

Abbas Makes His Move

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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Articles & Testimony

The New York Times convened an online panel of six Middle East experts to discuss the implications of Mahmoud Abbas's announcement on Thursday that he would not seek reelection in a presidential vote he has called for in January. The following is a contribution by Washington Institute Ziegler distinguished fellow David Makovsky, who is director of its Project on the Middle East Peace Process. [Read \(http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/05/abbas-makes-his-move/\)](http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/05/abbas-makes-his-move/) the entire discussion on the Times's website.

A Liberated Lame Duck

The famed French statesman Charles Talleyrand is reputed to have responded to the death of a Turkish diplomat by saying, "I wonder what he meant by that." The same could be said about Mahmoud Abbas's announcement Thursday. Was this the culmination of a life-long career or the latest twist in a diplomatic dance?

Several people who talk to Mr. Abbas say that his words should be taken at face value. He feels let down by everyone, and has been in a dark mood for the last several months. He is particularly upset with the Arab states for not backing him in the Gaza war aftermath. He knew the U.N. report would be a detour from peacemaking, but his Arab allies did not seem to care. In his speech Thursday, Mr. Abbas accused Hamas of "destructive" practices, making it clear he thinks the group is more concerned with their own ideological agenda than with the Palestinian cause.

Mr. Abbas also seems to feel that he has no partner in the Israeli government. He fears that he would yield his insistence on an absolute settlement freeze as encouraged by the U.S. only to enter a negotiation in which Benjamin Netanyahu's government would make an underwhelming peace offer. The Palestinian president also seems to believe the Obama administration boxed him in, first insisting on an absolute freeze and, once Mr. Abbas had no choice but to go along with this approach, backed off, leaving him politically exposed. It is unclear if Mr. Abbas, who will be justly praised for his support for a two-state solution and contribution toward better governance in the West Bank, is introspective about his own mistakes.

Nonetheless, Mr. Abbas has not yet resigned, and he could change his mind. The outcome seems to be the hands of Hamas, who will view Mr. Abbas's statement as the sign of his personal defeat and a vindication of their own path. If Hamas reverses course and agrees to participate in elections in January as originally favored by Mr. Abbas, Hamas

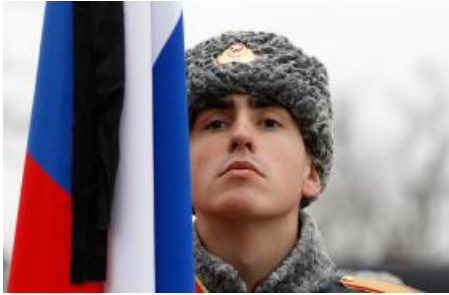
could force the president to make good on his promise. But Hamas may not take the initiative. Their popularity is low and they have opposed elections. Mr. Abbas could remain president indefinitely.

Not having to face the voters could be a strength for Mr. Abbas, rather than a weakness. His Israeli counterpart, Ehud Olmert found being a lame duck liberating. While Mr. Olmert announced his decision to resign last summer, he continued in office for another eight months and used the time to nearly reach a peace accord with Mr. Abbas. Indeed, he conditioned Israelis to the idea that they would have to yield most of the West Bank and even agree to compromises on Jerusalem.

It will be interesting to see if Mr. Abbas adopts the Olmert paradigm. Indeed, he might be able to do more to advance peace on his way out than he would by remaining in office. ❖

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