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A Golden Opportunity Squandered

By Jackson Diehl

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Yasser Arafat's death last November created, it was commonly said, a golden opportunity for Palestinians to arrest their society's downward spiral into squalor and suicide bombing. It also set up a test for all those who believed that Arafat himself was the principal Palestinian problem.

The test went like this: Let's say Arafat were abruptly replaced, via a fair democratic election, by a civilized moderate with a long record of opposing violence and a clear commitment to negotiating a peaceful settlement with Israel. Amazingly, that happened six months ago, when Mahmoud Abbas became the Palestinian president. Let's further say that Israel decided to unilaterally withdraw from all of the Gaza Strip and a portion of the West Bank -- as, almost incredibly, it appears ready to do just two weeks from now. What difference would we see in Palestinian behavior?

Here, so far, are the empirical results: With the Israeli pullout looming, the new Palestinian authorities are promising to rein in extremists who threaten to attack the withdrawing settlers and soldiers -- but so far their efforts have been weak. An experts' study recently concluded that Palestinian security forces remain factionalized, underarmed and undertrained, and that they are more easily commanded by local warlords than their official leaders. Corrupt hacks populate Palestinian ministries and dominate the legislature and the ruling Fatah party. Democratic elections scheduled for last month were indefinitely postponed.

There are fitful negotiations with Israel about coordinating the withdrawal and subsequent status of Gaza. But Palestinian leaders appear more focused on using U.S. mediators to extract concessions from Israel than they are on formalizing agreements with the Jewish state. In the end, they may prefer to remain passive and blame Ariel Sharon for a unilateral and chaotic withdrawal.

It all sounds, in short, very much like Yasser Arafat's Palestine.

So why did this happen? Was Arafat merely a faithful representative of a dysfunctional society? And is there any way all this can be repaired before Gaza plunges into anarchy or becomes a stronghold for Islamic extremists?

The Bush administration, which has supported Abbas but cautiously delimited its investment in his success, publicly offers the optimistic case. Yes, Assistant Secretary of State David Welch said in a congressional hearing last week, there are difficulties, "huge ones." But "do they have the will to do it? Yes, they do." Abbas, Welch and security envoy Lt. Gen. William Ward pointed out, has taken steps to clean up Palestinian finances and reorganize security forces. Some of those forces recently opened fire on militants from the Hamas movement in an attempt to stop rocket attacks on Israel. "It's not an overnight affair; it's a long-term proposition, but steps are being taken," Ward said.

Part of the problem, in fact, is that the Palestinians don't get to work at their own pace. Undoing the Arafat regime, building a new one, and finding a way to integrate or at least disarm radical forces can't easily be done in six months. But that timetable has been imposed by Israel's prime minister, Sharon, who has proceeded with his plan for the Gaza withdrawal without regard for Palestinian

circumstances. Sharon clearly doesn't expect Abbas to succeed, and he has tailored his actions accordingly: Concessions to the new Palestinian regime have been held to the bare minimum required to satisfy pressure from Washington. The Israeli leader meanwhile proceeds with the unilateral solution he designed before Arafat's death. Following withdrawal from Gaza, Israel will retreat behind the border-like system of fences and walls it is constructing through the West Bank and around Jerusalem, and prepare to live with that status quo indefinitely.

Arab states, too, don't seem to be betting on Abbas. Though they are rolling in fresh oil wealth, they have made no significant new contributions to the Palestinian Authority. As he prepares to take over Gaza, Abbas is struggling with a \$400 million budget deficit. Former World Bank president James Wolfensohn, who has been delegated by the international community to coordinate Gaza's development, said in the House hearing that "it is absolutely essential" that Abbas be able to show Palestinians results immediately after the withdrawal -- in new schools, new sewage systems, new jobs. That's because within months of the pullout he'll probably have to hold the elections he postponed; if there is no progress, Hamas may win.

But Wolfensohn is struggling to make headway, not just because the Palestinians haven't changed a lot but because the other parties to the endless Middle East conflict haven't altered their actions much, either. Yasser Arafat may have been the biggest single obstacle to peace. But now that he's gone, it's beginning to look like lots of people in and outside the Middle East didn't really want that golden opportunity.

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