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After Arafat

Emmanuel Navon

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(December 18) - Keynes's statement that "in the long run we're all dead" applies to everyone, including Arafat.

Apocalyptic prophecies about the post-Arafat era ignore this basic truth: eventually Arafat will have a successor.

The leadership that will emerge from Arafat's crumbling regime might be more radical or more pragmatic. For the second option to prevail, the Palestinians need to be convinced that terrorism will only bring more hardship, and that Palestinian statehood will only be achieved through sincere negotiations with Israel. The Bush administration should therefore make it clear that the post-Arafat regime will enjoy US support only if it renounces terrorism and embraces compromise.

Some believe that, despite his disastrous policies, Arafat is a lesser evil and that the only alternative to his leadership is that of Hamas. But the alleged animosity and ideological gap between Hamas and the PLO do not fit with the Palestinian Authority's words and deeds.

Arab League spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi openly admitted that "Hamas is not the enemy [of the Palestinian Authority]" (Jerusalem Post, 25 July 1995), PA Justice Minister Abu Medein declared that the PLO and Hamas "complement each other". (Al-Nahar, 11 April 1995), and PA Planning Minister Nabil Shaath made it clear that "We [the PA] have a brotherly relationship with Hamas" (Reuters, 28 October, 1994).

When Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin was released from prison in October 1997, Arafat flew to Jordan to publicly hug and kiss him. In 1997, Arafat named Imad Falouji, a Hamas activist from Gaza, as minister without portfolio, and chose Talal Sidr, a Hamas activist from Hebron, as minister of youth. In October 2000, Arafat freed all Hamas terrorists from PA jails and gave them carte blanche to commit terrorist attacks in Israel.

Recent declarations by PLO officials (such as the late Faisal Husseini and West Bank Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti) further blur the ideological differences between Hamas and the PLO. The popularity of Hamas is indeed growing in the West Bank and Gaza, but Hamas hardly constitutes an alternative to the PLO.

The alternative to Arafat must and can come from moderate Palestinian leaders who have abandoned the dream of a Palestine "from the Jordan to the sea," and who are eager to bring more freedom and prosperity to their people. A local, moderate Palestinian leadership had started to emerge in the West Bank in the late 1980s, when then defense minister Yitzhak Rabin and foreign minister Moshe Arens had worked together to strengthen the local Palestinian leadership that had no allegiance to the PLO.

The emergence of a local and moderate Palestinian leadership constituted a challenge to the PLO, then based in Tunis, and Arafat threatened those Palestinian leaders who called for the end of violence and for negotiations with Israel. The PLO carried out this threat by murdering Nablus mayor Zafer al-Masri.

Immediately after the Gulf War, the PLO was on the verge of total collapse, and Israel and the US could have helped the Palestinian leadership from the West Bank to emancipate itself from the Tunis diaspora. Instead, the new Israeli government estimated that a weak PLO was an ideal

partner for negotiation. This calculation proved correct in the short term and tragically wrong in the long term.

Today, Israel is back to square one, trying to distance the PLO's old guard from the younger, more pragmatic generation. At Camp David, the Palestinians "from the outside" (Arafat, Ahmed Qurei, and Mahmoud Abbas) could only talk about the "right of return," while the Palestinians "from the inside" (Hassan Asfur, Muham□mad Rashid and Muham□mad Dahlan) were more pragmatic. The US should use all its influence to make sure that the later prevail over the former.

(The writer is a political science lecturer at Bar-Ilan University and CEO of Navon Consulting.)



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