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## 'What After Arafat?'

by Ferry Biedermann

JERUSALEM - A historic vote in [Israel](#)'s parliament to withdraw from Gaza has been overshadowed by serious concern over the health of the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat.

Just days after the Israeli press unanimously described the highly contested vote in parliament in favor of a withdrawal from Gaza as "historic," the event has been eclipsed by a sharp deterioration in Arafat's health.

Now it is the veteran Palestinian leader rather than the veteran Israeli leader, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who is capturing the world's attention.

Sharon divided his coalition and his party in order to push through the "disengagement" plan, and his political future looks uncertain because of it.

Serious though that may be, it pales into insignificance for most commentators when compared to the impact on the whole Middle East if the 75-year-old Arafat dies or is incapacitated.

Palestinian political analyst Hisham Ahmed unreservedly speaks of "chaos" in a post-Arafat era. "And it will be the Israelis who will regret most his passing away," says Ahmed who teaches at the Bir Zeit University near Ramallah. "There is no other Palestinian leader they can do business with."

The fevered speculation in the Middle East about "what after Arafat" may bring home to Palestinians, Israelis, and the international community just how important he is to the political process in the region.

Israeli commentators have combined the two issues, the disengagement plan and Arafat's possible demise. The whole withdrawal from Gaza may be on hold or in doubt if Arafat disappears from the scene, they say.

The media are torn between predicting chaos in the Palestinian territories and the emergence of a more moderate leadership, a very unlikely outcome in the short term, according to most external observers.

In the case of chaos, the disengagement plan will be off, because it will be seen as irresponsible to carry on with it. And in case of moderate leadership, the rationale for

such a unilateral step will have disappeared, writes a commentator in the moderate *Ha'aretz* daily newspaper. Instead the government will then have to sit down with the new Palestinian leadership to negotiate.

The deluge of commentaries and analyses in the Israeli press suggests both fascination and deep confusion when dealing with the subject of Arafat.

Over the last four years, since the outbreak of the Intifada, he has been reviled as a corrupt, conniving old terrorist chieftain and warmonger who is to be isolated at the very least and preferably assassinated. This has been the official government policy that to a large degree has been backed by the Bush administration in the United States.

One of the major provisions of the international peace plan, the roadmap, is political reform inside the Palestinian Authority (PA). This is a code for the replacement of Arafat with a more moderate leader whom the Israelis and the U.S. administration think they can do business with. Until now, Arafat has not even formally, let alone in practice, given up his hold over the levers of power, in particular his control over the security services.

Israeli forces have kept him confined to his largely destroyed but now partially rebuilt headquarters in Ramallah. This may have limited his ability to assert his control, particularly in faraway Gaza, and he has had to watch his Fatah movement get mired down in internal disputes.

He remains nevertheless the only leader that Palestinians can unite around.

"The Palestinian people don't trust anybody else, certainly not the group around him, which is seen as corrupt and power-hungry," says Ahmed.

It was exactly to circumvent Arafat that Sharon last year came up with his formula for a unilateral disengagement. The Israeli government kept repeating that "there is no Palestinian partner" for negotiations or mutually agreed measures.

By dismantling the 21 heavily guarded Gaza settlements where some 8,000 Israelis live among more than 1.3 million Palestinians, Sharon is hoping to avert international pressure, limit exposure to Palestinian attacks, and strengthen Israel's hold over parts of the West Bank, which he considers far more important to Israel's survival.

Ahmed plays down the significance of the plan for the Palestinians, agreeing with the PA officials that it is a "redeployment" rather than a withdrawal. Under the current version of the plan Israel will remain in charge of Gaza's external borders, air space, and sea access.

There is a danger that Sharon will "increase his atrocities against the Palestinians in Gaza," says Ahmed. The prime minister will have to show that he is as tough as ever in

order to win back the support of some of the right-wingers who have abandoned him, says Ahmed.

The vote on Oct. 25 was accompanied by a large demonstration by settlers and their supporters in Jerusalem. Schools in the Gaza settlements had closed their doors so that children and their parents could attend the rally.

The settlers and their backers among the religious and nationalist wings of Israeli politics have agitated furiously against the plan over the last couple of months. There has been talk of civil war, soldiers have been called upon to disobey orders, and threats have been made against the life of Sharon.

The decision in Israel's parliament, the 120-member Knesset, went 67-45 in Sharon's favor. On the face of it, it was a comfortable majority, but in reality it rested partially on the support of four ministers of Sharon's own Likud-party who were threatened with dismissal if they did not vote in favor.

Now this group, led by former prime minister and current Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has threatened to quit the government anyway if Sharon refuses to submit the plan to a national referendum.

Netanyahu and Sharon are longtime rivals for the leadership of the Likud and the right wing of Israeli politics. Netanyahu has now said that if he does not get his way, he will challenge Sharon for the top post in the Likud.

The disengagement plan still has to pass several votes in parliament, including one within the next couple of weeks, on funding as part of the state budget. The vote on the disengagement plan did not include a specific provision on ordering the dismantling of settlements. This even more contentious vote has been postponed until next year.

Given the internal upheaval that the disengagement plan is creating in Israel, many commentators see in Arafat's illness an easy way out for Sharon.

The old Israeli prime minister, who gained himself the nickname "bulldozer" for both his penchant for demolishing Palestinian homes and his tendency to bulldoze right ahead over political obstacles, has not given any signs yet that he is considering a compromise.

Also, Arafat may well live to an even riper old age and the situation in the Middle East may not change very much at all over the next few years.

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