of the first Intifadah and Israeli jails). A distinction may also be made according to ideological affinities to Fatah, Islamist groups or others or links to foreign (Arab or Western) countries. In general, the "younger generation" of leaders is less centralist and hierarchic, and hence more "democratic" than their predecessors. The formal Palestinian democracy, however, as embodied in the legislative and the secular civil society (Academics, secularists and the business sector, who aspire to a society closer to that of Israel than to neighboring Arab models) have little weight in the balance of power and the influence of the members of the legislative is limited.

Only few of the "founding fathers" of Fatah have survived, and none of them is of leadership stature or influence on the power bases which come close to that of Arafat. It seems, therefore, that Arafat's demise will signal the passage of the "old guard" of the Palestinian movement. This "changing of the guard" will also signal the transfer of the leadership to the leaders of the WB/Gaza, as the Diaspora has no "second generation" inside the PA. However, the young "WB/Gaza leadership itself has no "national leadership". While the first Intifadah did give rise to a cooperative leadership, which encompassed the whole area, these leaderships were weakened by the Oslo accords and the "import" of the PLO leadership. Arafat's own policies along with Israeli security measures, primarily cutting the WB off from Gaza and the closures within the WB, contributed to the fragmentation of the area.

Along with the local leaders, two other important groups will influence the formation of a new leadership. The first is that of the "prison graduates" of the secular mainstream, who enjoy a great deal of public admiration both as people who have recently suffered for the cause and also as people whose are relatively clean (in contrast with 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 the fact their knowledge of Hebrew and their first hand acquaintance with the complexities and sensitivities of Israeli society. The second group is that of the wealthy business class. This group includes: senior PA officials who have monopolistic control over services and imported goods; Arafat's financial aids who have access to a great portion of the public treasury and Arafat's personal wealth; the old wealthy families from WB/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 the political fields.

Prognosis

It is unlikely that Arafat would 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.

The 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 a strong leadership does not take over the PA from Arafat, the Hamas may emerge as the only force on ground with the control direction and tools to appeal to the public. The situation may become even more complicated if a generational change takes place in the Hamas as well. The younger generation of the Hamas is less likely to accept the transfer of the exclusive representation of the Palestinians to Arafat's successors and will probably demand their portion in the leadership.

The historic "changing of the guards" and ensuing crisis in the legitimacy of the PA leadership may also create public unrest in the PA public. The Palestinians are probably the Arab people, with the most intimate acquaintance with democratic procedures, having experienced them in effect in Israel (even if they did not enjoy them directly) and may want to imitate them. However, in the absence of a strong "civil society" which can lead such unrest, 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 the 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. However, upon Arafat's death, it is quite possible that the Presidential system of the PA, tailored with him in mind, will become anachronistic. Members of the leadership may prefer to nominate a figurehead President without real authority 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, which 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, which 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.
- ◆ The list of potential leaders will remain open, and should take into account the appearance of a "black horse", especially from the local Fatah leaders, who despite the strengthening of Hamas, remains the most powerful force in the WB/Gaza, which can support 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.

- ◆ The fence, when it is completed, will have security, economic and political implications. From the security vantage point, it will reduce the capability of terrorists to infiltrate Israel and will channel some of these efforts against the settlements and IDF forces. Economically, it will reduce the infiltration of illegal workers and exacerbate the economic situation in the WB. Politically, it will be perceived, whether Israel declares it or not, as a border which Israel has drawn up for a future settlement.
- ◆ Anarchy in the PA area may revive the debate over international forces. Such a demand will have legitimacy as "follow up" of Arafat's policies and his successors may feel that such a presence will provide them with some coercive force vis-à-vis local warlords as well as international legitimacy.

Levers of Influence

While Israel cannot dictate developments within the Palestinian body politic, it also has no option to disengage and stand aloof. The most elementary security steps that Israel takes – and will have to take in the future – have a long-reaching effect on the Palestinian political reality and on the formation of the Palestinian leadership. An Israeli attempt to "crown" a Palestinian leader will probably be counterproductive, as it will brand him in the Palestinian street as a "collaborator". Nevertheless, it would be wise for Israel to refrain from excluding any candidate because of his past and before he has stood to the test under the new circumstances.

The available levers for Israel to influence the formation of a new Palestinian leadership may be security oriented, political gestures, economic or humanitarian. The security levers relate to an Israeli decision to use force, to threaten use of force or to refrain from using force. These include redeployments in WB/Gaza, removal of roadblocks and closures, transfer of areas to the PA, renewing arrangements for safe passage, or conversely, military action to put pressure on the PA or to act against Hamas. There is a wide variety of political levers as well, such as: removal of illegal settlements; freeing prisoners (with a possibility of prior contact with the senior prisoners about to be freed); allowing elections (general and/or local); dismantling of settlements; practical gestures in Jerusalem; optimistic declaration regarding the PA leadership. All 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. Ostensibly, Israel could wield influence by: international organizations operating in WB/Gaza; the dependency of the Palestinian economy on Israel's; transfer of taxes; channeling resources to areas where the leaders are more acceptable (perhaps after holding local elections); work permits; boosting economic activity by removal of closures; channeling development projects. However, any Israeli attempt to benefit from economic levers will be restricted by security, domestic economy, humanitarian and political considerations. The goal of all of this should be to break the monopolistic system that Arafat created and to allow the emergence of an economic elite with a vested economic interest in stability.

Conclusion

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

Blatant attempts by Israel to create an acceptable Palestinian leadership will not bear fruit. However, in the circumstances described here, Israel will not have the option to sit on the sidelines and claim 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 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, revival of the traditional economic elites and translation of 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.