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Abbas Targets Key Palestinian Officials

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Brief Analysis

The recent actions taken against Salam Fayyad and Yasser Abed Rabbo raise broader systemic concerns about PA governance and leadership.

These are busy days in Palestinian politics. On June 15, the Palestinian Authority (PA) attorney-general froze the assets of Future for Palestine, a development NGO founded and managed by former prime minister Salam Fayyad. On June 30, PA president Mahmoud Abbas informed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Executive Committee that Yasser Abed Rabbo had been relieved of his position as the committee's secretary-general. These events took place against the backdrop of a murky cabinet formation process.

Background

This is not the first time President Abbas has targeted Fayyad and Abed Rabbo. Last August, both were reportedly "audited" by the PA under suspicion of plotting a coup against Abbas. These proceedings quietly fizzled, with no formal charges or any other legal action taken.

During his tenure as prime minister and finance minister, Fayyad is credited with having enacted wide-ranging reforms and anticorruption measures targeting PA civilian and security institutions. He founded Future for Palestine, which provides services and support to vulnerable segments of Palestinian society, upon leaving office under pressure from Abbas.

Abed Rabbo, for his part, is a veteran Palestinian politician who has been a member of the PLO Executive Committee -- the organization's highest decisionmaking body -- since 1971, serving as its secretary-general since 2005. The

secretary-general position was previously held by Abbas himself, until his election as PA president and PLO chairman. Following the PLO's 1988 decision to recognize UN Security Council Resolution 242 -- which established terms after the Six-Day War -- and to renounce terrorism, Abed Rabbo was the first PLO official to meet with an American counterpart. He has been active in the negotiation process with Israel from the beginning, oftentimes leading the Palestinian team in discussions both formal and informal.

Fayyad and Abed Rabbo are both political independents and are seen as political allies, although they have no formal organizational ties. They are viewed as close to the West, particularly the United States. They both enjoy strong relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Separately, they have maintained relations, if uneven ones, with Abbas's rival Mohammad Dahlan, who is based in Abu Dhabi. Both -- vocal supporters of a two-state solution -- have occasionally criticized President Abbas's policies, although their opposition has primarily been voiced in internal leadership meetings rather than publicly or in the media. Both have had tense relationships with the Fatah establishment owing to their "outsider" status as well as specific official actions they have taken that undermined Fatah's monopoly on PA institutions and finances.

Legal Framework

The recent proceedings against Fayyad and Abed Rabbo raise legal and procedural questions. For Fayyad, initial accusations of money laundering were dropped after his finances were found to be clean, including through vetting by the PA's own anti-money-laundering unit. Eventually, however, his assets were frozen directly, and with no court order, by the attorney-general under the charge of being "political money," a nonexistent category under PA law.

The decision to remove Abed Rabbo, which has not yet been officially published or transmitted to Abed Rabbo himself, raises its own procedural questions. The decision was taken by Abbas personally in his capacity as PLO chairman, in Abed Rabbo's absence and without a vote by the PLO Executive Committee, which had elected Abed Rabbo to the position. Reports from the meeting at which the PLO Executive Committee was informed of the decision indicate objections were raised by at least three PLO factions -- the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA). Indeed, never before in the PLO's fifty-year history has a PLO secretary-general been removed by a chairman's unilateral decision.

Political Drivers

These recent decisions seem to have been driven not by legal considerations but rather by the political dynamic of consolidation and exclusion that has characterized Abbas's presidency.

Indeed, since becoming president, Abbas has sought steadily to consolidate power. In line with this tendency, he has decreed that he will add acting secretary-general to his existing litany of titles, which already includes PLO chairman, president of the state of Palestine, head of the Fatah movement, and commander-in-chief, among others.

Alongside his titles, Abbas has been amassing powers that often exceed his constitutional purview. Today, for example, PA internal security forces report to the president, contravening the Palestinian Basic Law, whose 2003 amendment gives authority over these services to the government. Indeed, the continued absence of an empowered interior minister -- a requirement dating back to the 2003 Roadmap peace initiative -- is a main obstacle facing international and U.S. efforts to continue developing the Palestinian security sector. During the last cabinet formation process, in 2013, Abbas again violated the Basic Law by directly insisting on the appointment of specific ministers. Ironically, this prohibition was enacted to protect Abbas himself from President Yasser Arafat's interference when he was forming his cabinet in 2003.

Abbas has sought similar consolidation as the head of Fatah. Party conferences, for instance, are convened to elect

the movement's various governing bodies. The Sixth Fatah Conference, in 2009, was supposed to be followed by the Seventh Conference in 2014, but this has repeatedly been postponed. In the interim, Abbas critics as well as perceived rivals have been sidelined, with some -- most notably Mohammad Dahlan -- actually expelled from the movement and others, such as former UN envoy Nasser al-Qudwa, informally pushed out. Not only top-tier officials but also more junior ones with questioned loyalty to Abbas have been targeted.

Parallel to such gestures, the Palestinian political space and public freedoms have become constricted. Alongside punitive measures against public figures such as Fayyad, Abed Rabbo, and others for questioning Abbas's policies, bloggers, satirists, and civil society activists who advocate engagement with Israel are more often finding themselves harassed or even detained by the PA. Likewise, recent reports indicate that the PA is planning to clamp down on civil society organizations' funding and operations. Gradually, in a process begun by Arafat but accelerated by Abbas, Palestine -- long regarded as one of the most pluralistic and vibrant Arab polities -- is coming to resemble a typical and archetypal Arab autocracy.

Political Context

Underlying the recent actions targeting Fayyad and Abed Rabbo are deep crises facing the PA. After the collapse of negotiations with Israel last year and given the dead end facing the leadership's UN strategy, Abbas is struggling to formulate a compelling diplomatic strategy for achieving Palestinian statehood. Nor have governance measures thrived under the PA, which is in a precarious financial situation and -- after a public-perception boost during Fayyad's reformist tenure -- is once again seen as corrupt by alarming numbers of Palestinians. Relations with traditional moderate Arab regional allies and backers are also tense. With the UAE and Qatar in particular, the PA's relations have become openly hostile -- the former for various reasons, including its hosting of Dahlan, and the latter because of its support for Hamas, Abbas's rival. Relations with Jordan and Egypt are tepid, and the PA has yet to establish significant relations with the new Saudi leadership.

Meanwhile, the division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, ruled respectively by Fatah and Hamas, continues to plague the larger Palestinian body politic, with drastic implications for the reconstruction of Gaza. The recent announcement of Abbas's plans to create a new government started with high-profile coverage -- including being discussed with visiting French foreign minister Laurent Fabius -- with the goal of isolating Hamas domestically and regionally. The initial bang, however, seems to have been muted to a whimper. And plans to create a factional government that explicitly adheres to the Quartet principles of recognizing Israel and renouncing terrorism have been shelved in favor of a limited government reshuffle.

But even a reshuffle holds risks, with Hamas insisting that such a development would violate the Cairo unity deal, allowing the movement to disavow the whole unity deal while shifting the blame to Fatah. The "national consensus government" was a fiction, in that Hamas never permitted it to operate in Gaza. But it was a useful fiction that allowed regional actors, primarily Egypt, to insist that Gaza reconstruction could only be done through the Abbas government, thus pressuring and sidelining Hamas. With the collapse of this construct, Hamas may successfully present itself as the only viable address for Gaza reconstruction, and in doing so gain international legitimacy as well as access to reconstruction funds and materials.

Implications

The specific cases of Fayyad and Abed Rabbo will be resolved within the framework of domestic Palestinian politics and the immediate regional context. But the overall trends exposed by the actions against them raise more systemic concerns.

If the erosion of institutional reforms enshrined in the Palestinian Basic Law and implemented primarily by Fayyad continues unabated, the very domestic legitimacy of the PA will continue to suffer. After all, Fatah lost the 2006

parliamentary elections as a direct result of public perceptions of PA corruption and mismanagement. Similarly, the impulsive and ill-considered nature of decisions such as those dealing with the cabinet formation will create openings to be exploited by the likes of Hamas.

While previous U.S. administrations, most notably that of President George W. Bush, prioritized issues of Palestinian governance and public freedoms, these issues lately have fallen to a lower position. Yet if the PA's viability, and the Palestinian people's future, is to be addressed in a fundamental manner, questions of governance, democracy, and public freedoms must again become an international and U.S. priority.

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