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PALESTINIAN POLITICS AFTER ARAFAT: PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS

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Yasir Arafat's death on November 11 may open up new possibilities for Palestinian political development, but it may also exacerbate the ongoing anarchy and the fragmentation of Palestinian society and politics. That could give a boost to the Islamist Hamas movement, thereby making any progress with Israel much more difficult.

The current leadership wants to maintain political stability and to project an aura of unity. That is clearly demonstrated by the smooth election of three successors to Arafat's multiple positions -- Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as PLO Chairman, Faruq Qaddumi as Head of Fatah's Central Committee, and Ruhi Fatuh, Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, as interim chairman of the Palestinian Authority (PA) – and by the continuation as Prime Minister of Ahmad Qurei (Abu Ala). In reality, however, Fatah has all but disintegrated into local and personal factions and militias that even Arafat could hardly control, and this will pose a serious challenge to the new leadership.

Given their age and organizational background, the current office-holders comprise a transitional leadership. Abbas and Qurei belong to the Tunis-based PLO cadre which came with Arafat to the West Bank and Gaza after the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords. Qaddumi, who opposed the Accords, has never set foot inside the territories.

Consequently, the new leadership lacks popular support among ordinary Palestinians. Abbas is criticized for being too conciliatory towards the US and Israel following his short-lived tenure as Prime Minister in 2003, while Qurei is tainted with charges of corruption. Fatuh is a second-echelon activist who has been temporarily elevated in keeping with the stipulations of the PA Basic Law.

More importantly, Abbas and Qurei lack any power base among the grassroots activists or "*Tanzim*" (organization) leaders of the "interim generation" who led the 1987-1993 intifada and have served as the backbone of Fatah ever since. Under Arafat, these Tanzim activists were relegated to secondary positions in the PA institutions; the front ranks were reserved for the "Tunisians." But the local activists were instrumental in the outbreak of the 2000 confrontation with Israel, and since then, most of them have been advocating the use of violence as a means of leverage on Israel during any negotiations. The most prominent of these is Marwan Barghouti, former Secretary-General of Fatah in the West Bank, who is now serving five life terms in an Israeli prison for the murder of Israeli civilians. Unlike the Tunis-based leaders, he enjoys widespread popularity for his incorruptibility and defiance of Israel.

Indications of the potential challenge of the

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Tanzim leaders may be found in the news spread by his supporters that Barghouti would run in the elections for PA chairman, scheduled for January 2005. It is possible, however, that such rumors are designed to goad the old leadership into giving the Tanzim activists more positions of power or at least a much greater role in PA decision-making.

The election of Faruq Qaddumi as new head of Fatah may signal one of two opposing trends. The first is reconciliation, i.e., an attempt, supported by Abbas, to heal the rift with one of the movement's original founders, despite bypassing him in the PLO succession. It is difficult to see how Qaddumi can carry out his role as Fatah leader when all Fatah institutions are located inside the territories, so his election means either that the position will become purely ceremonial while local Tanzim activists actually navigate the movement's destiny, or that the management of the movement will continue to deteriorate. The second possibility is that the election of the staunchest Fatah opponent of the Oslo process signals a victory for those hard-liners who refuse to suspend the armed struggle even during negotiations and who would therefore oppose any initiative to end the current round of violence. Moreover, his election may show that it is actually Abbas' position as PLO Chairman that is purely ceremonial, since real control over Fatah will remain out of his reach.

An even more serious challenge inside Fatah may be posed by the heads of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, who constitute the third-generation leadership that emerged during the current four-year confrontation. These groups, which combine terrorism against Israel with criminal activities (mainly extortion) against the Palestinian population, proved to be unruly even under Arafat. Having renamed themselves the Yasir Arafat Brigades, they have declared themselves the protectors of his legacy and oppose any concessions to Israel beyond the red lines set by Arafat, thereby narrowing the leadership's margin of maneuver *vis-à-vis* Israel

and the US. An equally important motive is their reluctance to lose the power and wealth they accumulated during the last four years of violence. The major weakness of the Tanzim and al-Aqsa Brigades leadership is the local nature of their power; none of them enjoys national stature. Even Barghouti lacks any influence or significant support in the Gaza Strip. The heads of the various security organs constitute another crucial element in the equation. These men, who hold considerable power, are divided among themselves. In Gaza, conflict between the General Security Service headed by Musa Arafat and the Preventive Security organization loyal to Muhammad Dahlan has escalated to the point of open violence. Nevertheless, the various security organ leaders are likely to resist demands by the US for the consolidation of rival organizations, lest some of them lose power.

Finally, there is the problem of Hamas, whose power has grown significantly since 2000. Hamas has signaled its readiness to join the new Palestinian leadership on the basis of equality, but that would mean veto power over major political decisions, particularly those related to the conflict with Israel. At the same time, Hamas spokesmen have hinted that while the movement accepted Arafat's personal status as leader, it might challenge the current leadership in the coming election. Given Fatah's ongoing disintegration, Hamas could emerge as the most powerful organization, at least in the Gaza Strip, even though its current leaders lack the stature and charisma of former leaders Ahmad Yasin and Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi, killed by Israel in March 2004. Thus, while Arafat only sought to co-opt Hamas, the new leaders may be forced to accept it as a partner in government, thereby ending Fatah's monopoly of power in Palestinian politics.