

ABU MAZEN AND THE MANY CHALLENGES AHEAD

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After ten years of a Palestinian self-rule, limited in its authority and scope, and after hundreds of meetings, conferences and direct and indirect negotiations, often repetitious, conflicting and with little achievement, Palestinians today are living a new *Nakba* (catastrophe) exceeding that of 1948 in both its context and consequences. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict entered a phase of denial, characterized by hate and anger in an endless episode of confrontation governed by a culture of Israeli revenge and Palestinian resistance through sacrifice or suicide.

With all the pains of the current Nakba, little Arab support and limited European input, the Palestinian house continues to be internally challenged by contradicting visions and missions of the so-called "insiders" - civil society activists and elites that emerged since the first Intifada - and "outsiders" - PLO guards and other returnees who control PA institutions as well as most factions. The often contradicting interests of these two camps determine their relationship and distorted the national vision for independence and statehood.

In this environment a new initiative introduced by the Quartet (US, Europe, UN and Russia) created a political storm, calling for leadership change and institutional reforms pertaining to the political and security system as a means to bring the Palestinians out of the current situation. No one would disagree that the call for change, reforms and effectiveness was a long-time demand from Palestinians of all sectors of the society and different political factions.

Arafat - under internal and external pressure - agreed to meet that demand and announced, *inter alia*, the establishment of the position of Prime Minister. He put before the PLO Executive Committee three models for consideration: first, that of the Lebanese Prime Minister, who possesses technical and political skills and the personal financial resources needed to boost development and investment projects. Arafat made no secret that he would like to have a "Palestinian Hariri," for which he envisioned businessman Munib Al-Masri. The second option was to copy the Egyptian and Syrian model, where the Prime Minister is mainly a loyal administrator serving the head of the state. A third model considered was that of British premiership, where an elected Prime Minister enjoys strong powers in running the government, while the head of state's role is limited to representative functions. Needless to say that Arafat wanted to avoid this model as a threat to his leadership, but it was nevertheless adopted by the PLC.

Fateh refused to accept an outsider for the post and its Central Council nominated founding member Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), whose candidacy was then endorsed by the (Fateh-dominated) PLC.

The Palestinian people are split in their assessment of these developments; some genuinely hope that leadership change and institutional reforms will be the end of the old era, leading the society from the agenda of "revolution till victory" towards "state building". Others are still skeptical fearing that political tactics and survival strategies of the current leadership are behind the recent reform drive. A third stream - the silent majority - see it as yet another transitional phase that will not bring any results, convinced that as long as Sharon is in power nothing will change.

On 19 March 2003, Abu Mazen formally accepted the post of the first Palestinian Prime Minister and began consultations towards a new government.

Saying "my men are your men," Arafat advised him to keep all the ministers in their post in a demonstration that there is no change of loyalty. The challenge lying before Abu Mazen is to balance between Arafat's fear of losing control, the old guards holding on to their seats of power, and his plan to bring in new faces.

Another challenge is to "contain" the political factions, which is particularly tricky as he cannot satisfy the factions (Fateh, PPP, FIDA) who agreed to join his government and those who refused, although he will need both to support his political agenda, which advocates a shift from the militarized Intifada to a political one.

Abu Mazen will further need the qualifications and connections of civil society leaders to empower his government. The NGO elites, however, want to know the content of his political program before endorsing the new cabinet and reforms to come. They see their role as outside observers and critiques rather than sharing direct responsibilities.

During a heated debate with Islamic factions in Gaza, it became clear to Abu Mazen that they - before committing to the "truce" he envisioned in order to be able to influence Israeli public opinion - would insist to see a lifting of the closure, freezing of settlement construction, an end to the painful episode of killing and destruction, the release of detainees, in addition to dropping the "terrorist" label on the Islamic leadership and their institutions.

In order to rebuild "negotiation bridges" with the Israeli government Abu Mazen must bring the current Nakba to an end and convince the Palestinian public that a different environment of coexistence is possible. To do so, he needs the backing of Washington and London to put pressure on Sharon to implement the "road map."

Abu Mazen's success or failure will depend on whether he will perform as an old PLO loyalist or become a real new leader ready to implement the needed changes. Will he be able to convince the Palestinian street of himself and his mission and establish the constituency needed to legitimize his leadership before traveling to Washington,

London, Paris and Berlin to receive "international recognition"? Will he be able to gain credibility by enforcing law and order, ensure security and a strong, independent judicial system? Will he be further able to convince the Israelis that they must trust - not "test" - him and contribute their part by putting an end to Palestinian suffering with no new demands? Will he be able to ignite a new spirit of hope and bring life back to Palestinian economy and society?

If the new Prime Minister will not be in the position to meet all the above requirements - and, unfortunately, this seems to be a mission impossible - the only change ahead is the announcement of yet another government with a slightly changed political program. It will not take long then that his resignation will be announced.

However, should the Palestinians realize the danger ahead in the event that Abu Mazen - and with him the reform process - fail, there is a slight chance that they opt to support his mission as a means to get out of the current dead end. In that case, all forces would have to join efforts to reconstitute Palestine and prepare for political elections that will empower a legitimate future leadership mandated to build the state.

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