

INFORMATION BRIEF

Number ??
?? December 2000

Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine / 2425-35 Virginia Avenue, NW / Washington, DC 20037 / Tel: 202.338.1290 / Fax: 202.333.7742

Who Will Succeed Yasser Arafat?

Jean-François Legrain

Background: Who will succeed Yasser Arafat, now 70? For several years, rumors have been rife about his state of health, fueling speculation about the succession to his various posts.

In just over three decades, Arafat has managed to concentrate such power in his hands that virtually nothing within the Palestinian sphere escapes him. Of the some 30 presidencies that he holds today, the four most important are his leadership of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the state of Palestine, the Fateh Central Committee, and the Palestinian Authority (PA).

PLO Executive Committee: Arafat has been chairman of the PLO Executive Committee (PLOEC) since 1969, and it is to this function that he owes his authority and international recognition. According to PLO statutes, the PLOEC implements the policy decided by the Palestine National Council (PNC), which is the supreme authority of the PLO. PLOEC members are elected by the PNC from its own membership, while the PLOEC chairman is elected by the PLOEC itself. Since the PLOEC first elected Arafat as chairman in 1969, his Fateh movement—the largest and most powerful of the Palestinian organizations—has controlled the PLOEC's key posts. Of the current PLOEC's total membership of 18, five (including Arafat) are Fateh members, and six are "independents" but close to Fateh.

Leading Candidates for the PLOEC Chairmanship: Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) will undoubtedly have the best chance of succeeding Arafat as PLO chairman if the policy of negotiations with Israel and the U.S. continues. Although Abu Mazen joined the PLOEC only in 1981, he has been its secretary since April 1996. More importantly, he is one of the founding members of Fateh. As a drafter of the Oslo Accords on the Palestinian side and a signatory of their Declaration of Principles (DOP), Abu Mazen is, above all, *the* man of U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Other possible candidates include Fateh's three other official representatives in the PLOEC: Al-Qaddumi (in charge of foreign affairs since 1973 and one of the founding members of Fateh), Faisal Hussein (the PA "minister" for Jerusalem and head of Fateh for the West Bank), and Zakariya Al-Agha (head of Fateh in Gaza). Opposed to Oslo, Al-Qaddumi could become a candidate in the event of a sharp reversal of PLO policy. Hussein and Al-Agha, notables from the "inside," are neither historic figures of the liberation struggle nor Fateh apparatchiks of long standing. Nonetheless, Hussein could conceivably be a compromise candidate to break a tie between Abu Mazen and Al-Qaddumi. Critical of Oslo but working with the PA as head of Orient House (the Palestinian headquarters in Jerusalem), Hussein is also respected by the Islamists.

Presidency of the State of Palestine: Arafat is president of the state of Palestine, as proclaimed on 15 November 1988 in Algiers by the 19th PNC. The same PNC also decided that "a provisional government for the state of Palestine" should be formed as soon as possible, but it was never formally constituted, even though

Many fear the truth of the prediction, confided to the Arab daily Al-Sharq Al-Awsat (25 November 1997) by an anonymous Palestinian . . . that only Arafat, while still alive, can assure a legitimate transition. "If he disappears, for whatever reason, before the transition is settled, a bloody conflict among Palestinians will follow."

The Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine
www.palestinecenter.org

The Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine (CPAP), an educational program of The Jerusalem Fund, promotes analysis and understanding of the Palestine question and the broader Middle East.

Al-Qaddumi has been vested as its foreign minister. Regarding Arafat's succession, everything would seem to indicate that the chairman of the PLOEC is the "natural" candidate for the presidency of the state.

The Leadership of Fateh: Though often billed as the head of Fateh, Arafat in fact has exactly the same status as all other members of Fateh's Central Committee (FCC). In theory, the FCC is no more than the executive instrument of the General Congress, which, in principle, is the supreme authority of the movement. In practice, however, the FCC has monopolized almost all of the organization's powers.

As the FCC is required to replace all vacancies immediately with members of the Fateh Revolutionary Council, the 120 members of the latter automatically become potential candidates for membership of the FCC. Nonetheless, the traditional influence of the older members makes it likely that the succession for leadership of Fateh will be played out among the three surviving founders of the organization and members of the FCC.

Salim Za'nun can probably be ruled out by virtue of his position as speaker of the PNC. The chances that Al-Qaddumi, who has refused to enter the autonomous zones, will get the post are slim. By process of elimination, Abu Mazen seems most likely to succeed Arafat. If he does, and if he also becomes chair of the PLOEC, the tradition of combining the two posts would be maintained. In case of separation of the two, Hani Al-Hassan, also considered a veteran of Fateh, could have a chance. Critical of Oslo, he nonetheless leads missions on behalf of Arafat, has good relations with his FCC colleagues and with the Islamists, and has good contacts in the U.S. and the Gulf countries.

The Presidency of the PA: Arafat's presence at the head of the "Executive Authority of the Palestinian Council" is exclusively linked to the Oslo peace process and therefore is limited in theory to the five-year interim period (which ended on 4 May 1999) spelled out in the September 1993 Declaration of Principles. The legitimacy of Arafat's PA position derives from two sources: (1) His appointment by the PLO following the signing of the DOP (also known as Oslo I); and (2) His election by popular vote in January 1996 in keeping with provisions of the "Interim Agreement on Modalities of Palestinian Autonomy" (Oslo II) signed in September 1995.

To address the issue of Arafat's succession as PA president—a succession that requires popular elections—would imply acceptance by the Palestinians of an almost indefinite extension of the interim period. While the list of pos-

sible candidates is almost endless, the fact that each political party can run only one candidate and that Fateh still stands at the center of the political arena seemingly restricts the list of possible winners to Fateh candidates. Logically, the list would include the older, well-known figures of the movement who embody its historical legacy. Thus, the FCC, possibly reinforced by membership in the PLOEC, becomes the only "natural" source of likely candidates.

While Abu Mazen's name appears again on this list, the question of concentration of power—an option clearly not preferred by most political forces—arises if he also gets the PLOEC and FCC chairmanships. Al-Qaddumi is not in the running unless he returns, or the law is changed. The candidacies of Husseini and Al-Agha, who are not returnees like Abu Mazen, are weakened by the regionalist segmentation of the territories and by the fact that they are neither historic figures in the liberation struggle, nor long-standing Fateh bureaucrats. Nabil Shaath (PA "minister" of planning and international cooperation) is also an unlikely successor because of the Palestinian Council's accusations of corruption aimed at him. By contrast, Ahmad Qurai' (known as Abu Ala'), a returnee born in Jerusalem, has a strong advantage. As speaker of the Palestinian Council, he is to serve as interim president in the event of vacancy.

Struggles for Succession? Many fear the truth of the prediction confided to the Arab daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* (25 November 1997) by an anonymous Palestinian (suspected to be Al-Qaddumi) that only Arafat, while still alive, can assure a legitimate transition. "If he disappears, for whatever reason, *before* the transition is settled, a bloody conflict among Palestinians will follow."

Short of apocalyptic outcomes, Abu Mazen is the only one who can legally and politically assume the chairmanship of the PLOEC, the leadership of Fateh, and the presidency of the PA. Qurai', legally excluded from the chairmanship of the PLOEC, is well positioned for the presidency of the PA.

Jean-François Legrain is working at the Maison de l'Orient Mediterranee in Lyon, France as a researcher of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. This brief is based on his article in the Journal of Palestine Studies (No. 112, Vol. 28, Summer 1999). The above text may be used without permission but with proper attribution to the author and to the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine. This brief does not necessarily reflect the views of the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine or The Jerusalem Fund.