

Global Journalist: Unrest in Israel

In this Oct. 28, 2004 program, host Stuart Loory discusses the implications of the Israeli Knesset's approval of a plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, and the reportedly serious illness of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on peace talks in the region.

Host: Stuart Loory

Guests:

- [Walid Batrawi](#)
- [Jay Bushinsky](#)
- [Paul Scham](#)

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Stuart Loory 0:14

Welcome to Global Journalist on KBIA. I'm Stuart Loory of the Missouri School of Journalism. A day after the Israeli Knesset voted to approve a plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, word of a serious perhaps critical illness of 75-year-old Yasser Arafat spread from his compound in Ramallah on the occupied West Bank. Taken together, the Gaza pull out and Arafat's illness portend a time of increasing unrest in Israel and in the lands governed by the Palestinian Authority. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's leadership is seriously questioned by his decision to pull 8,000 settlers and Israeli troops from Gaza next year, and there is no clear successor to Arafat if he should die. There is speculation that his death would create new uncertainties among the three and a half million Arabs living on the West Bank and in Gaza. Arafat has been living in severe confinement in Ramallah, a West Bank city just outside Jerusalem. The city is occupied by Israeli troops. Reports on his condition are not clear. One report says he is in critical condition, but another says the problem is only serious. Another report says he cannot keep food down and is fed intravenously. But there was a story that says last night he ate dates and had soup with (unintelligible), and that he left his bed to do morning prayers. The Israeli Defense Forces are planning for his death and how order will be maintained in the aftermath. Ariel Sharon is thinking about how Israel can go on with or without Arafat. To discuss all this, this morning we have Walid Batrawi(ph?), a Palestinian journalist in Ramallah, Jay Bushinsky, Israeli Bureau Chief for New York's WINS radio in Tel Aviv. Jay is the dean of foreign correspondents in Israel, and in Washington, Paul Scham, an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute. Let's start with Walid Batrawi, bring us up to date, if you will, on what's going on in Ramallah and what is known about Arafat's condition.

Walid Batrawi 2:38

Well, the Jordanians admitted to (unintelligible) where he had been confined for three years and where he is severe now. And, you know, we keep getting reports from inside. Some say that it's serious, some say that it's critical, but the official line is that his health is getting better and the medical teams will determine in a few coming hours on whether Arafat would be transferred to a hospital in Ramallah.

Stuart Loory 3:25

Well, is there any chance that he might leave the country?

Walid Batrawi 3:31

Only one chance. He will never leave even on these drugs or to go unconscious, maybe as he is removed from them for surgery, either in the West Bank or right.

Stuart Loory 4:00

Walid, I'm sorry to say that we have some problems in in transmission, but I hope our listeners can make out what you're saying because it's all important and interesting. But let's ask Jay Bushinsky if he can talk a little bit about what Arafat's illness adds to the to the situation involving Israel's plans for the future and security in Israel?

Jay Bushinsky 4:29

Well, there's different ways to answer that question, Stuart. To try to be, let's say as objective and dispassionate as possible, I would say that the procedure which was approved by the Israeli parliament would proceed what would be implemented regardless of Mr. Arafat's condition because it didn't depend on him. The decision to withdraw from the Gaza Strip as you said, settlers and soldiers by by the end of next year, if not the middle, was unilateral, something that Israel would do, regardless and there was no partner to this and no other side. So, in theory, it shouldn't make any difference. However, there are unconfirmed reports that there have been clandestine negotiations and contacts underway with the help of the Egyptians and the Americans and that it isn't quite that simple. And that the Israelis probably did not think that they would be leaving chaos, total chaos, or even civil war between Islamic Jihad or the Palestinian Authority itself behind when they left. So therefore, the absence of Mr. Arafat could make a difference because if there were Palestinians involved in these negotiations, and they probably were, they would have consulted with him and he would have directed them.

Stuart Loory 5:57

Yeah, but there is also the the danger of having a serious breakdown on the the West Bank and in Gaza. As a result of Arafat's death, is the Israeli government or the Israeli Defense Forces prepared to deal with it?

Jay Bushinsky 6:15

They are, but it's really not their cup of tea. They withdrew from the cities of the West Bank and went back only after they had to deal with various incidents in the way in which they thought they should be dealt with. They, they are not the people who are supposed to be running those areas, according to the Oslo Accords of 1993. And their approach to the situation here, in which we have two nationalities living in the same territory is that the Palestinians should be enabled to live their lives their way and the Israelis, their lives their way. I think that the most bottom line here is the attitude of the Palestinian

population. And I think that one can say fairly that the silent majority, which is really the overwhelming majority of Palestinians want the one thing, first and foremost, which is an opportunity to live normal peaceful lives so that if the nation the Palestinian nation suffers the loss of their leader, and a national symbol, of course, there will be mourning and there will be great emotion. But it will be also a common effort to somehow pull through, pull, pull together, and perhaps make a new start towards normalizing relations with the Israelis.

Stuart Loory 7:40

From the reports that we read here in the United States, the Palestinian Authority has not been able to reach any agreement on Arafat's successor. Walid, do you think that there are a lot of talks going on right now about that?

Walid Batrawi 8:00

There are a lot of speculation that Abu Mazen arrived yesterday or the day before with the current prime minister, and today also the former security chief Mohammed Dahlan. So, everyone was wondering about you know why these people are riding to the Mukataa. And one question was, who will be the successor to Arafat. Well, I have a longstanding position that already many of you know, if the president of the Palestinian National Authority, according to the basic law (transmission dropped).

Stuart Loory 8:47

Yeah, Waleed, once again we have some transmission problems. And while we try to straighten those out, let us ask Paul Scham to join the discussion and give us some idea of what the new situation portends for the American role in the Middle East.

Paul Scham 9:05

Well, I'd like to point out that I think it's unlikely there will be a direct and full successor to Arafat for some time. This development, if it comes now, or whenever it comes has been for seen for a number of times, for a long, long time. Palestinians recognized that Arafat is on his last legs, and I suspect that for many Palestinians, even those who say they support him, there is an element of relief. I think that most Palestinians and perhaps Walid will disagree with this, but I think that many of most recognize that for all of his putting the Palestinian National Movement on the map, he has, I think, been a disaster for Palestinians in the last few years. And I think that there is a sense that a new era can begin. I also think that it's significant, there's a report of three people in the council who he named — though, as always, it's confused (mechanical sound) Hello?

Stuart Loory 10:03

Yeah, go ahead.

Paul Scham 10:04

Yeah, it's confused. And it's, uh, you know, one of them said that he hadn't heard that he was supposed to be participating in this. But these are Abu Alaa, Abu Mazen and the current speaker, I believe, of the Palestinian National Council, and these are people who are moderates who have a good relationship with Israel and the West. And there's a real possibility there could be a comfort, there could be a comparatively easy transition. And of course, as everyone listening to this knows, we are having a

transition of our own here. And so I think that American policy which has really been hands off in many ways for the last few years, this new situation might portend a new activism on the part of the United States but of course, we don't know who will be heading that until next week.

Stuart Loory 10:55

Well, I want to come back to what you call our transition here in the United States. But first I want to ask Jay Bushinsky about the domestic political situation in Israel involving Ariel Sharon. His government is in trouble now. Isn't it over the Gaza pull out?

Jay Bushinsky 11:14

It certainly is. Prime Minister Sharon managed to win parliamentary approval for his plan for the unilateral pullout at a very heavy price for his political party and his coalition. His party is now split. He actually dismissed a minister, a very influential minister a matter of fact, who rebelled against his proposal as well as the Deputy Minister. He has a two-week ultimatum from two of the most influential members of his cabinet the Finance Minister and Education Minister that requires a national referendum. Otherwise they quit. Under those circumstances, it will be very hard for Mr. Sharon to continue governing the country, especially if the departure of the national religious party from his coalition, which also has been demanding a national referendum to shore up the parliamentary vote and confirm its legitimacy. If it leaves the coalition, Mr. Sharon will be totally dependent upon the parliamentary opposition, mainly the Labor Party. And under those circumstances, I think he will have to resign, and the president of the state will have to call for a national election. So that doesn't give Mr. Sharon a very comfortable political seat.

Stuart Loory 12:41

Okay, I want to continue on this. But first, I have to say you're listening to Global Journalist on KBIA. I'm Stuart Loory. You may listen to this program again, ask questions or make comments by going to www.globaljournalist.org or hear in mid Missouri by calling us at 573-882-9641. Jay, I want to come back to what you just said about a parliamentary election being called by the President. One of the ironies is that if Sharon is to avoid that, it will have to be with gaining some cooperation from the Labor Party and of course, he was a strong opponent of the the Labor Party for for a long time. And his party is in strong opposition. But if this election is held, what will that do to the Gaza pull out? It will delay it, won't it?

Jay Bushinsky 13:44

It might delay it, but right now the plot is on the books. It would have to be formally postponed or legislated out of existence. I think that what one must understand here is that Mr. Sharon's initiative was traumatic for a large segment of the Israeli population, and especially the ideologically motivated, right, because it ran counter to the precepts of Zionism, which is the ideological basis for Israel's existence. The fact that Jewish settlements would have to be re dismantled and removed from part of what the Israelis considered to be the land of Israel, because not all Israelis consider it the land of Israel. Some say the Gaza Strip isn't for the most part, and that there's no reason to stay there and there'll be nothing lost by leaving. But these 30 odd settlements which were established over the past 30 years exist, and it will be very painful psychologically, to see those committed people perhaps fanatics in some case, but still leaving under duress under the pressure of the Israeli armed forces and

police. I don't know how the Israeli population will cope with that experience, it will not be pleasant and those hardliners who want to hold on to those settlements for their various ideological reasons, will not make it any easier for the incumbent government if it is Sharon's or somebody else's, to implement that pull out. And therefore, I think stormy days will be ahead as long as this resolution is on the books and up for implementation.

Stuart Loory 15:28

Okay, I would like to ask Walid whether the Gaza pullout is really a victory of the the insofar as it's being claimed, in the occupied territories,

Walid Batrawi 15:48

Well to many Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip, and to the extremist groups in the Gaza Strip they believe that the decision that the Israeli government had taken to disengage from the Gaza Strip was due to the missiles and the weapons that they have developed and the resistance of these groups against the Israeli troops. So, at one part, yes, they do believe. But on the other side, on the other hand, many Palestinians believe that they have nothing to do with the Gaza withdrawal. And they believe that this is a unilateral step taken by Israel because it has not been discussed or negotiated with a Palestinian Authority or any Palestinian party.

Stuart Loory 16:35

Okay. Let me ask all of our guests now and we'll start with Paul Scham. Let us try to envision a time without Ariel Sharon, or Yasser Arafat leading their, their people, and what the result of that might be for the prospect of some settlement in the Middle East. Paul, do you have any good thoughts on it?

Paul Scham 17:01

Well, you're you're positing in a sense to vacuums because both of these men are larger than life. For Arafat, I would say that most of the visible people who might take over either individually or collectively from him, tend to be more moderate. But the people behind the scenes are often fighting very, very much for their own militias, their own ideological beliefs, and certainly their own financial beliefs as well. So, our fight on one hand, terrified not being there will make it more difficult for Israel to continue its unilateral actions. And in that regard, I'd like to expand that briefly on something that Jay said that, in fact, there's a very clear and majority among the Israeli population for disengagements. Put this disengagement in a poll there's no question that it would win. And the reason that Sharon is opposing a referendum is largely because of the people passions that it would engender and the time that it would take. But I think that if Arafat weren't there and and this is a big leap, a stable leadership emerged, then I think it would help the situation a lot. The situation in certain senses is much more problematic for Sharon because Sharon is now absolutely unique in Israeli politics. There is no one like him, because he is a man who is Mr. Security, even though that term was used for your sec revision previously, but he is the person who represents Israeli security. And who comes from the right, hardly anyone has greater right-wing credentials. And he does and is doing something that the Israeli must center, and moderate left has been pulling from pushing for many years. So if Sharon were not there, he was the most likely candidate to take over who was trying very hard to do it at this point, is Benjamin Netanyahu, who has made common cause in some respects with the opposition of disengagement so

that there might be a more hardline Israeli policy if Sharon were to disappear from the scene anytime soon.

Stuart Loory 19:08

What I hear you saying is that we are not necessarily better off without Sharon and Arafat, which seems to go contrary to conventional wisdom, that it has been these two guys at loggerheads with each other that have prevented the implementation of a settlement. Jay, what do you have to say about that?

Jay Bushinsky 19:32

Well, I find it a little difficult to go along with everything that was said in Washington. Let's see if I can keep this short and to the point if this situation reminds me of somebody who has a closet or a storeroom which is jam packed with equipment and other items and which are falling off the shelves and which are very untidy. And the only solution the person has is to just shut the door and keep it closed. Of course, the day that that door is reopened, those things will start falling all over the places they did before. That's the situation in the Gaza Strip. I call it an impossible situation. And they talk about 1.3 million Palestinians living in that small area. They say that, that that population has the highest birth rate in the world and will double itself within I don't know what is this 10 or 20 years? I think the figure the running figure is the disengagement plan does not solve the problem of the Gaza Strip. It doesn't solve the existence of refugee camps, people who are clamoring to return after having left their homes back in 1948, which should raise eyebrows among what I consider to be irrational people. That's an ideal that I don't think can be realized. So first of all, we we have to bear that in mind now, very briefly, Mr. Sharon really doesn't come from the right. He comes from the left from the moderate left, you could say with former my party of David Ben Gurion. He was born in a cooperative settlement and he's a come lately to the right wing. He chose to lead the right back when he finished his military service. But his thinking is pragmatic only up to a point he does not have solutions. He only has a short-term program such as this disengagement, which really doesn't solve anything for either side. And as far as Mr. Arafat is concerned, I'll just say one or two sentences. He's been blamed for this ongoing Intifada, the Second Intifada that began in September of 2000, which was extremely violent and still is, and therefore his departure from the political scene will be no great loss, neither to the Israelis and certainly not even to the Palestinians.

Stuart Loory 21:53

Walid, can you react to what Jay just said?

Walid Batrawi 21:56

Well, I don't think that that sense of Arafat to the Palestinians would not matter actually, it would matter very much because our effort has been the leader for the Palestinian people and the symbol for for them for almost more than 40 years. I have just been speaking to many of the people who gathered around the Mukataa and who said that despite all disagreements with Arafat, we care for him and we believe that he is the leader and we do not see any leader except for our efforts. And this is my this could be very emotional at this time. But what I'm trying to say here is that even with the absence of Arafat for you know, the, the actual and the physical absence of Arafat from the Gaza Strip, for example, for three years, his spirit was there and his apparatus was there, except for the past six months, I would say when, when the situation the internal security situation has deteriorated. If Arafat goes, I believe

that there is no one person in the Palestinian Authority or any Palestinian person who would gain public general consensus like Arafat had gained. Now, if Sharon goes, I believe that, you know, more or hard aligners would would, would be the leading leaders of Israel like Benjamin Netanyahu. And I think that this means goodbye for the Gaza plan.

Jay Bushinsky 23:26

No, but I must intervene here because

Stuart Loory 23:30

Let's let Jay go first.

Jay Bushinsky 23:32

please, because our moderator, certainly of all the global journalists around has more experience with indispensable leaders and that any of us having served as a top notch correspondent in the former Soviet Union and being familiar with indispensable leaders, and even being familiar with situations when their time is up. Those of you who followed the Soviet affairs will recall the tears on the faces of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens when Joseph Stalin died, and people who thought that the incumbent leader was was irreplaceable and that everything would go to the you know that cemeteries are full with indispensable people. And the same will apply to all of the incumbent leaders everywhere in the world because I don't want to mention the names of the principals that we're talking about as being candidates for for, for early demise. But I think that there are there are forces in life and all sides, which which predominate, not individual leaders, but national impulses and national needs. human needs. I think human is the most important thing and the most important human need of all is survival. And that's what the Israelis want. That's what the Palestinians want. And that's what we'll be regardless of whether our thought remains healthy enough to govern or whether Sharon can remain in office politically.

Stuart Loory 24:55

Paul Scham.

Paul Scham 24:57

A couple of things. First of all, I think that the in this case you have when you have leaders in place for a long time. Of course, there is by definition, no one is irreplaceable because everyone will die. And we know that shows both Arafat and Sharon are in their 70s. There will be a change but it to put it starkly you can for when when either one goes there is no line of serve of succession. That is clear and there is no successor who can take over and can command the sorts of support that they do. Ultimately, Arafat, in my view is a failed political leader and a failed statesman and the Palestinian and I think Palestinians privately recognize that but that doesn't mean that they won't miss him and that there won't be a tremendous reaction. Sharon, though, contrary to what Jay is saying is a person who has epitomized the Israeli right since he developed the doctrine of retaliation back in the 1950s. And he's the one who was putting who put together the Likud Party after the Yom Kippur War, and he's a person who who has made a transition of sorts, you cannot possibly call him a man of the left, but he is a person who has who epitomizes a transition view that no one else in Israel does. The the and I do agree with Jay, that the disengagement itself does not itself solve anything. And and I think this is connecting the two

themes that we've been talking about. The fact is that it may be much harder for Israel to maintain a unilateralist approach to the Palestinians if a more moderate and realistic Palestinian leadership emerges if Arafat dies, and none of us know that that will happen. But if so, then there may be both an irresistible domestic Israeli pressure and foreign pressure to deal with the Palestinian Authority and actually create a mutual settlements, a consensual settlement that can deal with the problems present and prevent the, the the closet from erupting the next time it goes and I think the Jays metaphor in many ways fits it.

Stuart Loory 27:09

Paul, I'm sorry to cut you off, but we have less than a minute left and I would ask, I'd like to ask Waleed to tell us whether or not Gaza after a withdrawal will be a secure and safe place to live.

Walid Batrawi 27:27

Well guess there has never been a secure place to live because it's surrounded by a you know, a fence and and the Israeli troops are actually inside the Gaza Strip and on the borders of the Gaza Strip. From what I hear and what I know about this, this engagement plan, it would not be a total withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, but that Israel would keep a few posts around Gaza and to many Palestinians this would turn Gaza again, which is a big jail, into a bigger jail whereby the Palestinians will be locked in and maybe the only exit for Palestinians will be —.

Stuart Loory 28:07

Walid, I'm sorry, I do have to cut you off, we are out of time. Our guests today have been Jay Buchinsky of WINS radio in Tel Aviv, Walid Batrawi, a Palestinian journalist in Ramallah and Paul Scham of the Middle East Institute in Washington. Our director is Pat Akers and our producers are (?), Aretha Sarah George (p?), Renata Johnson and Stephanie Vaughn Borkowski (ph?). For all I'm Stuart Loory. Global Journalist will be back next week.

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