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PALESTINIAN OPTIONS AFTER "DEFENSIVE SHIELD"

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Although Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's demand for Palestinian reforms became the major focus of his trip to Washington in early May, the fact is that elements within the Palestinian Authority had themselves been calling for reform for a long time. But the issue of reform only rose to the top of the Palestinian agenda in recent weeks, and when Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan joined the ranks of those pressing Yasir Arafat to act, the general Arab media began to subject the PA to intense scrutiny.

Various Palestinian spokesmen have insisted that Sharon's demand is nothing but an excuse to postpone negotiations and poke fun at the Prime Minister's sudden concern about the state of democracy (actually, the lack thereof) and the widespread corruption in the PA. At the same time, elements in the PA, including senior figures like Abu Mazen and Abu Ala'a, have argued that the need for comprehensive reform should not be subordinated to the tendency to reject blatant Israeli-American interference in internal Palestinian affairs.

The impulse to reform precisely at this time is explained by two principal factors: the need to rebuild and rehabilitate PA institutions following the destruction left behind in the wake of Operation "Defensive Shield," and the

undeniably poor performance of the PA during the *intifada*, the failure of the security organs to protect Palestinian civilians, and the chaotic behavior of the political leadership. Demands for reform are not new – calls for democratization, separation of powers and elimination of corruption have been voiced for many years. But they have never before been seriously addressed. When a petition was published in 1999 condemning corruption in the PA – the so-called "Letter of the 20" – most of its signers were arrested and interrogated.

In his speech before the PLC on "Nakba Day" (May 15), Arafat admitted that mistakes had been made that needed to be corrected. He also promised to hold elections for the PLC and for local authorities, although he avoided committing himself to any dates or elaborating on the kinds of reforms he meant to undertake. Even so, several spokesmen and commentators, among them signers of the "Letter of the 20," expressed their displeasure at the fact that Arafat was now responding to demands for reform coming from Israel or from "opportunistic individuals" in his own inner circle but had rejected similar demands in the past when they were raised by "honest people."

Despite differences of opinion about the justification for the reform process, there is a

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surprising consensus among all parties on the principles of the required reforms. They can be summarized in the formula of "Transparency, Accountability, and Public Freedoms." More specific demands touch on the functioning of the PA security organs, the need to hold elections, and the struggle against corruption.

The demand to hold new elections for the Presidency, the PLC and the local authorities was first raised several years ago, after the terms for those elected in early 1996 had expired. PLC Speaker Abu Ala'a promised that parliamentary elections would be held at the beginning of 2003 and that municipal elections would be held before the end of this year. Abu Mazen went further and argued that elections should go forward even if the IDF failed to withdraw from the territories it had reoccupied during Operation "Defensive Shield." By contrast, the question of presidential elections was ignored by senior PA officials and is generally avoided in the public debate.

The loudest complaints have been raised about the functioning of the various security organs. Even the most vocal Palestinian critics of American interference in the reconstruction of the PA's security forces agree that it is necessary to reduce the number of organizations, if not to merge them all into one body under a unitary command. They also insist on the need to raise the professional level of security personnel and to strengthen oversight of them, tighten discipline, and forbid their commanders to take part in negotiations with Israel or to maintain business ties with Israelis.

To combat the widespread corruption in the ranks of the PA, the suggestion has been made to centralize financial management in the Treasury, set up an independent monetary authority, create an independent comptroller, and pass legislation to institutionalize the separation of powers and strengthen the judiciary. There is also a move to replace serving ministers on a regular basis. In

any case, there is consensus on the urgent need to reduce the number of government ministries (from thirty to no more than eighteen) and to define precisely their areas of responsibility and put an end to the endless turf competition among them.

Although it is difficult to predict the degree to which these reforms will be implemented, the PA leadership clearly understands that it must carry out wide-ranging changes if it wants to survive. Arafat may well allow himself to be dragged along by developments in order to prove that he is leading, as he has so often done in the past. But while Arafat may not be the greatest champion of transparency and accountability, even he cannot ignore the growing public hostility to corruption and dysfunction in the institutions of the PA. The behavior of other senior PA personalities over the past month indicates that they are certainly aware of the anger at the Authority in Palestinian society.

If there are to be serious reforms, they will most probably be directed, in the first instance, at the security organs, because these are seen as responsible for the most glaring failures during the *intifada*. Besides, the inherent problems of the security apparatus seem most obvious, hence, most amenable to repair. There is also a reasonable prospect that elections will be held and that the government structure will be reformed. Arafat's personal popularity has risen due to recent events in Ramallah, and he may therefore be eager to run for re-election. But comprehensive economic/financial reforms – centralization and the creation of an effective comptroller's office – will be more difficult to implement, and if they come about at all, it will probably be at a later stage.