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More of the Same?

Fatah's Seventh General Congress and the Reelection of Abbas

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Buttressed by his election at the Fatah Seventh General Congress to another five-year term as leader of the organization, Mahmoud Abbas immediately renewed diplomatic activity to block an American veto of a UN Security Council resolution against the Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

The congress gave Abbas renewed public legitimacy, following the ongoing erosion in his status among the Palestinian public. Advance expectations were that a deputy or designated successor to 82-year old Abbas would be appointed, or at least that a mechanism would be established for determining his successor after he leaves his post. None of this happened. A decisive majority of Fatah united behind Abbas, the sole candidate. Whatever little internal opposition there was, it found itself neutralized, and it was clear throughout the congress who is the boss of Fatah, and who controls the movement. Like Arafat before him, in addition to being the leader of Fatah, Abbas is also the Chairman of the PLO and President of the Palestinian Authority (PA). There is no public indication that he intends to concede any of these power bases.

Two people not identified with Abbas were elected to head the list for the 22-member Fatah Central Committee: Marwan Barghouti, who is serving five consecutive life sentences in an Israeli prison, and Jibril Rajoub, who headed the Palestinian security agencies on the West Bank and now manages the Palestinian Football Association. They are followed by Mohammad Shtayyeh, Abbas's right hand man, who resigned from the team negotiating with Israel in 2013; Hussein al-Sheikh; Mahmoud al-Aloul, leader of the Tanzim; Tawfik Tirawi, former head of intelligence on the West Bank, who is associated with Mohammed Dahlan; and Saeb Erekat, secretary general of the PLO and former head of the Palestinian negotiation team, and associated with Abbas. Only a few opponents of Abbas were in the remaining lower positions on the list, including Abbas Zaki, another associate of Dahlan. Three places were reserved in advance – for Farouk Kaddoumi, former head of the PLO political bureau and chairman of Fatah; Salim Zanoun; and Abu Maher Ghneim, who was first in the preceding elections for the Fatah Central Committee, in 2009. Not reelected were Nabil Shaath, a veteran of the negotiations with Israel, and Sultan Abu al-Einein, an opponent of Abbas's relatively moderate stance toward Israel.

Abbas succeeded Arafat 12 years ago. No one disputes his talents as a politician who ostensibly has managed to overcome most of his opponents in Fatah, the government, the Palestine Legislative Council, and the legal system. At the same time, however, public opinion surveys on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip over the past year note that two thirds of the Palestinians want him to resign. Commentators see him as weak and lacking charisma – a corrupt dictator in command of an aging organization who has achieved nothing in his years as a leader. They regard Fatah as an insipid, uninspired, dispute-ridden, and corrupt political organization.

Dahlan, a contender for PA leadership who has repeatedly stated that he is not in the running, is conducting an all-out political and media war against Abbas. His candidate for the leadership of Fatah is Marwan Barghouti. Dahlan, who held the leading security position in the Gaza Strip before the 2007 Hamas takeover there, was once a member of the Fatah Central Committee. Ever since Abbas drove him out of Fatah in 2011, he has maintained a shadow apparatus purporting to be comparable to Abbas's official establishment. His supporters deny Abbas's legitimacy, and assert that Abbas played a major role in the removal of Arafat. They have conducted events parallel to official events, although most have had few participants, attracted no significant media coverage, and failed to detract from the legitimacy of the Central Committee or the demonstration of strength by Abbas and Fatah. A few days after the congress, in a noteworthy coincidence, Dahlan was sentenced in absentia by a court in Ramallah to a 3-year prison term and \$16 million fine for corruption.

The four countries referred to as the Arab Quartet – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates – are angry at Abbas for rebuffing their pressure and attempts to reach understandings with Dahlan. This has practical and painful significance for Abbas: Saudi Arabia, which transfers \$20 million monthly to the PA, is holding back \$140 million and expressing open dissatisfaction with the PA's attempts at rapprochement with Iran. Egypt recently turned its back on Abbas, and took care to emphasize this in its overtures to Hamas leaders, an ease in restrictions at the Rafah border crossing, plans to establish a free trade zone with the Gaza Strip, an economic conference with Hamas, and open support for Dahlan. Cairo is now expected to increase its pressure on Abbas for reconciliation with Hamas and a return to a joint government. This has already been reflected in declarations and warmer relations with Hamas, and close political and economic coordination with the movement.

The international community, which is alarmed at the state of the PA, is silent, fearing that this is not the time to criticize Abbas. There, too, however, the regression of the PA under Abbas's leadership, the dismantling of institutions built with a great deal of effort and money, and the continued failure to build state and governmental infrastructure have not escaped notice.

The reelection of Abbas highlights Fatah's stagnation and its structural, functional, and ideological weakness, which affects the PA and Palestinian society. Moreover, Abbas's

reelection is insufficient to restrain the internal battles within Fatah. Recently, after two years without any official contact between Fatah and Hamas, Abbas met with Hamas leaders Khaled Mashal and Ismail Haniyeh in Qatar in late October. They agreed – not for the first time – to continue negotiations for unity and the establishment of a joint government that will rule in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. They called the coming year “the year of unity,” and stated that their meeting was in preparation for general parliamentary and presidential elections in the PA. Mashal even sent his personal greetings, which were read aloud during the congress.

Over the years Israel has contributed a great deal to the decline in Abbas's political status, with Prime Minister Sharon's statement that “Abu Mazen is a chick without feathers”; the reluctance to release prisoners and ease restrictions; the continued expansion of settlements and outposts in the territories; the disengagement from the Gaza Strip, which fell into Hamas – instead of Abbas – hands; and statements by Avigdor Liberman such as “Abu Mazen is not a partner for anything” and “He was and remains an anti-Semite.”

Internally, Abbas ostensibly demonstrated leadership by walking away from the negotiations led by US Secretary of State John Kerry, and launched an aggressive diplomatic and legal warfare in early 2014 designed to isolate Israel in the international arena and achieve full recognition of a Palestinian state without negotiating an agreement with Israel. Abbas nevertheless symbolizes to many Palestinians the weakness of the Palestinian leadership and the complete failure of his entire generation regarding the resolution of the conflict with Israel. His relative moderation and public opposition to terrorism as a means of achieving political ends are a source of ridicule in internal Palestinian discourse.

Initial Insights

- a. Abbas is now expected, to the best of his ability, to increase the international pressure on Israel, using every organization, tribunal, and means for this purpose, with the aim of obtaining an irreversible political achievement in the UN Security Council: recognition of a Palestinian state.
- b. On the socioeconomic level, the Palestinian economy is likely to continue its stagnation, with widening social gaps. Most of the Palestinians in the West Bank are justifiably dissatisfied with how the PA functions under Abbas, as it remains a weak, corrupt, and ineffective body. The inadequate public order, corruption, high unemployment rates, political frustration, and continued growth of the Israeli settlements are only a few of the factors in which no change for the better is expected in the near future.
- c. Despite Abbas's hitherto consistent stance against the use of violence and terrorism as a road to the Palestinians' political goal, two main scenarios are possible. One is deterioration in the situation on the West Bank into a loss of control and a violent popular uprising. The other is a planned escalation of violent resistance against Israel in coordination with Hamas.

- d. In addition, there are Palestinians who see a great advantage in broad non-violent, popular resistance. It appears that as of now, Abbas is incapable of organizing this on a large scale.
- e. In the Gaza Strip, Hamas will continue to do whatever it wishes, as it has since the national unity government fell apart in 2015. A possible rapprochement between Fatah with Abbas at the helm and Hamas in the foreseeable future appears feasible, however, for several reasons. First, despite their reciprocal accusations and the deep rift between the two sides, they share a common interest in strengthening a united Palestinian front. Second, Egypt has a strong interest in a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation, which will enhance Egypt's standing and institutionalize its key role in the Palestinian arena as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Third, internal Palestinian reconciliation will help defuse the ticking bomb in the Gaza Strip and facilitate reconstruction there, an interest shared by Israel, the Palestinians, Egypt, and the international community.
- f. Against this backdrop, uncertainty prevails concerning the political line that the new US administration will take toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general, and toward Abbas in particular. Initial statements by President-elect Trump, and signs such as the appointment of David Friedman as the US ambassador to Israel, carry little promise for the Palestinians.
- g. Who will be the designated successor? One likely possibility, given the results of the congress, is Jibril Rajoub. Other names mentioned, whether by the individuals themselves or foreign politicians, commentators, and researchers, include Barghouti, Dahlan, Erekat, Shtayyeh, Majid Faraj, and Nasser al-Qudwa. Salam Fayyad is also sometimes mentioned in Washington from time to time in this context.

Continued rule by Abbas in the coming years is not good news for Israel or the Palestinians. However, familiarity with Abbas and with the trends in the Palestinian, regional, and international arenas enables Israeli leaders to maintain the possibility of reaching a future settlement of two states for two peoples. Assuming that Israel aspires to the Zionist paradigm of a secure democratic state for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, Israel can initiate a considerable number of actions aimed at gradually creating, in cooperation with the Palestinians, the conditions for progress toward such a reality. Despite his weaknesses and drawbacks, Abbas remains a comfortable partner for this.

