

Ahmad Qreia: a Master communicator, not warrior

By

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“ The hero as he appears in the tangle of modern life is a man struggling with a vision he can neither realize nor abandon; 'a man with a load on his mind' ”

(*The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* T.E. Lawrence)



To understand the agenda and direction of Abu Ala 's (Ahmed Qreia, 68) government, it is crucial to consider his personality and to analyze some of his past views. Abu Ala ' has historically been seen as a professional technocrat, deeply involved in 'daily business' rather than grand strategy. He joined the 'Old Guard' of Fateh in 1983 and became the head of the PLO's Economic Department in Tunis with overall responsibility for the organization's major financial transactions.

He used his 'Samed' Institute to enhance the durability of the PLO establishment. He is not a 'guerrilla' and has never fought in combat or held a gun. He is however an expert in facilitating communication among the various factions that comprise the Palestinian community, and throughout his time as PLC Speaker he successfully mediated between Arafat and the other groups in the Council.

He is known as one of the architects of ' Oslo ' but admits that he needed Abu Mazen's support and the approval of Arafat in order to achieve it, demonstrating to all that he is a 'loyal employee' and not leadership material. His vision is of a two-state solution to the conflict and ever since Oslo he has been a key player in negotiations. As Speaker of the PLC, his actions continued to underline his loyalty; nevertheless when people praise or criticize PLC actions over the last seven years, Abu Ala ' is hardly ever a target for credit or blame.

He acknowledges the need for a 'separation of powers' and in private meetings he has criticized Arafat's style of leadership. He has however, never dared to do so publicly and he continues to accept without complaint the tasks delegated to him by the President. These have included both direct and secret negotiations with the Israelis.

His support for the 'Amendment to the Basic Law' and the establishment of the post of Prime Minister served to affirm his political principles. During the brief three months of Abu Mazen's government he spent more than a month traveling in Japan and Europethus leaving the former to his "mission impossible".

After the demise of Abu Mazen, when the focus shifted to him as a potential successor, he was at first too reluctant if not too afraid of the massive responsibilities that lay ahead. Without doubt, he regrets accepting the post and losing a potentially more powerful position with a guaranteed future, namely that of Speaker of the PLC. (Under the terms of the Basic Law, the PLC Speaker is to be nominated as successor should the office of 'President' become vacant.)

For the first month Abu Ala 's government was an 'emergency' one and this period served as a test of his power and influence. He has had to decide whether to remain in office or resign. The 'credit' for his re-appointment as Prime Minister should go to the Finance Minister, Salaam Fayyad who argued repeatedly for his re-installment and threatened resignation if Arafat did not endorse him and end the one-month emergency period.

Arafat's perception of Abu Ala ' is that he is not a threat to his leadership like Abu Mazen and hence his position is much more stable than that of his predecessor. The relationship between President and Prime Minister is of a qualitatively different nature in this new government.

To placate the Fateh 'political tribe', Abu Ala ' requested that they select most of his ministers and demanded a vote of confidence from them in the PLC. However he is also keen to keep other factions happy, in particular the Islamists. He went directly to visit Sheikh Yassin in his home and ensured that pictures of this meeting made front-page news.

His aims in doing this were two-fold; firstly he wanted Hamas' recognition of his government and of him personally (which he received despite their continuing view of him as the discredited 'Oslo Man'), and secondly he demonstrated his recognition of Hamas as the center of power in Gaza and listened to their unexpected demands to "share political power".

As for his channels of communication with the Israelis, they have remained open since the Oslo period and he took steps to re-invigorate them as soon as he took office. The first day he was appointed Prime Minister he met his counter-part, Sharon , personally and later he delegated Hassan Abu Libdeh (director of his office) to meet and coordinate with Sharon 's office. Abu Ala 's Israeli connections will help him to push for what he needs most – an end to Sharon 's aggressive policies and some signs of a willingness to return to the negotiating table.

As to the agenda of Abu Ala 's government, this centers on the issues of elections, reform, security and the overriding need to seek a regional political settlement with Israel . With regards to elections, Abu Ala ' has been in the past very keen on the idea and he held meetings with the Central Elections Committee and urged them to continue preparations for political elections.

He wanted to use these meetings, however, to put pressure on the PLC to support him and to pass a vote of confidence in him, otherwise he will call for elections. In the latter stages he has become more hesitant however. He is keeping the option of elections open simply in order to improve relations with civil society organizations by showing that he is receptive to their demands and to keep the European election monitoring team on board.

He retains an interest in municipal elections and listens carefully to demands from the new Minister of Local Government, Jamal Shoubaki, who takes them very seriously and sees them as a top priority, alongside ending corruption and the 'tribal' structure of government. Meanwhile the Minister is making preparations and awaiting the green light to move forward.

On the reform policy, Abu Ala ' will continue with internal changes but not in a 'revolutionary' style. It is likely that he will adopt an approach which maximizes the durability and stability of his government and avoids potentially divisive confrontations; i.e. instead of dismissing troublesome figures he is likely simply to reshuffle his cabinet. The

advantage of this approach is that the second layer of officials in the ministries will remain in place and can function professionally in a more stable environment. This will help to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the process of government.

As to the government itself, the nature of the individuals the Prime Minister has accepted to sit in his cabinet means that there is arguably more than one Prime Minister, more than one Interior Minister, more than one spokesperson and so on in his new team. For instance, three ministers all demanded in the first meeting of the cabinet that they be the sole avenue for contacts with Israel (the Foreign Minister, the Negotiations Minister and the Minister for Civil Administration).

Abu Ala ' listens to their requests, nods his head and smiles allowing them to think they have approval whilst maintaining his own exclusive link through his Bureau Chief Abu Libdeh. From time to time he manipulates them psychologically by engaging them with Abu Libdeh's work in order to satisfy their egos and contain their ambitions.

Meanwhile on the media front, one can hear every minister criticizing, arguing or advocating a position in front of the cameras, but only Abu Ala ' provides the overall picture of where his government is heading and what its agenda will be. As such, although there seems to be many voices talking at once, only the Prime Minister has the full message. This allows Abu Ala ' to retain a sense of control over the potentially unruly collection of personalities that comprise his cabinet.

Minister of Finance Salaam Fayyad is regarded as the reformist, keen to promote elections and to boost civil society. He has been working on a draft 'retirement law' which would provide the Fateh 'Old Guard' with a graceful way out.

Two factors make this initiative problematic; firstly those who are most vocal in their demands for retirement are not really serious because it will entail the loss of their power and privileges, and secondly those who most need it will expect 'incentives'. For instance the first wave of retirees will expect 150% of their salary as a pay-off, the second 120% and so forth, resulting in a process with stages. It remains to be seen however whether the necessary political will exists to implement any of these measures.

This 'softly-softly' approach to reform is a further indication that Abu Ala' is keen to ensure that his government is far more stable than its predecessor and that he is not simply another 'transitional' Prime Minister. He expects to be in office for at least the next three years and is preparing his agenda accordingly.

On security issues, Abu Ala ' is promoting law and order and stability. This entails the involvement of all factions in the resumption of a 'national dialogue', and going to Cairo once again under an Egyptian umbrella to negotiate a 'hudna' (ceasefire). At the same time the Israelis, Europeans and the Americans have to be kept in the picture and made to feel that concrete results are being achieved.

What is expected from Cairo is a formula to meet the "power-sharing" demands of Hamas by forming an open-ended or "unified leadership structure" that encompasses all the major factions and diminishes the prospect of a Palestinian civil war. There will not be any public support or condemnation from the Cairo talks of the 'Road Map', the 'Geneva Accords' or any other proposal. They will leave that to the Abu Ala' government but they'll demand clear signs that Israel is ending its war against the Palestinian people. Any 'hudna' is expected to be conditional upon reciprocity from the Israeli side.

As for the new internal security arrangements, Abu Ala' will use his seat on the new National Security Council (NSC) as Arafat's deputy to assist him in his desire to invite four or five generals from the NSC to attend cabinet meetings so that they can discuss ways to bring order, slowly and gradually, to the chaotic security apparatus. By bringing senior security figures to share the cabinet sessions he is seeking to enter "Arafat's house" and develop a relationship with the security people in order to build trust and in time persuade them to accept and implement the government line.

The events in Nablus over the past few months demonstrate the absence of the PA and its inability to enforce law and order. The Chief of Police was hospitalized after being shot in the legs, the Governors car was set alight and some of his relatives kidnapped. Most recently a botched assassination attempt on the Mayor of Nablus left his brother dead.

On the regional political settlement with Israel, Abu Ala' has always been aware of the importance of the "two lungs" of Palestine – i.e. Egypt and Jordan. He welcomed Egyptian Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman's drive to get dialogue between the various factions restarted, and he has shown his commitment to a 'hudna' by visiting Sheikh Yassin and by going personally to the Cairo talks.

Also, a few days ago, he was in Amman presenting his ideas to King Abdallah II and discussing with him the many obstacles that lie ahead. He also spoke of the need for a "partnership mission" with Washington and the Israelis to stop the bleeding in Palestine before attempts to heal the wounds can begin via the 'Road Map'.

As to the recent 'festival' in Geneva, the Beilin-Abed Rabbo Accords, Abu Ala' is happy to see them evolve as they will act as further pressure on the Sharon government to change its current course. Yet at the same time he is not exaggerating their ability to impact upon the divided society at home whilst the erection of the 'Apartheid Wall' and the expansion of the settlements continue.

The Road Map is no longer the only game in town. Although the 'Geneva Accords' are a 'fudge' and along with other meetings they are simply a public relations exercise, Abu Ala' is not dismissing any of them, and continues to court all possibilities. Abu Ala' 's place in Palestinian history is not yet set in stone and in the absence of an overall strategy, attention should focus on his choice of tactics.

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