

## A Legitimate Palestinian Leadership

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In the post Arafat era it is clear that there is a merging of Palestinian, Israeli and International interests that a new and legitimate Palestinian leadership emerge as soon as possible. In the immediate aftermath of the formal announcement of Arafat's death, the team of Abu Mazen and Abu Ala will have, at best, only limited legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinian public. It seems that the negotiations with the various factions and forces, within Fatah and with the other movements has enabled the possibility of a rather smooth transfer of authority, but only for a very limited time frame. It seems that the Palestinian public and the various factions and forces are not interested in any kind of a bloody coup, internal violent strife or civil wars. This will not last for long.

No leader after Arafat in Palestine will gain full public legitimacy without being elected in open, free and democratic elections. This is the demand that is heard from all quarters of Palestinian society. Thus in the post Arafat era the possibility for Palestinian democracy has increased and Palestine might emerge as the first real example of democracy in practice in the Arab world.

It is in the interest of all the relevant players that the next leadership in Palestine have public and international legitimacy. It is also important, at least to Israel and the International Community that the next legitimate Palestinian leadership will also be a partner for the renewal of a political process. The definition of "partner" being a leadership that demonstrates willingness – having the political will – to enter into a political process for reaching understandings and agreements with Israel and demonstrates responsible behaviors – creating and enforcing systems of law and order, or in other words, a leadership that will implement the Palestinian obligations under Phase I of the Road Map. It might be that a legitimate Palestinian leadership will be elected by the public that while having legitimacy, will not be a partner for Israel in a renewed political process. But the necessary condition for partnership is first and foremost public legitimacy.

Palestinian elections can be a substantial incentive for upholding a ceasefire with Israel. Elections cannot and will not take place in Palestine unless there is a deployment of Israeli forces outside of Palestinian populated areas. Elections will not take place without some form of international guarantees that Palestinians will be able to organize and to carry out a campaign, meaning that there must be a much higher degree of freedom of movement within the Palestinian territories. This in itself is a significant incentive for Palestinians to uphold and to support a ceasefire and therefore serves Israeli interests directly by bringing about a lowering in the level of violence.

It is in the interest of the current Palestinian leadership, the international community and Israel that the results of elections will produce a legitimate Palestinian partner. It is also therefore in the interest of all of these parties to lower the level of confrontation, enabling freer movement of people and goods and to take actions that will benefit the Palestinian economy.

It is also well known that there are forces that are not interested in the election of a potential partner for a renewed political process. These forces will exploit the period of time between now and the convening of elections to escalate the confrontation, either as a means of preventing elections or as a means of ensuring the election of Palestinian leaders who will not be a partner to Israel in any form. Therefore, there is great importance in agreeing to a very

limited time frame for conducting elections.

Just as in Israel there is a need for the political parties to organize, to set lists and to convene primaries, the Palestinians too much get their house in order. There is probably a need to convene elections for the Fatah Central Committee and for other internal bodies of the various factions and movements. The Palestinians must finalize their election law and determine what elections are being held – legislative, executive or both. They must complete the registration process (here I would recommend that they drop the entire process of pre-registration and adopt the kind of system that Israel uses whereby every Palestinian who reaches the age of 18 on election day is automatically registered to vote – this would increase the legitimacy factor). They must set the laws for campaigning, funding of elections and they must reach agreements with Israel and the international community on the election process itself. Here it is essential that Israel agree to the same framework that was agreed upon in 1996 whereby residents of East Jerusalem can participate in the process because without this there will be no Palestinian agreement to conduct elections.

It is also essential that the Palestinians, Israel and the International community agree to the framework for international supervision, inspection and monitoring of the elections. This is a necessary condition for conducting free, open and democratic elections in Palestine that will produce legitimate results. It is in the interest of Israel to facilitate and to expedite this process as well. The accepted framework for advancing the election process could be the Road Map. The Road Map states: *Palestinians undertake comprehensive political reform in preparation for statehood, including drafting a Palestinian constitution, and free, fair and open elections upon the basis of those measures. As early as possible... Palestinians hold free, open, and fair elections. GOI facilitates Task Force election assistance, registration of voters, movement of candidates and voting officials...*

So now decision must be made and all concerned parties should support a real democratic process in Palestine. This is in the interest of all and should take place without delay.

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