



Is Mahmoud Abbas Becoming Chairman Arafat?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: For years, Mahmoud Abbas has been viewed both as a weak political figure and as a moderate state-builder. However, recent statements and actions suggest that Abbas is becoming a more effective politician and, unfortunately, also a radical one. This raises the question of whether Mr. Abbas is turning into Mr. Arafat – dominating Palestinian Authority politics and posing an adversarial challenge for Israel. Recent signs of Abbas' radicalization include indications of support for violence against Israel which suggest that Abbas, in the event he indeed resigns, may not have been the address for negotiation of a stable, two-state solution.

Arafat vs. Abbas

Is Mahmoud Abbas becoming Chairman Arafat? During the last two years of Yasser Arafat's failing rule of the Palestinian Authority and his bitter conflict with Mahmoud Abbas, it was clear who was the terrorist and who was the would-be state-builder. Time and time again during the course of the al-Aqsa Intifada, Arafat abandoned the vision of a Palestinian Authority (PA) emerging into statehood for the sake of initiating and continuing a losing battle of terrorism against a vastly superior Israeli state. By the time of his death in November 2004, casualties inflicted among Israelis had dropped by nearly 80 percent from its peak in 2002, Palestinian security forces were in shambles, and internecine violence occurred between rival Fatah groups and the security forces to the obvious delight of Hamas – which in the course of the violence, showed exemplary unity.

Arafat backed extremist elements, former foes like Marwan Barghuthi and Nablus Fatah leader Khusam Khader against the would-be state-builders led by Mahmoud Abbas. The latter's attempt to rein in Arafat as Prime Minister, an office created under United States' fiat, came to naught when Abbas acknowledged Arafat's control of what was left of the PA and Fatah – and resigned. Abbas's roar, characterized by a statement he made when he first assumed the prime-ministership in 2003 that Palestinian “armed conflict” was not going to lead to freedom and independence, ended with a whimper.

State Builder vs. Inept Politician

Both Abbas's positive image as a state-builder, a Palestinian politician committed to developing the Palestinian Authority into a Palestinian state in a peaceful manner as part of the two-state solution for two peoples, and its negative, an image of a weak and inept politician – a wimp – was confirmed in the years that followed.

On the positive side, after the loss of Gaza to Hamas in June 2007, he boldly outlawed all armed groups – by implication this included the Fatah Tanzim and the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades – though one might ask why it took him so long to make the move. The reasoning behind the move was clear. Without a monopoly of violence, there could be no statehood. To this end, Abbas unabashedly continued and even intensified cooperation with the United States to rebuild and reform the PA's security forces. To date, four battalions consisting of 2,000 security personnel have been trained under a program run by US General Keith Dayton. These are the forces that enabled the PA from 2007 onwards to take over civil security in the former trouble spots of Jenin and Nablus, Hebron and Bethlehem.

With equal tenaciousness, he and his state-building aide, Salam Fayyad, who now occupies the post of prime minister, initiated a level of security cooperation with Israel never realized with Arafat even during the purportedly halcyon early years of the Oslo process. This cooperation is characterized by a clear division of labor in which the PA destroys Hamas' social infrastructure by day, while the IDF and the Israel Security Agency destroy the terrorist infrastructure, including Fatah cells, by night. The Hamas daily, *Felesteen*, reports the results of this cooperation on an almost daily basis to vilify Abbas, his prime minister, and his security forces. So close is this security cooperation that the PA itself has been emboldened in past years to occasionally attack Hamas' terrorist infrastructure.

On the negative side, the image of Abbas as a political wimp who can hardly survive in the violent local and Middle Eastern terrain was also confirmed.

Abbas failed in staving off United States' pressure to hold free elections for the legislative council. Even after the elections, he failed to deter Fatah renegades, who outnumbered the official Fatah candidates, to contest the elections. These renegades subsequently split the Fatah vote in the multi-seat districts which accounted for half of the total seats in the legislative council and thus facilitated the huge Hamas victory that brought the fundamentalists into power to the horror of Abbas' local moderate state allies such as Egypt, Jordan and most of the Gulf States. And even after this fiasco, Abbas proved inept in preventing a greater failure – the Hamas takeover of Gaza in June 2007.

However, this image of Abbas as a political wimp warrants reassessment. In his handling of the Fatah general conference in summer 2009 (the first such conference held since 1989), Abbas demonstrated that he learned a technique or two from his former leader and then foe, Chairman Arafat. He made mincemeat of his Fatah arch-rival in Tunis, Farouk Kaddoumi, the last name in Fatah's historical pantheon to survive, by holding the conference in Bethlehem rather than outside the territories as Kaddoumi and his supporters wished for obvious reasons. Abbas made sure to ridicule and neutralize Khusam Khader, a leading "revolutionary" from "inside" the Fatah ranks. Most importantly, he made sure that his only major political rival, Marwan Barghuthi (who was a one-man opposition in the Fatah central committee), remained neutralized in Israeli jail. Abbas made sure that the calls for the release of Barghuthi, Arafat's would-be heir, were reduced to a whimper.

Mr. Abbas had been transformed into Chairman Abbas. The Ra'is could now turn to his Arab allies, the leaders of Arab states so deft in Machiavellian craft and who remained in power for decades, and claim that he was one of them. No more acting as nice guy to curry favor among feint-hearted European leaders; no more free elections; and no political moves without guaranteed outcomes in advance. I'm one of yours, a brother-in-arms, Abbas demonstrated to President Mubarak and the kings and princes of Arabia.

Does this, however, also mean that he is becoming Chairman Arafat in the diplomatic sphere; turning from a state-builder into a terrorist, a seditious leader, a man who engages in violence for violence's sake? There are worrying signs. To begin with, at the Fatah conference, Abbas adopted a policy plank which declares that armed conflict remains an option.

Most recently, Abbas and the PA have been behind the violence and conflict in and around the Temple Mount. This is evident in the way the two semi-official PA newspapers, *Al-Ayyam* and *al-Hayat al-Jadida*, mobilized and promoted the tensions over the Temple Mount. (Their propagandist approach can be

compared to the more independent *al-Quds* newspaper, which simply reported the events without inflammatory rhetoric).

Another telling fact is found on the sophisticated Fatah websites, financed by Abbas and Fayyad,¹ which publish countless pictures of Chairman Abbas straddling posters of the terrorist Fatah Tanzim and the Al-Aqsa Brigades against the backdrop of the Temple Mount. And although he banned armed groups, the communiqués of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades appear on this official Fatah site.

Worse still is the fact that these official web sites also contain posters showing Israeli paratroopers crying over the burial of a fellow fighter with captions like, "As long as Fatah exists – You will cry, feel loss and lament!" Such messages signal violence for violence's sake.

The most offensive item on a Fatah website forum is a poster showing Hitler purportedly quoting *Mein Kampf*, "I could have destroyed all the Jews in the world but left some of them so that everyone would know...why I wiped them out".

The Fatah website does note that the contents of the forum quoted above "do not necessarily express the positions of Fatah officially," but together with the other positions Abbas has recently taken, this does raise the question of whether Mr. Abbas has become Mr. Arafat not only in his newfound toughness, but also in his political horizon as well. Alas, Chairman and Ra'is Abbas may not be the address for negotiation of a stable, two-state for two peoples solution. His intention to resign may not be such a blow to proponents of this approach after all.

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¹ See <http://fatehforums.com/showthread.php?t=254163>; <http://fatehforums.com/forumdisplay.php?f=4>; and <http://www.fatehforums.com/showthread.php?t=5517>.