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**WITH HIM AND WITHOUT HIM:
ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS IN THE POST-ARAFAT ERA**

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Until he finally married Suha Tawil in his late 60s, Yasir Arafat fended off questions about his bachelor status by insisting that he was married to the Palestinian people. There is much truth to that claim. Arafat devoted himself exclusively to Palestinian politics since his days as a student activist in Cairo almost half a century ago, and for the past forty years, he has dominated a tempestuous and often bewildering political arena. His shortcomings and failures are legion, but he has one overriding accomplishment – moving the Palestinian issue to the forefront of the international political agenda. For that reason alone, he has become virtually synonymous with the Palestinian cause. Whether or not Arafat recovers his faculties and returns as a living symbol, he will almost surely not return as an active leader, and in the political sense, his departure from the scene means that the Palestinians have been widowed.

Like real new widows, the Palestinians have reacted with a combination of denial and a reluctant acceptance of the need to think about how to face the future. And since they, like the rest of the world, cannot remember a Palestinian past without Arafat, the future cannot be projected by extrapolation from the past. Nor do Palestinian political institutions and

constitutional arrangements provide much guidance. These exist, but they are fragile and have never been put to the test of political succession. Indeed, it is not even clear whether these institutions and arrangements will be of any relevance at all or whether – as many fear – matters will be decided in an extra-constitutional power struggle among those with independent power bases or, perhaps even worse, not decided at all. The question of succession implies a host of other questions, especially whether any successors will be willing and/or able to implement changes in governance and policy that they could not make as long as Arafat still held the reins of power. Perhaps the only real certainty is that it will be a long time, if ever, before these uncertainties are clarified.

All this obviously has major ramifications for Israel, but what it actually implies for Israeli policy is far less obvious. This is particularly true with respect to the urgent questions of Palestinian succession and unilateral disengagement. On the former, Israel has a clear interest in the empowerment of a Palestinian leadership committed to the end of violence and the resumption of peace negotiations. In the first instance, that requires the rationalization of the structure of Palestinian security forces, the

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confiscation of unauthorized weapons, and the suppression of hostile incitement in the media and the educational system.

But it is less clear what -- if anything -- Israel can contribute to the consolidation of such a leadership. On the one hand, a posture that appears to reward Palestinian advocates of a conciliatory approach with actions on such matters as quality of life, freedom of movement, prisoner releases, and settlement activity could enhance their authority and legitimacy against the more confrontational forces inevitably arrayed against them. Indeed, it has been argued that Israel's failure to do precisely that helped undermine the standing of the man most frequently mentioned as Arafat's likely successor -- Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) -- during the latter's brief tenure as Prime Minister in 2003. On the other hand, Palestinian advocates of reform and an end to violence are vulnerable, *a priori*, to accusations of collaboration, and anything Israel does can easily be portrayed as interference on behalf of its favored candidates or "puppets," thereby further eroding their authority and legitimacy. It will be difficult, in the best of circumstances, for Israel to reinforce and encourage those whom it might prefer to prevail without exposing itself, and them, to charges of unwarranted interference in Palestinian affairs in order to "subvert" the "will of the people."

On the second matter, the strongest argument in favor of unilateral disengagement has been that since there is no partner for negotiations, either on permanent status issues or even on the Road Map, there is no reason for Israel to condition its actions on a negotiated agreement, which would essentially mean doing nothing. But it is already being argued that the effective end of the Arafat era, by breaking the logjam in Palestinian politics, casts doubt on that rationale and that the disengagement recently approved by the Knesset should therefore be put on hold. For those

Israelis opposed to any territorial concessions under any circumstances, this is just an excuse. But for those who prefer or are at least prepared to entertain the possibility of negotiated withdrawal based on reciprocity, the departure of Arafat does seem to warrant a reassessment of unilateral disengagement, not just because a credible Palestinian interlocutor might emerge with whom Israel can negotiate an agreement but also because negotiating or at least coordinating withdrawal from Gaza might actually contribute to the emergence of that leadership.

Prime Minister Sharon, however, has already rejected the idea of any delay. He and his supporters also concede that negotiations are always preferable, in principle, to unilateral action. But they apparently assume that the reconfiguration of Palestinian politics, even if it eventually produces changes that are positive from Israel's perspective, will take far too long to justify putting off implementation of the hard-fought Knesset approval. Very preliminary indications seem to bear out this prognosis. The provision of the Palestinian Basic Law designating the Speaker of the Legislative Council as Interim President has already been sidestepped in favor of a collective leadership, the durability of which -- at least to judge by precedent in Palestinian politics and politics elsewhere in the Arab world -- must be suspect. And although voter registration has already begun for local and municipal elections, there is no evidence of preparations for presidential elections within 60 days, as called for in the Basic Law. Nor is there any indication at all of how the Fatah rebels -- much less Hamas and Islamic Jihad -- intend to act in this unfolding situation. All in all, the departure of Arafat is unlikely to constitute a reason to defer the disengagement. But given the almost equally unstable state of Israeli politics, it could turn out to be an effective pretext.