

The Election of Abu Mazen and the Next Stage in Israeli–Palestinian Relations

Mark A. Heller

It has been clear since the reconfiguration of American foreign policy after September 11, 2001 that the wave of violence unleashed by the intifada would not be translated into tangible political gains for the Palestinians. It has also been clear, at least since Operation Defensive Shield of April 2002, that the Palestinians would pay a rising price in both economic and human terms for the continuation of the intifada. True, terrorists could still inflict casualties on Israel, but their ability to do even that diminished in the face of ongoing IDF operations inside Palestinian cities and the progressive extension of Israel's security barrier. Finally, it became increasingly clear during 2004 that the Palestinian leadership had no coherent political or military response to Prime Minister Sharon's proposed "unilateral disengagement" from Gaza and the northern West Bank. Instead, Palestinian politics and society were mired in a morass of policy paralysis, diplomatic impotence, economic regression and impoverishment, administrative chaos and corruption, and growing lawlessness.

The Day after Arafat

As a result, the death of Yasir Arafat in November 2004 removed an already marginalized political figure, one who had long since ceased to be a source of inspiration for or reform of Palestinian politics and policy. Despite growing evidence of fatigue in recent years with the consequences of his leadership, however, Arafat still enjoyed

enough stature and semi-mythical status as "the father of the Palestinian cause" to block others who did aspire to reform. Very soon after his demise, it therefore seemed that most Palestinians mourned him much more than they missed him, and the focus of public concern quickly shifted to the issue of succession.

That issue actually involved two questions: "Who would replace Arafat?" and "What, if anything, would replace Arafatism?" The answer to the first question was rather straightforward. On January 9, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), the long-time secretary of the PLO's Executive Committee and former prime minister of the Palestinian Authority (PA), was elected chairman/president of the PA with a plurality of about 62%. Despite widespread predictions that part of Arafat's political legacy would be chaos and a dysfunctional political system, the immediate aftermath of his death played out according to constitutional norms, and the election proceeded in a distinctly orderly fashion. And notwithstanding some complaints of irregularities by other candidates (e.g., distorted allocation of air-time by state-controlled radio and television, a last-minute extension of voting hours, and permission for unregistered voters to take part), the election met every reasonable test of political transparency. If nothing else, the very fact that Abu Mazen won by "only" 62% (in contrast to the 90+% approval ratings normally given to the establishment candidate in Arab elections) and that his closest

competitor received almost a quarter of the votes attests to these being free and fair elections by almost any standard.

Of course, the elections were held under the most intense scrutiny of the international media and international election monitors. The United States sent a high-level delegation of observers headed by former president Jimmy Carter, and the European Union also dispatched about 260 monitors (in contrast to the barely thirty monitors it sent for the first round of Ukrainian presidential elections). Nevertheless, the conduct and outcome of the election were primarily a testament to the desire of the Palestinians themselves to conduct their own affairs according to the rules of democratic politics. For example, voter turnout was over 60%, as high as in most democratic polities where voting is not mandatory and about the same as in the 2001 prime ministerial election in Israel (which the Palestinian election resembled in the sense that it only involved the direct election of a national leader; Legislative Council [parliamentary] elections are scheduled to be held in July 2005). The turnout is even more significant given the decision of Hamas and Islamic Jihad not to participate. On the other hand, the Islamists merely refrained from running for office. Unlike opposition elements in Iraq, they did not resort to violence or other forms of intimidation in an attempt to sabotage the election or persuade voters to boycott the election. This stance almost certainly reflected their appreciation of the widespread public desire for an

exercise in democratic choice and for the resolution of issues like political succession through political, i.e., non-violent means.

In this sense, the conduct and outcome of the election suggest a partial answer to the second question, as well – voters registered their clear rejection of Arafatism, at least in domestic affairs. By most accounts, there was widespread voter dissatisfaction with the growing corruption, cronyism, economic deterioration,

Soon after Arafat's demise, it seemed that most Palestinians mourned him much more than they missed him.

and breakdown of law and order in recent years. Thus, the demand for greater adherence to legal norms in politics that was implicit in the behavior of voters was actually but one dimension of the demand for broader transparency and accountability in public affairs and greater attention to economic needs after the election. These demands resonated in the promise of all the candidates to bring about change – an unstated but rather obvious rejection of the way that Arafat had (mis)managed domestic affairs up to the very end.

Abu Mazen's election gives him the legitimacy to move forward on

matters of domestic reform, including issues of financial transparency on which some progress had already been registered at the prodding of European donors and under the direction of Finance Minister Salam Fayyad. Abu Mazen also has a fairly clear mandate to restore public order by rationalizing the public security agencies and reining in the criminal activities (including extortion of businessmen) by various armed gangs. The major obstacle will be the resistance of vested interests, including those same gangs masquerading as "resistance groups," whose power, independence, and personal prosperity will be threatened. But efforts to overcome this opposition will enjoy a fairly wide measure of public support, as evidenced by the general approval of Abu Mazen's directive to security forces, shortly after his election, to demolish illegal buildings on Gaza beach, and there is some basis for projecting that progress will be made on democratization and good government – the first pillar of President Bush's vision, laid out in June 2002, for Israel and the future state of Palestine.

Relations with Israel

Much more ambiguity attaches to the significance of the election for external affairs, i.e., the future course of relations with Israel. Here, the rejection of "Arafatism" is not so clear cut, either in terms of ultimate Palestinian ends or the means by which they are to be pursued. On the former, Abu Mazen's record suggests that he might be slightly more inclined to consider a

permanent status agreement along the lines formulated in the "Clinton parameters" of December 2000 that Arafat rejected. If so, that would not contradict somewhat greater public receptivity to such ideas in the months following Arafat's death.

But attitudes toward permanent status issues are of less immediacy than are attitudes vis-à-vis de-escalating the current situation in order to facilitate the resumption of negotiations. On this matter, Abu Mazen would clearly prefer to act in keeping with the second pillar of the Bush vision, not to speak of Israeli conditions for a relaxation of military pressure and the resumption of political dialogue, and to establish a leadership "untainted by terrorism." Abu Mazen has long been on record as opposed to the armed intifada, insisting that it is inimical to Palestinian interests, and he persisted in this posture during the election campaign, refusing to retract his condemnation of suicide bombings and mortar and rocket attacks on Israeli towns. Indeed, his desire to rationalize the Palestinian security services in order to rein in terrorists during his brief tenure as prime minister in 2003 brought him into open confrontation with Arafat and resulted in his resignation after only three months in office. As a result, there was every reason to expect that Abu Mazen would not persist in Arafat's policy of denouncing terrorism for Western audiences while encouraging it in domestic rhetoric and back-channel subsidies.

On the other hand, it was precisely the exigencies of electoral politics that

forced him to trim his message, to the point of portraying himself as Arafat's protégé and successor despite the fact that he had not exchanged a word with "the old man" for over a year following his resignation as prime minister. In particular, he could not make an unequivocal commitment to deal forcefully with terrorists given the widespread popular conviction that violence against Israel – whatever its utility – does not qualify as terrorism but is instead legitimate resistance in

**Progress by the
Palestinian Authority
on the democratization
track of the Bush agenda
may inhibit progress on
the terrorism track.**

the cause of national liberation. Consequently, Abu Mazen insisted that he would avoid coercion and rely only on "dialogue" and "persuasion" to bring about a ceasefire, that Palestinian security forces would not be used against terrorist groups but would actually protect them from Israeli pre-emption or reprisal, and that in any event he would do nothing to provoke a Palestinian civil war. Since these positions appear to be firmly within the Palestinian consensus, that raises the possibility, perhaps paradoxical, that progress on the democratization track of the Bush agenda for the Palestinian Authority may inhibit progress on the

terrorism track. Moreover, they leave unanswered several critical questions: how long will Abu Mazen pursue his non-confrontational approach; what, if anything, will persuade him that it has run its course if he fails to secure voluntary compliance; does he have a fallback position; and what can or will Israel do while this internal dialogue plays itself out.

Because of Abu Mazen's established record and known preferences, Israel (along with the United States and most other outside parties) was inclined to look favorably on his candidacy. Many of his pre-election statements were discounted by the Israeli government as campaign rhetoric (after all, Ariel Sharon's own campaign slogans turned out to be poor predictors of his post-election policies), and Israeli action and inaction before and during the election seemed almost designed to minimize any adverse impact on his domestic credibility. Moreover, his election was greeted by barely disguised expressions of relief. Both the president of Israel and the prime minister sent him messages of congratulations, and Sharon immediately announced that a high-level meeting would take place soon, thereby hinting at the possibility that Israel's impending disengagement, already the subject of consultations with the United States, Egypt, and others, might not even be unilateral with respect to the Palestinians. Moreover, Israeli leaders focused their initial expectations on matters such as incitement in the PA-controlled media that Abu Mazen could attend to without the concurrence of his do-

mestic opposition, and they signaled some appreciation of Abu Mazen's need for time to confront the question of terrorism. They even indicated an understanding of the argument made by Abu Mazen's defenders that he required Israeli help to consolidate his position and hinted at a continuation of the technical coordination with PA agencies and the easing of constraints on movement within the West Bank that were instituted in order to facilitate election logistics.

The Challenge of Violence

The honeymoon was brief. Within a week of Abu Mazen's inauguration, a barrage of rocket and mortar attacks and suicide bombings killed ten Israelis and wounded dozens more in settlements and military positions in Gaza, at the Karni cargo transfer facility on the border between Gaza and Israel, and in the Israeli town of Sderot, a few kilometers east of Gaza. One of these attacks actually took place on the day Abu Mazen arrived in Gaza to initiate direct discussions with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as if to underscore by deed the defiant statements issued by spokesmen of those organizations.

These developments confronted the Israeli government with a serious dilemma. On the one hand, the entreaties of outside actors reinforced its own calculus that self-restraint was best designed to help Abu Mazen consolidate his authority. On the other hand, public opinion rejected the notion that Israel should passively absorb casualties while Abu Mazen

got his affairs in order, and it pressed for some forcible response. The tentative resolution of this dilemma was to buy time by announcing a suspension of high-level political contacts with the PA and signaling that large-scale military action was imminent. This prompted more resolute declarations of intent on the part of the PA and PLO leadership, orders banning public displays of weapons on the streets, and plans by the Palestinian Security Service to prevent rocket attacks from

The functioning of a Palestinian government is unlikely to affect the substance or timing of the Israeli disengagement.

the northern Gaza Strip. These actions averted, at least temporarily, further escalation of violence and a further complication of Abu Mazen's task of asserting his authority through political means. Indeed, opposition elements showed more receptivity to Abu Mazen's demands even as they insisted on far-reaching Israeli commitments in exchange for compliance, and the level of violence did drop dramatically. As a result, security contacts between Israel and the PA intensified and political contacts were resumed, focusing first on modalities for an incremental handover of security responsibility to the PA in areas where

its determination and ability to suppress violence were evident. At the same time, Israel began to consider measures of its own, such as prisoner releases, that might further enhance Abu Mazen's domestic credibility.

But in the absence of a more comprehensive program, such actions provided few reliable guidelines for predicting future developments. Resistance to any plans by Abu Mazen to reformulate Palestinian strategy, and especially to act on Israeli demands that he actually dismantle terrorist infrastructures, can be expected from two main sources: the Islamist opposition (Hamas and Islamic Jihad), and the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, which are nominally an offshoot of the Tanzim (i.e., subordinate to Fatah) but in practice constitute an assortment of small, loosely coordinated gangs that answer to local warlords and are even sometimes organized along clan lines. The former, especially Hamas, are relatively disciplined organizations with political agendas, meaning that they are responsive to public opinion, including indications of a growing conviction that terrorism has become counterproductive. As a result, they are potentially amenable to a ceasefire as part of a broader effort to stabilize conditions in PA-controlled territories, provided there is an incentive (e.g., power sharing) appealing enough to override the inclination to reject a political agreement in the absence of a credible PA threat to use force. Against the backdrop of almost a decade of fruitless on again-off again PA-Hamas discussions, often encouraged by Egypt, there is little reason to

expect that current discussions will end differently unless new variables – the death of Arafat and the prospect of Israeli disengagement – make a critical difference. By late January, expressions of PA confidence in the outcome were still rendered suspect by Hamas' ambiguous declarative policy and its unambiguous actions on the ground. And even if some agreement were reached, it could not long endure unless the Islamists underwent a strategic transformation.

Despite their ostensible subordination to Fatah, the Aqsa Brigades are equally problematic. Their chaotic structure makes them resistant to central directives and the mixture of ideological and instrumental motives that animates them makes them targets of a "bidding war" between a PA tempted to co-opt them and outside elements (Iran and/or Hizbollah) bent on sabotaging any stabilization efforts.

The degree to which these uncertainties about the evolution of the Palestinian Authority are resolved may

influence the modalities of the Israeli disengagement: a functioning government able to enforce some measure of public order in Gaza will make it easier for Israel to coordinate with the PA and withdraw in an orderly fashion, which is its own preference and that of Abu Mazen (though not of Hamas). But it is unlikely to affect the substance or timing of the Israeli disengagement, which are almost exclusively subject to internal Israeli variables. The question of disengagement has been constitutionally and legally settled by government approval and Knesset ratification, and the decision is reinforced politically by the persistent support of approximately two-thirds of the public and the incorporation of the Labor Party into a stable "disengagement coalition." The settlers' movement and its supporters continue to wage a campaign of resistance, but they have failed thus far to persuade the government or the public to reverse course. Furthermore, the very fact that the disengagement

has been justified as a unilateral measure makes the outcome of the settlers' campaign relatively immune to Palestinian intervention, one way or another. Any hopes they still have of preventing the disengagement therefore rest on the belief that while their opposition to withdrawal is firm, support for it may be ambivalent and might be swayed by some traumatic event before or during the actual evacuation of settlements.

But barring such a trauma, the Israeli road to disengagement is unlikely to be affected by developments in the PA. It is the post-disengagement course that is hostage to Abu Mazen's own fortunes. If he manages to make Arafatism simply a chapter in Palestinian history, that road may well lead to a serious political reengagement and a real prospect of conflict resolution. If not, the road may or may not pass through further unilateral actions by Israel, but either way it will only lead to continued conflict along a new set of frontlines.