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Detoxifying Yasser Arafat's Disastrous Legacy

James Phillips

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who died on November 11, has left the Middle East a more brutal, nasty, and toxic place. Arafat's disastrous leadership exploded the once promising Arab-Israeli peace process and left the Palestinians mired in growing violence, anarchy, and misery. Although Arafat's death has removed one obstacle to Israeli-Palestinian peace, his legacy of terrorism has poisoned the prospects for future negotiations. There is little chance of attaining a genuine peace until Arafat's successors disavow his failed policies, reject terrorism, and build mutual trust with Israel. This will take time, probably several years—if it happens at all. In the meantime, the United States should avoid the temptation to convene a premature summit that will likely fail to resolve intractable final status issues. Instead, Washington should focus on incremental, short-term steps to reduce violence, facilitate Palestinian elections, and encourage Palestinian cooperation with Israel's planned withdrawal from Gaza.

Arafat's Double Game. Arafat welcomed the peace process, but not genuine peace. He played a double game until the very end, often extending the olive branch to Israel when speaking in English to Western audiences while calling for jihad and "martyrdom" when speaking in Arabic

to his own people. Throughout more than a decade of protracted negotiations, he never permanently halted his use of terrorism, despite repeatedly committing to do so.

Arafat went along with negotiations as long as he gained more than he lost. The Oslo peace process, which began in 1993, anointed him the sole leader of the Palestinians, rescued him from near irrelevance in Tunisia, allowed him to return to Gaza in 1994, and strengthened his stranglehold on Palestinian politics. Arafat supported the Oslo process to pocket a long list of Israeli concessions, including recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization; the acceptance of Arafat's Palestinian Authority, which would become an embryonic Palestinian state; the withdrawal of Israeli military forces from Palestinian areas; and the negotiation of a two-state solution that would involve extensive Israeli territorial concessions—including Palestinian control over the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem.

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- Unless Yasser Arafat's successors reject his legacy of terrorism, there is little hope of achieving a final Israeli-Palestinian settlement.
 - Washington should focus on short-term steps to reduce violence, facilitate Palestinian elections, and encourage Palestinian cooperation with Israel's planned withdrawal from Gaza.
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However, when it came time to negotiate a final settlement, Arafat squandered an historic opportunity to negotiate peace at the July 2000 Camp David summit. He rejected Israeli and American proposals without offering a counterproposal and walked away from the negotiating table. In September 2000, Arafat unleashed the second *intifada*, the violent uprising that drove the last nails into the coffin of the Oslo peace process.

Arafat leaves Palestinians much worse off than when he returned to Gaza in July 1994. Under his capricious leadership, the Palestinian Authority became corrupt, unaccountable, and incompetent. His refusal to end terrorism poisoned the peace negotiations, led Israel to reoccupy Palestinian areas and close its borders to Palestinian workers, and crippled the Palestinian economy. Palestinian parents have been horrified to find their children brainwashed into becoming suicide bombers and cannon fodder for Arafat's revolutionary pipedreams.

The ultimate beneficiaries of Arafat's failed policies are likely to be the Islamic radicals of Hamas, who hope to pick up the pieces after the discrediting of the Palestinian Authority. Although Arafat often escaped criticism because he had managed to turn himself into the human flag of the Palestinian movement, Arafat's successors inside the Palestinian Authority have little popular support or personal charisma. Arafat's death will likely leave a power vacuum that will trigger a lengthy power struggle. Arafat never groomed a successor, because doing so could create a threat to his own personal power. Initially, he will probably be succeeded by an unstable collective leadership composed of several of his protégés.

Until the succession struggle is settled, no Palestinian leader is likely to take political risks to revive the stalled negotiations with Israel. In fact, political rivals are more likely to compete with each other to see who can take the hardest line against Israel. Once a new leader has consolidated power, he is likely to grow increasingly pragmatic in order to stay in power. At that point, the dynamics of Palestinian politics might encourage a successor to take personal political risks to renew negotiations with Israel in order to relieve the misery that Arafat's ruinous policies have imposed on Palestinians.

Incremental Steps. Incremental steps are preferable to high-risk summitry. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has proposed an overly ambitious summit to jumpstart the stalled peace negotiations, but the Bush Administration should not rush to engage Arafat's successors in a premature bid to forge a final settlement. Such a push could backfire by energizing Palestinian hardliners and discrediting pragmatic leaders before they can consolidate power. A hastily prepared summit could break up in disarray or produce an agreement that Arafat's successors may not have the power or legitimacy to implement. Presidential involvement should be ruled out until the diplomatic sherpas have mapped out a path for attaining a summit agreement acceptable to both sides.

Instead, the Bush Administration should adhere to its principled policy of urging Palestinians to halt terrorism and reform the Palestinian Authority to develop a responsible, transparent, and democratic leadership capable of advancing Palestinian interests by reaching a genuine peace with Israel. To help Palestinians along this path, Washington should focus on brokering a ceasefire and fostering bilateral Israeli-Palestinian cooperation on elections to fill Arafat's office as leader of the Palestinian Authority. President George W. Bush should also appoint an ambassador-at-large to encourage Palestinians to coordinate with Israel on its withdrawal from Gaza, scheduled for next year. Over time, the mutual trust created by ending the violence and resolving immediate issues could grow enough to provide a hopeful basis for addressing the many thorny final status issues.

Conclusion. Arafat's death could lead to a long-term opportunity for progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but his legacy of terrorism and treachery remain a formidable obstacle to peace. The United States cannot rescue the Palestinian people from bad leadership, nor can it impose a lasting peace on reluctant Palestinians. Until a new Palestinian leadership has emerged that rejects Arafat's legacy of terrorism, there is little hope of achieving a final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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