

## Arafat's critics rise from among ranks of former friends

Palestinian politicians clamor for change, seeking to distance themselves from the President's failures.

By Ilene R. Prusher, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor **September 13, 2002**

**JERUSALEM** — Palestinian president Yasser Arafat has just had one of the worst weeks in his political life. And for that he can thank old friends like Nabil Amr.

Mr. Amr has known Mr. Arafat for nearly four decades. He knew him in Cairo, and was with him in war-ravaged Beirut, from which the two men and other Palestine Liberation Organization guerrillas escaped on a ship to Athens. Later, Amr was the PLO's ambassador to Moscow and, until a few months ago, one of Arafat's cabinet ministers.

But not until now were Amr's differences with Arafat's leadership apparent, in plain print in the pages of the semi-official paper of the Palestinian Authority, al-Hayat al-Jadida.

"What I said was simply, 'Let us go to elections. Let us try to find a point in the middle.' And by that I mean choosing a prime minister," Amr says.



Photos of the Day Photos of the day 02/08

In his letter, Amr criticized Arafat for failing to take advantage of the opportunity he had at Camp David two years ago, when Ehud Barak was prime minister of Israel. "Our timing is wrong," he wrote. "We reject when we should accept and we accept when we should reject. It is time to recognize that we are mistaken...."

But last week's open letter to Arafat coming from a man who has, until recently, been an important figure in the Palestinian leader's decision-making circle was read by many as an open invitation to challenge Arafat's leadership. It helped spark the explosive events of this week, in which Palestinian legislators, threatening a humiliating vote of no-confidence in Arafat's Cabinet, instead forced it to resign □ the greatest act of defiance the 88-member council has ever showed the beleaguered Palestinian leader.

"If the Israelis consider [Arafat] illegal, we will not find anyone to speak with him." says Amr. "The most important thing is how the world deals with our prime minister."

At the heart of the current dispute is the push to create an office of Palestinian prime minister. Most Palestinians, even those who fault Arafat's leadership, still view him as the embodiment of their national aspirations. Establishing a prime minister would give them a more effective day-to-day leader, without sidelining Arafat entirely.

Current Palestinian "Basic Law," as outlined in the Oslo Accords, makes no mention of a prime minister simply a president or executive branch. But this week's upheaval shows that an increasing number of Palestinian politicians are demanding the creation of prime minister as an elected office.

Under pressure from all sides, Arafat yesterday chose a date January 20 for the election. But he has so far ignored calls for a prime minister, concerned and probably rightly so that the change would leave him with a virtually titular role.

Amr, a tall and well-spoken man in his mid-50s with a thick head of hair and long pedigree in Arafat's Fatah faction of the PLO, does not rule out running against Arafat or being considered as a candidate for prime minister. But he says he is far less concerned with who leads than with how.

"We must avoid speaking about any specific person," says Amr, who studied law at Damascus University and once ran the Voice of Palestine radio in Cairo. "My business is figuring out how we will put this change in the Basic Law." A Palestinian prime minister, he says, will have to get approval for his actions from the legislative council, as in a classic parliamentary system. Adds Amr: "He cannot turn into another dictator."

Such talk of regime change, which has been humming in the corridors of Palestinian power for years, is now ringing like warning bells. Although this may be partly the result of Arafat's isolation from the interlocutors who matter most neither the Bush administration nor Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will speak with him Palestinians say external pressures do not tell the full story.

"There are some positive dimensions to this development, because it shows that Palestinian democracy is real and alive despite the occupation," says Hisham Ahmed, a

political scientist at Bir Zeit University in the West Bank. "It shows that reform is not an Israeli or American dictate, it is a genuine Palestinian need, sparked by a genuine conflict between the Palestinian executive and the Palestinian legislative branches."

The reason legislators have pushed Arafat into a corner is genuinely complex. Now that elections the first in seven years are inevitable, many Palestinian politicians are distancing themselves from the disappointments of Arafat's regime, particularly the unprecedented Israeli-Palestinian violence of the two-year-old intifada.

At this rare moment, all of Arafat's legislators, from those at the conciliatory end to those who think Arafat should give up on negotiating with Sharon's government, only stand to gain by criticizing the Palestinian Authority.

In short, legislators here may be behaving much like incumbents in Washington who, ahead of an election season, suddenly begin painting themselves as outsiders who will take on the system.

"I think there is a profound, widespread feeling on the part of the Palestinian people that the cabinet which just resigned was not doing what it was supposed to do, especially during times of duress," says Dr. Ahmed. "There is a feeling that there are least some members of government who are not fit for the job. There is a feeling that there is corruption."

Even the legislative council was seen over the past two years as "almost inept," he says. "They want to reassert themselves just prior to the elections in order to give the impression to their respective constituencies that they can even challenge the executive branch of the authority."

Arafat now has 14 days to appoint a new cabinet, but at least some here will view it, to use a term more commonly heard in American politics, as a lame duck. Many Palestinians say that even though some of Arafat's choices for cabinet minister will be acceptable, there is little the president can do now to quell demands for change.

Mohammed Hurani, a Palestinian legislator from Hebron who helped pressure Arafat's cabinet to resign, calls the upheaval a "great victory." But, he says, it doesn't mean that Palestinians no longer want Arafat as their leader.

"He has the ability to rule, but the point is that we are partners," says Mr. Hurani. The message is, 'You will rule, but with us.' "

Hurani says he has spoken to Arafat personally this week to urge him to reconsider his opposition to a prime minister. The answer? "He will think about it," Hurani says. "He needs to think."