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ISSUES BRIEF

ANTHONY BUBALO
Research Fellow
Tel: +61 2 8238 9140
abubalo@lowyinstitute.org

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arafat may have suffered a lingering physical demise, but politically he has long been in decline. He lost much of his international credibility over his unwillingness to rein in Palestinian terrorism against Israel, and domestically his authority had gradually been eroded. While lacking an anointed heir, a succession plan is more or less in place. Political infighting is a possibility, though a desire for unity will probably prevail in the short term. But Arafat's successors will struggle to end the chaos and lawlessness into which the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have descended. Over the longer term Arafat's passing will remove the main obstacle to internal Palestinian reform. It has the potential to re-invigorate the peace process although it will not solve the fundamentals of the current impasse. It will also complicate Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plans for a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the West Bank, even if his instinct will be to press ahead.

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A slow political decline

It has become a cliché to say that there is no-one who can fill Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's shoes. For Palestinians, and for many in the international community, he was the pre-eminent symbol of the Palestinian cause. Arafat brought together in one person the leadership of three key Palestinian organisations: he was Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) the chief international representative of Palestinians; he was the elected President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), the body established under the Oslo Accords with Israel to administer Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza; and he was the head of Fatah, the political movement which Arafat established as the dominant faction inside the PLO and later the PA. Indeed it is very difficult to conceive of one person heading all three organisations in the future.

Arafat's physical demise may have been somewhat prolonged, but politically he has been in decline for months if not years. Four years of violence and growing chaos in the Palestinian territories saw Arafat's authority badly eroded and the PA virtually disintegrate. The Intifada began in 2000 with Arafat's active encouragement. But less apparent was the fact that it was as much directed against him and the "old guard" Palestinian leadership as it was against Israel. In particular, a "young guard" has tried to use a strategy of violence to show that they could achieve what Arafat and the older generation leadership failed to deliver through almost ten years of negotiations.¹

The Intifada has also exposed the inadequacies of Arafat's rule. An overwhelming majority of Palestinians – 93 per cent according to a recent Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) pollⁱⁱ – support calls for internal reform. And many – 42 per cent, according to the same poll

– see the current PA leadership and Arafat as the main obstacle to change. Arafat has continually blocked efforts to unify the multiple Palestinian security forces, to reform the judiciary and to hold new elections, including within Fatah. Many of those he promoted within the PA are deeply corrupt. Amongst Palestinians Arafat's death will thus be met with both genuine and deep anguish, but also some relief.

For Israel and the United States Arafat became an obstacle to peace. For the Israeli right he was always an unreconstructed terrorist but even Israeli doves came to despair of him over his unwillingness to stop the Intifada. And he long ago stopped being a regular guest at the White House (as he was during the Clinton Presidency) with Arafat's reluctance to fight Palestinian terrorism placing him on the wrong side of President Bush's list of those with the US or against it in a post-11 September world.

Succession blues

Arafat constantly resisted formally anointing a political heir, a reflection of the dog-eat-dog world of Arab politics where designating a successor can sometimes lead to a premature succession. Nonetheless plans for a handover seem to be in place, at least in the short term. Prime Minister Ahmad Qorei (Abu Ala) and former prime minister Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) will run the PA and the PLO. (The Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Rowhi Fatuh, will assume a ceremonial role as President of the PA, at least in the short term). Their problem is not succession but power. Both Abu Ala and Abu Mazen relied on Arafat for it and neither has a strong, independent popular base in the territories or in the Palestinian diaspora.

The Intifada has seen the emergence of "young guard" figures like West Bank Fatah leader Marwan

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Barghouti – currently in an Israeli prison on terrorism charges - and former Gaza security chief, Mohammed Dahlan, who were born in the territories and have stronger popular roots. Within Fatah, still the most powerful of all political factions, this younger generation is pushing for change and a seat at the leadership table; a struggle that has already been manifest in at times violent confrontations, particularly in Gaza. Meanwhile, Hamas' popularity has grown amongst Palestinians in recent years, a reflection of its perceived effectiveness as an organ of "resistance" to Israel and the lack of corruption in its ranks.

Nonetheless, if the ingredients for a power struggle are present, there are reasons it is not inevitable, at least not at the national leadership level. Precisely because they are weak, both Abu Mazen and Abu Ala will have to rule by compromise. Nor is there anyone else who today commands sufficient authority to be master of both the West Bank and Gaza together. Even Hamas, which has traditionally avoided confrontation with the Palestinian leadership, won't try to take full control. Indeed it is difficult to imagine who would want sole and immediate responsibility for running a destitute and disintegrating PA.

The most probable result, therefore, is an unsteady and fractious collective leadership whose control of the West Bank and Gaza will be partial at best. Deals will need to be made with many of the local figures and warlords who have emerged in the vacuum left by the gradual disintegration of the PA's security forces over the course of the Intifada. The emphasis on unity may also see Hamas brought into a broad leadership grouping, perhaps echoing co-operation between Fatah, Hamas and other Palestinian factions in the so-called Committee of National and Islamic Forces established at the beginning of the Intifada to co-ordinate the uprising.

Hamas' inclusion in a collective leadership could, of course, have a negative impact on Israel's willingness to negotiate with the new leadership – and possibly also affect the attitude of the US. But any new collective leadership would probably calculate that it is better to have Hamas inside the tent rather than outside it.

Continuity and chaos

Even if Abu Mazen and Abu Ala can paper over the cracks in the Palestinian leadership they will not necessarily be able to end the chaos and violence in the Palestinian territories. There is little doubt both Abu Mazen and Abu Ala would prefer a return to negotiations with Israel. They have long been arguing that armed attacks and terrorism have cost the Palestinians more than they gained. (One of Abu Mazen's first acts during his brief stint as Prime Minister was to organise a short-lived ceasefire). But their ability to end the violence and lawlessness in the West Bank and Gaza is limited, at least in the short term.

For one thing, the Palestinian security forces would need to be rebuilt. These have been heavily targeted and effectively disarmed by Israel. Secondly, while Abu Mazen and Abu Ala might be able to co-opt some of the larger militant groupings into a collective leadership, there are simply too many to do deals with all of them. Finally, local militant groups are likely to resist any effort to disarm them or otherwise hinder on-going attacks, while Israeli military forces remain heavily deployed in and around Palestinian population centres. But any Israeli redeployment is unlikely to occur unless Israel perceives that the Palestinians are taking serious step to prevent attacks.

The one positive development on the horizon is that many Palestinians are growing weary of the violence

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and growing lawlessness that today typifies the Intifada. The Intifada has had a disastrous impact on the Palestinian economy and society. Some armed groupings are little more than a militant cover for criminality, often running local protection rackets. And some Palestinians are arguing for a return to non-violent tactics against Israel. Larger and more politically astute groups such as Hamas remain acutely sensitive to the so-called “mood of the street”. A “law and order” campaign or a “ceasefire in the interests of national unity” launched by a collective leadership could gain some traction.

The problem is that Palestinian public opinion contains contradictory tendencies. The PCPSR’s poll shows continuing support for armed attacks and terrorism against Israel – some 77 per cent for a recent attack in Beer Sheva. Yet the same survey showed that some 83 per cent of those polled supported a mutual cessation of violence. Thus while there is potentially a constituency for a new leadership prepared to end violence, it is an unstable one. Ordinary Palestinians would probably need some promise of an immediate improvement in their living conditions and rapid progress in any resumed political negotiations with Israel before swinging decisively behind an end to violence.

Should the worst happen and the West Bank and Gaza descend into even greater chaos it would create pressure for some form of international intervention. The Palestinians and Israel (and the US) would have to agree to its going ahead. And in the first instance Israel would oppose anything resembling a peacekeeping force, fearing that this would do little to prevent Palestinian terror attacks, while limiting the Israeli Defence Forces’ ability to respond. Nonetheless Israel has no desire to re-assume full responsibility for running the territories. If there was a total breakdown of even essential services

Israel might be prepared to accept a US-led intervention supported by countries politically acceptable to all three sides; Australia would be close to the top of that list.

A new dawn?

The main impact of Arafat’s death is likely to be on the internal Palestinian situation. While, as already noted, it could prompt a power struggle, it will also clear the way for serious political reform and long-promised elections. The latter, in particular, could help solve the current crisis of political legitimacy in the Palestinian territories and, if held under the right conditions, produce a Palestinian leadership with the authority to negotiate with Israel. But elections are a double-edged sword for Abu Ala and Abu Mazen. On the one hand, the longer they rule without them the more their legitimacy will erode. On the other hand even if it were possible to hold early elections – which given the current security situation is highly unlikely – neither would be assured of victory. In PSPCR’s polling, for example, both rate well below more militant figures like Barghouti and Hamas leader Mahmud Zahhar.

With Arafat gone there is also a new opportunity for re-engagement by the United States in efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With Arafat no longer an obstacle and given the current imbroglio in Iraq, a renewed effort by the US on this issue could provide it with badly needed political capital in the Arab world. Nonetheless, Arafat’s death won’t solve the fundamentals of the impasse. The key first step of the US-sponsored Road Map for Peace calls for the Palestinians to prevent attacks against Israel and for Israel to withdraw its military forces from the territories. As already noted, the prospects of any new Palestinian leadership doing this in the short term are limited. But even if, over the longer term, the situation can be stabilised, reaching a permanent

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agreement will require both sides to make far-reaching concessions. On the Palestinian side only Arafat had the authority to deliver such concessions, but was not willing to do so. Abu Ala and Abu Mazen might be willing, but don't have the authority.

Arafat's demise may also complicate Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plans for a unilateral withdrawal of Israeli settlements and military positions from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank by the end of 2005. There is strong opposition to the plan from within Sharon's own ruling Likud party as well as from other members of his coalition government. Opponents have already been urging him to postpone it until the shape of a future Palestinian leadership is known. At the same time, left wing supporters of unilateral withdrawal are arguing that the pull-out should be co-ordinated with any new Palestinian leadership. They may now be joined by elements of the international community.

Nonetheless, even with Arafat gone, it will take time for a credible and authoritative replacement to emerge and Sharon may balk at negotiating with a collective leadership that included Hamas. And as already noted, it will be difficult for the Palestinians to end the violence and stabilise the situation in the short term. Sharon's instinct will thus be to press ahead with the plan, if he can.

ⁱ See Khalil Shikaki, *Palestinians Divided*. *Foreign Affairs* 81 (1) 2002.

ⁱⁱ Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research. *Opinion Poll 13 September 2004*. 2004: <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2004/p13epressrelease.html>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Bubalo graduated from the University of New South Wales with a Bachelor of Arts Honours, majoring in Political Science. He joined the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 1991. He undertook long-term Arabic language training in Egypt, and has served in Australia's Embassies in Saudi Arabia and in Israel.

More recently he was a Director on the Iraq Task Force and was the Department's senior speechwriter. He also served as Middle East Analyst in the Office of National Assessments from 1996 to 1998.

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