

Anthony Bubalo

WAR OR PEACE - A struggle for peace continues - POWER STRUGGLE

Sunday Telegraph

14 November 2004, p. 93

Yasser Arafat's lingering demise was characteristic of the Palestinian leader; defiant in death as he was in life. Seen by many to have become an obstacle to peace, his passing promises a new beginning for both Palestinian internal politics and efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But it won't be easy for his successors to set a new course.

Arafat held the holy trinity of positions in Palestinian politics. He was the Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) the chief international representative of the Palestinian people. He was the head of the Fatah, the political faction Arafat founded and steered into a dominant position within the PLO. And he was President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), set up in 1994 to administer Palestinian self-rule in the Gaza Strip and West Bank as a part of the Oslo Accords with Israel.

The post-Arafat era won't, however, see as much power concentrated in one man's hands.

Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) will head the PLO while Ahmed Qorei (Abu Ala) will continue as Palestinian Prime Minister. Both will form the core of a shaky collective leadership that will run Palestinian affairs, at least in the short term. While the speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Rohwi Fatuh, has been sworn in as interim President of the PA until new elections are held, he is likely to play a largely ceremonial role.

One noteworthy development has been the election of Farouk Qadoumi as head of Fatah. Qadoumi, one of Fatah's founding fathers, refused to return to the West Bank and Gaza in the mid-1990s with Arafat because of his opposition to the Oslo Accords. He remains a strong supporter of armed struggle against Israel and has support amongst Fatah members in the territories. He could become a lightning rod for dissent, though his position is weakened by the fact he lives in exile in Syria and Tunisia.

Qadoumi is not, however, the only potential challenger that Abu Mazen and Abu Ala face. Recent years have seen the emergence of a younger generation of Palestinian leaders keen to succeed the "historic" leadership. While the current Palestinian uprising, or Intifada as it is called, began in 2000 with Arafat's active encouragement, it was directed as much at him and the "old guard" as it was at Israel. The young guard has tried to show that, in terms of Palestinian national goals, they could achieve through violence and terrorism what the old guard failed to deliver through a decade of negotiations.

Prominent among the young guard is West Bank Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti. Unlike Abu Mazen and Abu Ala, who spent much of their lives outside the West Bank and Gaza, Barghouti has strong local roots and has emerged as perhaps the most popular figure after Arafat. His problem is that he is serving five consecutive life sentences in an Israeli prison on terrorism charges and it is very unlikely that the current Israeli government would release him.

Popular support for the Islamist group Hamas has also grown in recent years and today it rivals Fatah in the territories. While Hamas has been weakened by Israel's killings of some of its key leaders, over the medium term the movement will seek to capitalise on Arafat's death and any infighting that takes place within the new leadership.

In the short term, however, no-one is in a position to challenge for the national leadership, buying Abu Mazen and Abu Ala some time. Their key predicament is that they lack authority and popular legitimacy and the only way they can resolve this is by calling new elections. But even if elections were possible in the current security situation they are a double-edged sword for the new leaders. On the one hand, lacking a strong popular base in the territories, neither would be assured of victory. On the other hand the longer they rule without a new vote the more what legitimacy they do have will erode.

Having identified Arafat as the problem, his death is likely to prompt the United States to re-engage in efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A renewed push on the Israeli-Palestinian front could help President Bush to rebuild his battered credibility in the Middle East. It is debatable, however, whether any such effort would bear fruit in the short term.

Even if Abu Mazen and Abu Ala can unify Palestinian ranks they probably won't immediately be able to end the chaos and violence in the Palestinian territories. Both would prefer a return to negotiations. But they lack either power or authority over the numerous militant groups that have proliferated since the start of the Intifada.

One positive on the horizon is that many Palestinians are growing weary of the violence and growing lawlessness. 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.

There is, therefore, a constituency for the new Palestinian leadership to build on.

But even if, over the longer term, the situation can be stabilised, reaching a permanent 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.

Again, elections will hold the key to establishing a new Palestinian leadership capable of resuming negotiations.

Arafat's death will 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.

There is strong opposition to the plan from within Sharon's own ruling party. Opponents have already begun urging him to postpone it until the shape of a future Palestinian leadership is known. Nonetheless, precisely because it will take time for a stable Palestinian leadership capable of reining in violence to emerge, Sharon's instinct will be to press ahead with the plan, if he can.

Arafat's death also carries with it implications for the international community. Should the worst happen and the West Bank and Gaza descend into even greater chaos it could see pressure for some form of international intervention. In the first instance Israel would be opposed. But it has no desire to re-assume full responsibility for running the territories. If there was a total breakdown 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.

There is also the question of how the international community should respond to the new Palestinian leadership. The instinct of the international community will be to seize the opportunity for a fresh start and back Abu Mazen and Abu Ala. But there is also a risk that too close an embrace could ultimately prove fatal to their long term political prospects should

Palestinians perceive that the new leaders are placing the interests of the international community ahead of those of the Palestinian people.

Anthony Bubalo is a Research Fellow with Sydney's **Lowy Institute**. He specialises in Middle Eastern affairs.

AHMED QOREI: Otherwise known as Abu Ala he is set to continue in his role as Palestinian Prime Minister at least in the short term

MAHMUD ABBAS: Also known as Abu Mazen he will help form a shaky collective leadership to govern Palestinian affairs

MARWAN BARGHOUTI: Has strong West Bank roots and is popular with youngsters, despite serving a long jail term