

Hamas? Jordanian federation? Or chaos?

DANNY RUBINSTEIN



Arafat, the symbol of Palestinian nationalism.

IS HANDS SHAKE CONSTANTLY. HIS LOWER LIP TREMBLES UNCONTROLLABLY. He looks tired, almost ailing. This August, Yasir Arafat turns 70. His doctors say he is fine. What may look to be infirmities, they say, are the result of a head injury sustained when his plane crashed in the Libyan desert in 1992. His bureau staff claims that he is as energetic as ever and that his pace of work has not slackened. Those who monitor his public appearances, however, see a change. Arafat has aged.

How long he will last is anybody's guess. But nobody in the Palestinian leadership dares speak, even in a whisper, about a possible successor. To Palestinian Authority (PA) leaders, Arafat is both a father figure and the irreplaceable founder of modern Palestinian nationalism.

Arafat's working schedule certainly seems to support his doctor's view of his health. A few months ago, he told a visiting American Jewish delegation how his secretary brought an infant girl to the office one morning. When he reprimanded her for doing so, she replied, "But, Mr. President, don't you recognize your own daughter, Zahawa?"

Arafat likes to tell this anecdote to illustrate his

frantic schedule, which prevents him even from spending time with his family.

He does seem in perpetual motion between his bureaus in Gaza City and Ramallah in the West Bank. Wherever he goes, hundreds of people are waiting to see him. A Palestinian journalist says that whenever he enters Gaza City, he knows whether Arafat is in town. If the streets are clogged with convoys, police sirens blast, and beachside cafes are full, Arafat is in Gaza City. If cafes near the office of the "President of Palestine" are empty, Arafat is either in Ramallah or abroad.

Arafat's working style leaves no room for the delegation of authority. He has no real deputies. Since his teens, he has devoted his life to the Palestinian struggle. A Palestinian cabinet minister relates how he once found Arafat sitting in his Gaza office going over hundreds of traffic tickets. Arafat explained that he had received complaints from Gaza drivers alleging corruption in the collection of fines and was examining all parking tickets issued during the previous month. Asked why he himself was doing this work, Arafat replied that in such matters he relied only on himself.

For the moment, his regime seems fairly stable despite the fact that the peace process is logiammed, the outlook for progress in negotiations on a permanent peace settlement with Israel appears less than rosy, and the territories' economic situation is grim, with an estimated 40 percent unemployment rate. Although one often senses the Palestinian public's bitterness toward its official institutions, it is not expressed in any substantive manner. Here and there, demonstrations are organized over local issues, such as the abusive behavior of Palestinian security officers. Islamic extremists affiliated with Hamas sometimes protest. For example, in mid-March, after a Palestinian court sentenced a suspected member of Hamas to death for killing a Palestinian police officer, hundreds of angry Hamas supporters demonstrated against the Arafat-approved sentence. Overall, however, the PA's regime is stable.

Officially, Arafat holds three positions: He is chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the most senior of the three positions because of the PLO's claim to represent all Palestinians in Israel, the territories, and neighboring countries; he is president of the PA, his most demanding role because he is laying the foundation for a future Palestinian state; and he heads Fatah, the PA's ruling party. In none of these positions does he have an official deputy; however, each position does have an unofficial number two. In the PLO, it is Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abas), secretarygeneral of the PLO's executive committee. The PA's number two is Abu Ala'a (Ahmed Karia), speaker of the Palestinian National Assembly (the Palestinian parliament), who sometimes fills in for Arafat when he is away. In Fatah, Arafat's unofficial deputy is Farouk Kadoumi, the organization's foreign affairs chief and the only one of its five founders remaining. Kadoumi, who lives in Tunis, strongly opposes the peace process with Israel and has announced he will not come to the West Bank or Gaza if he must obtain the Israeli government's





authorization to do so. None of the three has emerged as a likely successor to Arafat. Arafat's working style leaves no room for delegating authority.

Faisal Al-Husseini-who holds the Jerusalem portfolio in the PLO and is a member of a promi-

Can any Palestinian assume leadership after Arafat is gone? For now at least, no one appears to be leading the pack.

nent Palestinian family with close ties to the Palestinian intelligentsia—could be a contender. But Husseini is a very easygoing, polite politico known in Middle East circles for his sense of humor, rather than his ability to wield power, and that does not translate well in the hard-edged world of Palestinian politics.

Arafat and Husseini grew up together in Cairo in the late 1940s, but the two eventually parted ways. Husseini was not with Arafat during the turbulent civil war between Jordan and the PLO in 1970; he was not in Beirut when Arafat made it his base between 1970 and 1982; and he was not with Arafat in Tunis in the decade before the Oslo deal. During those years, while Arafat was struggling to build a broad Palestinian

Paper tiger: The Palestinian National Assembly can't check Arafat's power. Palestinian children chant Islamic songs at a Hamas kindergarten in Gaza City. consensus, Husseini remained in Jerusalem. Arafat worked most closely in that period with men like Mohammed Dahlan and Jibril Rajub-now topranking security officials in the Occupied Territories-who had been deported by Israel. Though arrested many times himself. Husseini was never deported and did not work alongside the chairman until his return to Israel. Recently, Husseini had a falling out with Arafat, and the two are no longer on speaking terms. Arafat feels that Husseini, a cabinet member, spends too much



money, and has stopped funding Husseini's Orient House headquarters in east Jerusalem—where the PLO is based. During a recent argument at a cabinet meeting that got a bit too heated, Arafat asked Husseini to leave. Though Husseini refused to be ousted, his image was tarnished by the widespread publicity the incident received.

After Husseini, the list of possible successors is thin. Dahlan, chief of security services in Gaza, and Rajub, who holds the same position in the West Bank, could emerge as viable candidates from within the ranks of the Palestinian security services. Both men are young and ambitious and have lengthy credentials as guerrilla fighters who, like Arafat, were once linked to terrorism. But neither enjoys broadbased popularity among Palestinians.

Among Palestinian politicians, Hanan Ashrawia member of the Palestinian National Assembly (PNA) who played a high-profile role during peace talks with Israel-is perhaps the best known. But as a female Christian living in a world dominated by male Moslems, most political observers say she doesn't stand a chance. And it's not likely that any of her cohorts in the PNA would be able to mount a serious challenge either. The assembly, first elected in 1996, has not developed into an effective counterbalance to executive power, in part because the Palestinians have no constitution. Assembly decisions-like a vote last year to investigate corruption in Arafat's cabinet-are largely paper tigers and are not binding on other PA institutions. Even if the Assembly's investigation had turned up misdeeds, it would have been powerless to act. Politicians who

have based their careers on symbolic decision making are not likely to be viewed as serious contenders for Arafat's crown.

Who, then, will step up to fill the void? Can any of these people—or any other Palestinian—fill Arafat's shoes when he is gone? For now, no one appears to be leading the pack. And that has prompted some to wonder about the possibility of a takeover by Hamas, the Islamic resistance movement. At the very least, Hamas is well positioned to make the job of Arafat's successor much more difficult. The organization is a powerful destabilizing force in the region which any successor would have to contend with.

Although organized groups of religious fanatics operated even before the *mtifada*, Hamas is relatively new, founded only a decade ago when the Palestinian uprising against Israel began. Its aims are to fight Israel and crune and heresy in Palestinian society. The organization battles prostitution, drug abuse and trafficking, gambling, pornography, consumption of alcohol, and other "maladies of Western society."

Retrospectively, it seems bizarre that in the 1960s and 1970s devout Muslims—now stout supporters of Hamas—collaborated with their Israelu occupiers. At that time, Arafat and his followers were allies of the Soviet Union. Arafat and his partners—George Habash, Na'if Hawatmeh, and other leaders of the Marxist Palestinian Left—maintained strong ties with radical leftist underground armies throughout the world. Devout Muslims considered the leftist-secular PLO a dangerous enemy—and so did Israel. In politics the strongest alliances are between those who share a common enemy, and so

Over the years, Hamas has diligently set up hundreds of kindergartens, soup kitchens for the needy, clinics, vocational training frameworks, sports clubs, associations of youth, and care institutions for the handicapped and elderly.

Israel and Muslim extremists in the West Bank and Gaza became allies in the fight against the PLO. Paradoxically, Hebron's Islamic College, today an important Hamas nerve center, was established in the 1970s with assistance and funding from the Israeli government, which subsidized its budget for nearly ten years.

The situation has since changed dramatically. The Soviet Union has collapsed, as have radical leftist movements in the Arab states and the rest of the world. And thanks to the successful Iranian revolution, which challenged the authority of both America and Israel (in Iranian revolutionary jargon, "the big devil and the little devil"), Islamic fundamentalist movements have become extremely popular in the Middle East (particularly among Palestinians), where they spearhead the struggle against Israel.

Arafat fears and despises Muslim fundamentalists. They are the most dangerous opposition not only to his regime but also to the regimes of all Arab states: In Algeria they have generated a civil war in which



tens of thousands have perished; in Egypt they deploy terrorist cells that strike out at the country's leadership (the members of one such terrorist cell assassinated President Anwar Sadat in 1981); and in Sudan they have even managed to take over the regime.

Tensions between PA institutions and Islamic extremists are palpable. Arafat has tried unsuccessfully to incorporate Hamas into the PLO and the PA's official agencies, but Islamic fundamentalist leaders have made cooperation conditional upon terms that he cannot accept: They demand half the seats in PLO institutions and half the jobs in the Palestinian national movements' agencies. They also demand cancellation of the Oslo agreement and insist on freedom to continue their armed struggle against Israel.

Protracted negotiations between Arafat's representatives and Hamas leaders to prevent a civil war in 1995 produced the following agreement: "Hamas will not engage in military operations [terrorist activities] launched from within the Palestinian Authority's boundaries and will avoid any actions that could embarrass the PA." This vague, bite-less wording was intended to prevent the Palestinian regime from being accused of responsibility for Hamas terrorism. In accordance with this formula, however, while Hamas cannot, for example, store explosives or train terrorists in Gaza or Nablus, it can do so in east Jerusalem, which is under Israeli, not Palestinian, jurisdiction.

No matter. Hamas did not honor the agreement. After Baruch Goldstein murdered 29 Muslim worshipers in the Hebron Mosque at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in February 1994—just six months after Oslo—Hamas embarked on a series of suicide bombing missions in Israel. Hamas terror was the prime reason for lengthy closures often imposed by Israel on the West Bank and Gaza, actions that prevented Palestinian laborers from working in Israel. Thus, instead of conciliation between Israelis and Palestinians, Hamas terrorists sent the peace process into

Young Hamas supporters rally against the Wye River Accords.

Arafat fears and despises Muslim fundamentalists. They are the most dangerous opponents of his regime.

a tailspin, creating a vicious cycle of anti-Israel terrorism, increased unemployment and economic hardship on the West Bank and Gaza, and Israeli retaliatory operations, such as the killing of Yehieh (the Engineer) Ayash and the assassination in Malta of Fat'hi Shekaki, the Islamic Jihad chief, followed by more anti-Israel terrorism and stepped-up hostility and hatred on both sides.

Arafat continues to press hard on Hamas, from time to time arresting key leaders. Recently he placed Hamas's founder and mentor, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, under house arrest for several weeks.

In battling Hamas, Arafat is concerned not so much with protecting the peace process as with countering Hamas's threat to the stability of his regime. After spending so many years in Lebanon and seeing how a state can unravel when the central government does not retain a monopoly on the use of force and instead allows the creation of private armies, Arafat is well aware of the threat Hamas represents to the stability of his regime. He is also aware that Hamas's opposition to the peace process is diametrically opposed to his interests. The peace process, after all, is the basis of the PA's legitimacy. If the peace process logjams, the PA might well lose its raison d'etre—and Hamas could take over.

Yet Arafat can take only limited action against Hamas. He cannot destroy the Hamas infrastructure because it operates a network of religious, educational, and welfare institutions. Over the years, it has set up hundreds of kindergartens, soup kitchens, clinics, vocational training frameworks, sports clubs, associations of youths and university students, care institutions for the handicapped and elderly, and of course, mosques and institutions for religious instruction. These agencies serve as meeting places for Islamic movement members, only a small percentage of whom engage-clandestinely-in planning and carrying out terrorist attacks in Israel. Only rarely do the Palestinian police close down any of these agencies, which are extremely popular among the Palestinian populace.

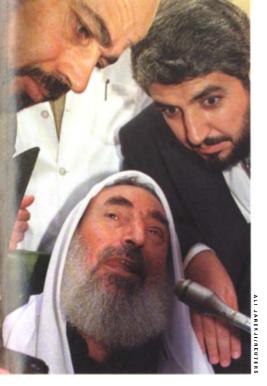
If Arafat strikes Hamas too hard, Hamas would

react violently against PA leaders. This kind of reaction has already occurred in several Arab countries. In Egypt, for example, following a crackdown against Islamic fanatics, religious zealots murdered key Egyptian government officials, including army officers and police personnel.

According to public opinion polls in the West Bank and Gaza, about 30 percent of all Palestinians support various groups opposed to Arafat, the central one being Hamas. One of the reasons Hamas is so popular is its image of purity and incorruptibility. Almost all its leaders maintain a modest lifestyle, living in the slums of the major Palestinian cities. Unlike PA operatives, they never frequent luxury restaurants and places of entertainment. Many Hamas leaders are highly trained professionals lawyers, accountants, physicians, engineers, and pharmacists. Some of them are affluent merchants, especially in Hebron. Others are Islamic college instructors, sheikhs, and clergy.

The unpretentious lifestyle of Hamas activists is in marked contrast to the hedonistic, corrupt image of the leaders in Arafat's inner circle. Thousands of PLO members accompanied Arafat when he returned from Tunisia to Gaza and the West Bank. Many of them had tasted the good life at the expense of the fat budget the PLO enjoyed during the 1970s and 1980s, when it received generous allocations from Arab oil states. Far from their families, they traveled to European capitals and enjoyed a lifestyle free of the restrictions of traditional Muslim society. Now, in Gaza City, Ramallah, and other cities under PLO jurisdiction, nightclubs, restaurants, and other places of entertainment have opened and are regularly patronized by the upper echelons of the PA, who wear expensive clothes and drive Mercedes. Many of them have VIP cards recognized by Israeli authorities that enable them to travel freely through the checkpoints between the West Bank and Gaza. This lifestyle breeds resentment among poor, disenfranchised Palestinians.

The most blatant expression of the PA's corrupt lifestyle in the eyes of many Palestinians is the gam-



bling casino that opened last year in Jericho. Islamic laws forbid gambling. And although Palestinians are not permitted to enter the casino to gamble almost all the casino's customers are Israelis—most of the employees are Palestinians, and the ownership and management are largely in PA hands. Hamas leaders derisively point out that Arafat's government is the only regime in the Muslim world that derives its revenue from the profits of gambling. A large luxury hotel is currently under construction near the casino, and Muslim fundamentalists fear the traditional by-products of a hotel—prostitution and drug trafficking.

Wherever you go in the West Bank and Gaza, you can hear stories about the PA's blatant corruption. Although the rumors can rarely be corroborated, they stem largely from the PA's system of franchise distribution. Franchises for basic products, chiefly gasoline, are distributed without any guidelines or public bidding. Building permits for factories, banks, hotels, housing projects, and transportation and telecommunications facilities go to individuals and companies who are on friendly terms with Arafat or his associates.

The average Palestinian's most intense hostility toward Arafat's regime is directed at his security services. The PA has at least six security agencies, with nearly 50,000 employees. Each agency operates independently, sometimes giving the impression of being a private army. All the heads of these security agencies are absolutely loyal to Arafat. Their implementation of his every order verges on blind obedience. Nevertheless, the competition between them is fierce, and their disputes at times resemble gang fights. There have been fatal shootouts between members of rival security agencies. The personnel of these agencies often treat ordinary citizens contemptuously, arresting people, holding them without trial, and conducting brutal interrogations. They are also corrupt; the collection of protection money is widespread.

Arafat's security agencies are another factor in any discussion about succession, as they are deeply involved in the PA's power struggles. Many observers believe that they will play a major, perhaps even decisive, role in the war of succession after Arafat departs. Other participants in the power struggle will be the heads of local branches of the ruling party, Fatah, which has organized paramilitary training for their members in the past year.

Arafat's personal role is vital in preserving stability, in part because he refuses to delegate authority. He will conduct peace talks personally, focusing on every detail; raise funds around the world to keep his regime afloat; serve as commander of each Palestinian security agency; maintain his complex relationship with Hamas; and deal with a wide range of mundane administrative topics, such as Gazan drivers' traffic tickets. Palestinian newspapers carry daily notices by citizens thanking Arafat and sending him personal greetings. They shower him with titles like "Our leader and symbol." Arafat is thus not only a leader who takes direct responsibility even for the smallest detail, but also the PA's symbol. When he ceases to be its leader, a major crisis could well develop.

It seems very unlikely that any single leader will be able to step into the power vacuum left by Arafat. Of all the candidates mentioned here, Abu Mazen, the PLO's number two man, and Abu Ala'a, of the Palestinian Authority, would seem to be the top contenders. But neither has Arafat's charisma or leadership skills, and both would likely face serious instability before they'd be able to consolidate their power.

How about Hamas? Islamic zealots have proven time and again in the Middle East that while they are very good at causing trouble, they are incapable of running a country. Hamas is primarily concerned with religion and morality, and its members still have

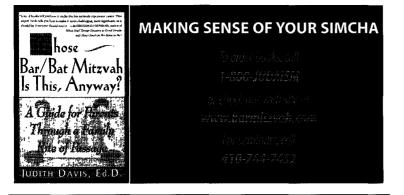
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Arafat has sometimes pressed hard on Hamas leaders like Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who founded the movement.

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lingering reservations about modern technology, such as the Internet. Hamas's attitude toward women—that they have no role in the political sphere—is also a handicap in the eyes of Palestinian moderates. And if Hamas did mount a major offensive, the entire Arab world, Israel, Europe, and the United States would exert tremendous pressure—both economic and political—to prevent the militant group from taking over.

In the long run, Jordan will probably play a crucial role, but the Palestinian-Jordanian relationship is complex. After King Hussein moved against the Palestinians in 1970 (prompted by a second attempt to assassinate him), a lengthy period of calm coexistence ensued. Many Palestinians enjoyed Jordan's stable economy during the 1980s, when Iraq and Iran were at war. Those Palestinians were considered loyal subjects of the monarchy. But many other Palestinians in Jordan were poor and unemployed. Their bitterness allied them firmly with their brethren in the West Bank and Gaza. Ties between Pales-



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tinians on the West Bank and the east bank run deep: Scattered on both sides of the Jordan are people from the same families, separated by political boundaries but linked by history. Over half of Jordan's four million inhabitants are Palestinian. Unofficial estimates peg the number much higher around 70 percent.

It is highly doubtful that Palestinians would ever accept a full union with Jordan, which would strip them of their autonomy. For one thing, Jordan is an absolute monarchy, governed by a notable Arab familydescendants of the prophet Mohammedthat traces its roots to Mecca. The Palestinians, on the other hand, are seeking to establish a presidential republic within a democratic regime and would not accept the anachronistic Jordanian system. Additionally, since King Hussein's death, the stability of the regime has come into question. As one of his last acts, Hussein replaced his brother, Crown Prince Hassan, with his son Abdullah as successor. The new king has since been greeted by a wave of questioning murmurs regarding his competency to lead the nation across tricky political terrain. King Abdullah, whose mother is English, left Jordan when he was four and has spent most of his life either in Britain or the United States, where he graduated from Georgetown University. His wife is Palestinian, but that is unlikely to help him shrug off his "one of them" image (Hashemite monarch King Hussein's third wife, Queen Alia Tukan, was also Palestinian, but it made no difference to Palestinians). Far more likely to matter is the fact that King Abdullah speaks Arabic with a heavy foreign accent, which Palestinians have already noted. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Queen Noor (King Hussein's widow, now the Queen Mother) is an American, and she also battles the "stranger" stigma. And her son Hamza, the new crown prince, 1s half American. That means the three highest positions in the kingdom are held by people who are widely viewed as foreigners. In a moment of crisis, opponents of the monarchy could use this fact to foment unrest. The questionable circumstances of the monarchy make a union between Jordan and the PA unlikely.

The most likely possibility is some sort of confederation between Jordan and the West Bank that would allow the PA to retain some degree of autonomy. Because of favorable Palestinian demographics, the arrangement has a certain appeal to Arafat. In 1985, long before Israel's peace agreements with the Palestinians and the Jordanians, Arafat and Hussein even signed a confederation agreement. But after only a year, Hussein backed away from the plan and cancelled the deal. Since then, the Jordanians have understood that confederation could pose a threat to the character of the monarchy. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that Arafat recognizes the same thing. Immediately after Abdullah's coronation in February, Arafat once again raised the possibility of confederation. Jordan's official government spokesman, shocked that the plan was once again on the negotiating table, rushed to reject it on the spot. Israel, on the other hand, might well support the idea of confederation.

At present, however, Arafat seems irreplaceable. As the founding father of Palestinian nationalism, he appeals to Palestinians across the region in a way that neither the Palestinian contenders nor Abdullah can. Whoever follows Arafat will be attempting to stand in for a man who has embodied Palestinian national aspirations for three decades—a tough assignment. The main thing will be to avoid chaos at Arafat's passing.

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