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Arafat's death wouldn't solve main problem

Australian Financial Review

8 November 2004

Many years ago I asked the Palestinian activist Marwan Barghouti, now in an Israeli jail for his involvement in acts of terrorism, what would happen if Yasser Arafat did not "wake up tomorrow". Barghouti smiled wryly and answered that even if all the Palestinians did not wake up tomorrow, Arafat surely would.

In all likelihood Palestinians would treat news of their leader's death with similar disbelief.

Notwithstanding growing criticism of him in recent years, he is still seen as the pre-eminent symbol of their cause. Indeed he has been such a central figure in Palestinian lives for so long that it will be difficult for them to conceive of what might follow once he goes.

Yet in many ways Arafat has been politically terminal for a long time. The chaos in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has badly eroded his authority. Within his own dominant Fatah movement some young Turks are no longer even willing to pay him lip service. Among Palestinians his death, when it happens, will be met with genuine anguish and some relief.

While Arafat has constantly resisted anointing an heir, a succession plan is in place, at least in the short term. It is already clear that Prime Minister Ahmad Qurei (Abu Ala) and Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), Arafat's effective No. 2 in the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, will take over once Arafat goes. Their problem is not succession but power. Both have relied on Arafat for it and neither has a strong, independent popular base in the territories.

The erosion of the old guard's political influence has led to the rise of a younger generation - figures such as Barghouti and former Gaza security chief Mohammed Dahlan - who were born in the territories and have stronger popular roots.

Support for the Islamist group Hamas has grown. And armed militants, many only nominally subordinate to Fatah, have proliferated since the start of the intifada.

If the ingredients for a power struggle are present, there are reasons it is not inevitable. There is no one figure who commands sufficient authority to be master of the West Bank and Gaza together. None of the pretenders to the throne will want to be accused of fomenting disunity or civil war, particularly against the background of the intifada. Even Hamas, which has traditionally avoided confrontation with the Palestinian leadership, won't directly challenge it once Arafat dies.

The most likely result, therefore, is an unsteady and fractious collective leadership whose control of the West Bank and Gaza will be partial at best.

But if the prospects for an open power struggle are not as great as assumed, an end to the chaos in the Palestinian territories is not necessarily in sight either. Despite the fact that both Abu Mazen and Abu Ala would prefer a return to negotiations, their ability to end the violence would be limited. Though there are signs that most Palestinians have grown weary of the intifada, many of the militant groups will resist any effort to disarm them or otherwise prevent them from launching attacks against Israel.

Indeed, should the worst happen and the West Bank and Gaza descend into even greater chaos and lawlessness, it could have serious implications for the international community. Notwithstanding Israel's regular military forays into Palestinian population centres, it has no desire to resume responsibility for the territories. A breakdown could thus create a need for international intervention, including a request for an Australian contribution.

There is no doubt, however, that Arafat's passing would remove an obstacle to the genuine desire of many Palestinians for internal reform and may even re-invigorate the peace process in the longer term.

Arafat has run the Palestinian territories as he ran the PLO, consistently blocking Palestinian calls for political reform. As recent years have shown, the exigencies of running a revolutionary movement are far removed from what is required to establish and run a nascent state.

Arafat is also seen by Israel and the United States as an obstacle to peace. His passing could provide a new opportunity for re-engagement; indeed, the US President George Bush has already signalled this. Yet it would not solve the fundamentals of the impasse. To reach a permanent settlement both sides need to make far-reaching concessions. On the Palestinian side only Arafat has the authority to deliver such concessions, but he has not been willing to. Abu Ala and Abu Mazen might be willing, but would not have the authority.

Arafat's demise would also complicate Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plans for a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Opponents of the plan in his own Likud party will urge him to postpone it until the shape of a future Palestinian leadership is known. Even left-wing supporters of the plan are urging that the pull-out be co-ordinated with any new Palestinian leadership; and they may now be joined by some in the international community.

Given the precarious state of his ruling coalition, Sharon could well agree to re-visit the plan. One of the reasons he has given for the withdrawal was the absence of a Palestinian negotiating partner. With Arafat gone that problem would be partly resolved; though as already noted, it will take time for a credible and authoritative replacement to emerge. His instinct will thus be to press ahead, if he can.