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Mahmoud Abbas in the Post-Arafat Era: Achievements and Challenges

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Introduction

I was reading the other day a book that tells the story of a frog dropped in a pot of water. What do you think will happen if you take a frog and pop it into a pot of boiling water, naturally it will jump out. Now, what if you take the frog and place it in water at room temperature and quietly let the frog relax in it. Then gradually start turning up the heat one degree at a time making the water get hotter and hotter, what do you think would happen? The frog would just sit quietly in the water and adapting itself to the change in temperature. When change creeps up in small increments then it is easy to adjust, adapt and ignore. The internal system of the frog is only geared to respond and adapt to sudden environmental changes. So, when slow changes like the gradual boiling of the water occur, it fails to react. It actually seems to enjoy itself. A false feeling of security blinds it from seeing the approaching danger. Then, when it least expects it, it boils to death yet another casualty of a complacent mind-set. This seems to explain the turn of events in the life of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat. In Amman and Beirut he escaped danger by jumping out of the pot, but as the political temperature was gradually increasing in the Muqata'ah, where the Israelis succeeded in besieging him, he failed to appreciate the threat and kept adapting feeling himself invincible, until without realizing the danger, his mechanisms failed to adapt any more resulting in his death on November 11, 2004 at Percy Military Hospital in Clamart, France.

His demise closed a long controversial saga in the Palestinian history that began with his creation of the Fatah movement in Kuwait in 1958, his ascendancy to power when elected PLO Chairman in 1969, his return to Palestine in 1994 and election as PA President in 1996, and finally his besiegement at al-Muqata'ah in Ramallah throughout the al-Aqsa Intifada. No doubt, the departure of Arafat created a strategic turn about in the region. It offered an opportunity and danger at the same time. If managed well, the window of opportunity for peace is open; if mismanaged the prospect of continued conflict persists.

Arafat's unaccomplished mission was passed on to his long-time colleague and trusted friend Mahmoud Abbas [also known as Abu Mazen]. Even before he was officially elected to succeed Arafat, the world attention focused on Abbas. Many questions filled

the air: How can we understand Abbas? Can he fill the vacuum left by Arafat? Was his election truly a breakthrough for the stalled peace process or simply another moment of fleeting hope? Is he a replica of Arafat? How long will he last? Is he a transitory or a long-term leader? Does he just create expectations without intentions to deliver on his promises? To what extent would he be able to have his own stamp and enforce his own style of leadership? Is he weak, as the Israelis portray him; or just temporarily paralyzed by the Arafat court, as Palestinians believe? If so, should action be taken to strengthen him? If so, what steps need to be taken? Would an Israeli successful pullout from Gaza inject new energy and momentum into the peace process? Will he promote the implementation of substantive and wide-ranging reform? Will he be able to accomplish what his legendary predecessor failed to accomplish – namely, establishing an independent democratic Palestinian state with Al-Quds Sharif as its capital? Does he have the appropriate strategy to achieve such a goal?

In searching for answers to such perplexing questions, one finds it essential to proceed on four tracks: the first track, to shed light on the man in the center, the second track, to evaluate his achievements, taking into consideration he hardly completed 100 days in office; the third track, to look at the challenges he confronts, to help us see the difficulties he has to surmount, and the heavy burden he carries; and the fourth, to look ahead and offer recommendations.

Who is Mahmoud Abbas?

Let me start by shedding some light on Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas who reluctantly accepted to take the job of President of the Palestinian Authority. He is one of the founding fathers of the Palestine National Liberation Movement (Fatah). Abbas exercises political diet. He works more and promises less. He learnt from his experiences the futility of violence as an option; that terrorism does not accomplish peace but plant the future seeds of hate and conflict. He had the courage to speak out loud and clear against the militarization of the *Intifada* and suicide bombings. By emphasizing the strict Islamic injunctions against suicide, and the equally strict Islamic rules governing combat, he made Palestinians realize that “random killing of civilians to make a political point” is the definition of ‘terrorism’ and not ‘resistance.’ Though he disagrees with their methods, yet he believes that the beauty of a garden lies in its wide variety of its flowers. His is an Islam of moderation: *wasatiyya*, the middle way. Thus his approach to dealing with Muslim organizations such as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad is cooptation rather than confrontation.

Under Arafat, the Palestinian people had no say in their government. Arafat had only one item on his agenda- negotiations with Israelis; other matters such as good governance and institution building did not count. In turn, Abbas is focusing his attention on state building and reform. He reflected his austerity when he declined to indulge in costly self-promotion advertisements in his presidential election campaign that normally accompany candidates running for public office. He shows no interest in time-wasting flamboyant receptions on various occasions, nor does he like people to

place money-wasting advertisements in the daily newspaper to show allegiance or to congratulate him on holy feasts or periodical festivities. While Arafat suffered from the “Sphinx Syndrome” -leaders keeping silent and not sharing with their people the affairs of state – most exemplified in the Camp David Summit in which his silence caused him to be labeled as the spoiler of the “generous offer” Israel made to the Palestinians, Abbas is a good communicator. He uses the media well to air his views and policies. Arafat thrived on creating crises; Abbas is more of a crisis manager. He cherishes a strong belief in the power of dialogue as the best way to resolve conflicts adopting President Woodrow Wilson’s philosophy, “When we know each other, we cannot hate each other.” Furthermore, he made it known that his job is not for life and that he would like to retire one day and maybe hit the lecture circuit or write a book.

Accomplishments

Since he took office, Abbas toiled to pave the way towards realizing the vision of the Road Map peace plan devised by the Quartet of the UN, European Union, Russia and United States: two States - a secure Israel and a sovereign, democratic, independent and contiguous Palestine - living side by side in peace and security. So far, he managed to achieve the following:

Orderly Transition Period

Abbas should be credited with managing the quite transitory period following the crisis precipitated by Arafat’s sudden demise. Foreign as well as Israeli observers were expecting violence and even a civil war to erupt in the Palestinian territories over who would succeed Arafat. However, all were surprised at the peaceful democratic and orderly fashion in which the transition in power took place. It was the first test to leadership of Abbas and he passed with flying colors.

Democratic Presidential Elections

Despite the Israeli occupation and the harsh political, social, and economic realities on the ground, the Palestinian presidential elections were conducted a peaceful orderly fashion on time and Mahmoud Abbas was elected president of the Palestinian Authority in a transparent democratic elections.

Cooling Al-Aqsa Intifada

In the absence of peaceful and effective mechanisms to address their feelings of injustice, Palestinians were tempted to embrace violence. The nonviolent views of Abbas left their impact on Palestinians to change attitudes on the militancy of the Intifada which only brought them misery and suffering, handing Israel the pretext to strengthen its hold on the West Bank, escalate settlement expansion, reject pleas to free prisoners, increase movement restrictions, and thus precipitating in the collapse of the fragile Palestinian economy, as well as alienating Israeli, American and European public opinion. A poll taken following the suicide bombing in February 2005 showed that more than two thirds of the Palestinians opposed the attack. Was it a symptom of Intifada fatigue? Was it an awakening that militancy does not pay off? Was it the Israeli security measures? I believe Abbas gets much credited for

this state of calm and dramatic drop in the scope of violence and suicide bombing. Will regional powers such as Iran and Hizballah succeed in fueling the Intifada from abroad? I very much doubt that.

Meeting Israeli Conditions

When Israel declared it had no negotiation partner meaning Arafat, it declared it will not conduct negotiations with the Palestinians until the PA ceases the incitement against Israel, unifies the security apparatuses and carries out comprehensive reforms. President Abbas fulfilled all his commitments. He conveyed instructions to all PA media official to halt incitement, unified the security apparatus, and conducted comprehensive reforms in all priority areas identified in the Road Map. However, Premier Sharon is not happy.

Dealing with Sharon is the most intriguing perplex problem Abbas inherited from Arafat. Sharon sees peril in supporting Abbas since this is translated into making concessions, a very unpopular move for a premier whose constituents are hard-line fundamentalists, and whose eyes are on 2006, an election year in Israel. And in an election year, a shrewd Premier certainly cannot make concessions or take dramatic steps. What's more, in an election year the Premier has to turn sharply to the right, in order to win the support of his Likud central committee. The Likud Party opposes Sharon's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, ending the occupation of the West Bank, freezing settlement growth policy, or going back to the negotiations table to implement the Road Map.

Thus Sharon finds it politically wise to voice disappointment with Abu Mazen. To him, it is a matter survival versus leadership. So he follows his instincts and voices disappointment with Abbas' policies and decisions, as well as the people around him and makes unrealistic demands declared in the press conference with President Bush on April 10, 2005, held in Crawford, Texas, in which he stated: "Only after the Palestinians fulfill all their obligations, first and foremost a real war against terrorism and the dismantling of the terror infrastructure... can we proceed toward negotiations based on the road map." Here, Sharon is asking Abbas to make the camel go through the eye of a needle. Like Pharaoh who ordered the Children of Israel to produce bricks from straw, but did not provide the straw, Sharon is asking Abbas to conduct a war without having an army.

Dealing with Islamic Movements

In dealing with the Palestinian Islamic movements such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Fatah's *al-Aqsa* Martyrs Brigade, Arafat played his cards carefully by keeping them close to show Palestinian unity, and not to be associated with their violent tactics which he viewed as a useful tool to pressure Israel. In contrast, Abbas sent a clear message, he would not tolerate the use of terrorism as a tool to achieve national goals. Radical Islamic groups used violence as a tactic to achieve two goals: to undermine the centralized authority of the Palestinian authority and to derail the peace process. Abbas knows well, that Sharon's efforts to get him to stand up and be counted by waging a war against Hamas and the Islamic Jihad,

would only cause him to be counted out. That is why Abbas preferred to reach a *hudna* (cease fire) with them, creating an atmosphere of political momentum by bringing these organizations into the fold and thus strengthening civil society.

International Relations

Once elected president in January 2005, Abbas moved swiftly to improve Palestinian relations with the international community, to repair damaged relations with the Arab countries, the European community, and to restore US relations.

Challenges

A number of challenges confronting Abbas may be identified as follows:

Issuing a Palestinian Constitution

An important challenge Abbas faces and most significant to his legacy to build an effective transparent democratic political system is to declare a Palestinian constitution. Arafat dragged his foot in this endeavor so as not to loosen his grip over the three branches of government. In 2002 he unwillingly signed the Basic Law four years after its approval by the Legislative Council. The Basic Law presently inactive, remains deficient in many aspects. The new constitution should give clear definition to terms such as 'homeland' and 'Palestine,' create a system of separation of powers between the executive, legislative and judiciary branches, with clear checks and balances, limiting the tenure of the president to one six-year term or two eight-year terms, and would clearly safeguard the civil rights and civil liberties of the people and provide security and rule of law to all citizens.

Rule of Law

The rule of law is fundamental to any democratic system. Arafat made no serious effort to establish the rule of law. Four and a half years of the Intifada, in which the Palestinians were without police and law enforcement agencies, are putting to a very big test his ability to control the rise of chaos in the Palestinian cities. The anarchy - the 'fawda' in Arabic - spreading in the Palestinian street creates a formidable challenge to Abu Mazen. The law is far from being supreme. Senior government officials are not subject to law. Should an official derelict in the performance of his duties, no legal recourse for judicial action. Restrictions on the exercise of discretionary power are not exercised. No underlying moral basis for the law prevails.

The Old Guard

A heavy burden Abbas inherited from the Arafat legacy is the continuation in power of the veteran old guard and the fragmentation within his Fatah movement limiting his ability to move ahead. Since Arafat's return to Palestine, senior government seats were usurped by those who came back with him at the expense of those 'insiders' leaders of the first Intifada of 1987 who paid their dues in Israeli prisons. Abbas is waiting for the coming July national elections to get fresh faces for his government. It seems he may have read the bestselling book, **Winning**, in which

Jack Welch lists as Rule No. 1 for winning leaders “to relentlessly upgrade their team.” Unfortunately for Arafat, the book was published after his death.

Reform

Arafat’s loyalists who had been benefiting from their privileged status under Arafat to enrich themselves without worrying about legal restraints have formed enclaves within the Fatah movement to limit Abbas’ ability to deal with favoritism, bribery and corruption. Vital social services languished or were to some extent provided by Hamas or NGOs. No genuine reform will proceed so long as those responsible for resisting the need to have reform are still in power. Arafat treated public funds as private money, investing it abroad, and squandering it on his inner circle to buy cars, villas, apartments and travel in style. Abbas views this phenomenon as a social virus rather than a political vitamin.

On April 13, 2005, Abbas announced the unification of all the security services in three branches, the National Security, the Interior Ministry which includes the police, preventive security and civil defense; and the General Intelligence in its current structure. He requested all national security services and public security to submit detailed lists of names and numbers of members in those services and those who attend their posts and those who are absent in order to determine the actual number to end abuse. This step carries much significance since under Arafat the various security agencies used to present a highly inflated salary roster of their cadres to pocket the difference. Furthermore, Abbas granted amnesty to the wanted fugitives, confiscated their weaponry and integrated them in the national security forces.

Separation Wall

A big challenge facing Abbas is how to deal with Separation Wall, [labeled by Israelis as the Security Fence and by the Palestinians as the Apartheid Wall since it digs deep in Palestinian land confiscating more than 40% of the territory and only separates Palestinians from Palestinians]. The Israelis would like to attribute the dramatic drop in violence to their heavy investment in the Separation Wall; yet any military analyst can observe that neither walls nor borders would deter a determined terrorist from accomplishing his mission. Walls may hinder civilians but not determined professional terrorists who may dig a tunnel under it, breach it, climb it or fly over it. Should Israel have spent the 3 billion dollars it spent building the wall to construct peace with its neighbors, the dividends would have been much more tangible. No doubt, similar to its Berlin Wall predecessor, the fate of the Separation Wall is sealed.

Jerusalem Issue

One big challenge for Abbas is how to stop the continued Israeli efforts to change the facts on the ground in the City of Jerusalem in violation of the Oslo Accords and international law. There is no doubt that the Palestinian Authority bears much responsibility for the erosion of Palestinian presence in Jerusalem. From the start, Arafat conducted an ambivalent policy on Jerusalem, making much rhetoric to a

sensitive issue while at the same time undermining efforts by his authorized representatives to perform their duties. He initially appointed Faysal Hussein in charge of Jerusalem Affairs and undermined his authority by appointing Ziad Abu Ziad with similar responsibility. When Hussein died in Kuwait in 2001, he appointed Professor Sari Nusseibeh for the job but undermined his authority by appointing Dr. Samir Ghosheh, who could not enter Jerusalem, to be in charge of Jerusalem affairs. Abbas is yet to declare a PA Commissioner to Jerusalem leaving the city and its Palestinian residents to face their fate.

To regain support among his Likud loyalists, Sharon advanced a plan for building a new neighborhood of 3,500 housing units between Ma'ale Adumim and Jerusalem to create continuity between them and Israel settlements and besiege its Palestinian residents. Recently, the Israeli government approved 53 million shekels for the eastern ring road around Jerusalem. The new project, similar to its preceding projects, not only goes beyond the municipal boundaries of the city, but includes more expropriation of Palestinian land.

Recently, a crisis erupted over the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Irineos I controversial sale of Palestinian Orthodox Church land property in Jerusalem to extremist Jews. This would definitely change the multicultural character of the old city. To dismiss Patriarch Irineos because he granted powers of attorney to untrustworthy deputy is not the answer. The proper response is to revoke the illegal sale to allow return to the old status quo.

Palestinian Legislative Elections

The elections of the Palestinian Legislative Council (Parliament) are scheduled for July 17th, 2005. Fatah old guard want to have the elections postponed but the young Turks see in the upcoming parliamentary elections a golden opportunity to significantly enter into the Legislative Council. In their view, the old guard, except for the few, should make way for the younger generation.

The decision by Hamas to take part in the upcoming national elections should be viewed as an opportunity to co-opt Hamas and incorporate it within the political process rather than danger since it implies acceptance of the Oslo Peace Process; eventually, this would lead to the diffusion of political power so far monopolized by Abbas' own Fatah movement.

Having taken the strategic decision to become integrated into the political establishment of the Palestinian Authority, Hamas is picking up standing and momentum, particularly for not being tainted with corruption. Depending on how many seats it may win will determine whether it will become a parliamentary opposition or would join the rank of government to get its name off the list of the terror organizations. Should the US and Israel worry that Hamas may become a legitimate power after the July elections? Why worry? Didn't both the US and Israel consider the PLO a terrorist organization with whom dialogue was considered

illegal? It is feared that Hamas election success may push the Israeli voter in the coming elections to the right paving the way for the reelection of the Likud Party.

Palestinian Economy

A formidable challenge facing Abbas is the crumbling economy and how to bring back the trust of investors in a charged volatile political environment. Restoring political stability is one way to deal with this problem.

Israeli Gaza Pull-out

The world is anxiously awaiting the Israeli unilateral disengagement from Gaza scheduled for July 25th, 2005 but postponed to mid=August until after the Tisha B'av Holiday, which marks the destruction of the Second Temple. Under American pressure some coordination with the Palestinian Authority is building up; meanwhile Prime Minister Sharon is saying there will be no "disengagement B." The Gaza pull-out plan involves evacuating all 21 settlements in Gaza Strip, in addition to 4 settlements out of the 120 settlements in the West Bank. A Dahaf poll among the Gaza settlers finds that only 20% reject any solution, and only 11% say they will forcibly resist the pullout while 79% say they haven't reconciled themselves to the pullout. Another Dahaf poll finds that 49% of the settlers say that during the time of the pullout they will obey the army and not the rabbis. 39% will obey the rabbis. 64% say they won't participate in resistance to the pullout. Israelis predict that "after the IDF will exit from Gaza everything will be looted within a half hour and nothing will remain there." Premier Sharon who indicated he does not believe that the settlements homes should be demolished, had this bleak forecast for what may happen:

Immediately after the IDF will exit from there,
everything will be looted. The guys from Khan
Yunis will storm from one side, and the guys
from Rafah will storm from the other side.
One will take a window, one will take a door,
One will take pipettes and one will take a green
house.'

Palestinians are well advised not to make this scenario come true, and not to demolish the settlement housing units since such senseless damage to valuable property would only reflect a negative image for the world. Donors are well advised to assist them in creating an investment project such as a tourist resort city.

Palestinian Strategy

Build a solid strategy with a clear vision for a democratic secular future has always been a stumbling block for a political power under occupation. Under Arafat, the strategy was not to have a strategy, and the plan was not to have a plan. Abbas has a strategic desire to restore security and the rule of law.

Looking Ahead

The next stage following the pullout would be for Palestinians to support President Bush's idea of having Gaza declared a Palestinian state to test the viability and prospects of such a state to annex later the West Bank.

Abbas is concentrating on ways of establishing the Palestinian state and building the peace. However, without US aid, his efforts will be frustrated. To strengthen his positions, US Mideast diplomacy is guided by President George Bush's policy that Israel should not undertake any activity contravening the Road Map or prejudicing final status negotiations and should meet its obligations regarding settlements. Along these lines, the United States ought to increase its educational and humanitarian assistance and support the socio-economic development in Palestine focusing on the promotion of good governance and the institution of democratic culture. Also, to seriously reconsider its policy on Jerusalem, perhaps the 1947 UN decision to have the city internationalized would be a good idea whose time has come. And finally, to ensure that both Israel and the PA abide by their agreements reached, such as the agreement reached between Sharon and Abbas in the Sharm el-Shekh Summit held on February 8th, 2005 to withdraw Israeli troops from West Bank population centers, and to resume Israeli-Palestinian negotiations within the framework of the Roadmap for Middle East peace. This would give life and meaning to President George Bush's statement, "The advance of freedom leads to peace."

Conclusion

Arafat's legend vanished with his demise. It is amazing for a historic leader who dominated the political scene for so long to leave no lasting impression. Where did he go wrong?

Like his controversial predecessors, Haj Amin al-Husseini and Ahmed al-Shukairi, Arafat's leadership of the Palestinian people started with hope and ended with despair. He would have remained a living legend to the Palestinian people had he walked in the footsteps of such great leaders: George Washington who gave the American people a democratic constitution that fits the size of the nation and then retired as a national hero; Franklin Roosevelt who kept the American people informed and engaged with his frank open fireside chats; John Kennedy who appointed to his cabinet and inner circle "the best and the brightest;" King Hussein of Jordan who kept shuffling his government and upgrading his team with new fresh faces; and Nelson Mandela who retired having and himself called it quits after winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994. But unfortunately, like President Richard Nixon before him, Arafat's chance at greatness was ultimately destroyed by his passion for power.

Arafat left the Palestinians in a world where hope is hard to find and at a time when the conflict has quenched every ray of hope. In that dark tunnel, Abbas offers a dim hope. The more time that passes, the smaller will grow the window of opportunity opened with him. His sincerity affirms the need to strengthen his abilities to deliver on his promises. To paraphrase a quote by Eleanor Roosevelt inscribed on the Franklin

Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, “Peace cannot be the work of one man, or one nation, it must be a peace which rests on the cooperative effort of all those concerned.”

Arafat bet that to deal with Sharon would not be worse than dealing with Barak; unfortunately, he lost the bet. Similarly, Sharon is betting that dealing with Hamas would not be worse than dealing with Abbas. He will also for sure lose this bet. Bush, Abbas, and Sharon may want the same things for the people of the region - security, peace, prosperity, and an end to conflict. The question is: How to get there? Are their people ready for peace? Today, the Palestinians are ready for peace. The question is: Are the Israelis ready for peace?

Against peril, we urgently need to pull back from the current abyss of hatred and despair and work together on building better bridges of understanding. Our children deserve no less.