

The Un-Arafat Comes Calling

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Oct 19, 2005

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Mahmoud Abbas is a different kind of Palestinian president. Unlike his predecessor, Yasser Arafat, who made a long-term strategy out of being a victim, Abbas has made it clear that he seeks to build a political culture of responsibility. He has repeatedly said (in both English and Arabic) that violence is counterproductive to Palestinian aspirations.

While Arafat saw the misery of Palestinian refugees as a tool to be exploited for political purposes, Abbas has now given two speeches in the last month, in Arabic, declaring that it is time that Palestinians built housing for the refugees and that the Palestinian cause is not served by keeping refugees in wretched conditions. Such statements provide a way to demystify the refugee issue as a calling card of Palestinian grievance and as an impediment to an eventual peace agreement.

Whereas Arafat's focus was on the "revolution," Abbas said recently that he should be judged on "reconstruction"—whether he makes good on promises to build houses, schools and hospitals.

These are the things a Palestinian president should be doing, rather than posturing, pandering and seeking to manipulate at the expense of his own people. And on one level, at least, Abbas' approach seems to be working: His approval rating has remained consistently above 60%—virtually double Arafat's rating during his last few years.

But Abbas—who arrives in Washington this week for meetings with President Bush—also faces immediate threats to his hold on power, especially from Hamas and other militant groups. Though he certainly must be much more decisive in confronting the challenge, it is also essential that the U.S. does more to help build his authority.

The U.S. could do three things quickly to help bolster Abbas' credibility before parliamentary elections scheduled for January. First, nothing would enhance Abbas' authority more than showing that his way is working and that Palestinians are going to work. Billions of dollars have been pledged to restore the Palestinian economy, but little has

been delivered. The U.S. should spearhead the effort in the next 90 days to turn those pledges into a new reality of jobs, especially in the labor-intensive areas of housing and infrastructure construction. Why not send a U.S.-Palestinian delegation to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—both of which have pledged money for Palestinian housing—and have it work out the immediate transfer of funds?

Second, the Palestinian economy cannot be viable without access into and out of Gaza for people and goods—but at the same time, Israelis have a right to know that such access won't be used to smuggle in terrorists or weapons. The nut to crack is how to ensure that a third party at crossing points (whether made up of Egyptians, Americans, Europeans or others) has the ability not just to identify the smuggling of guns or terrorists but to confiscate such materials and arrest such individuals.

Third, the U.S. needs to bridge the difference in expectations between Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on what is next. Abbas wants to know that there is an ongoing peace process that will ensure that "Gaza first"—the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza that took place over the summer—is not "Gaza only." But Sharon, having confronted his party and having put his country through a painful decision, understandably wants to pause until he sees that the wrenching steps that Israel took will be matched by Palestinian steps on security.

To bridge this difference, the Bush administration needs to transform the "road map" to peace that was put together by the U.S., Russia, the European Union and the United Nations from a list of slogans into an action plan. Currently, there is not one obligation laid out in the road map that is interpreted the same way by the two sides, and the U.S. should take the lead in forging a common understanding by Israel and the Palestinians of their responsibilities.

Abbas has other things he needs to do as well. He needs to follow through with the security reforms he has said he supports—building more professional, reliable security forces to combat chaos and lawlessness in Gaza and the West Bank (which would also give him added confidence in dealing with Hamas). And he needs to insist that any party participating in the upcoming elections—including Hamas—must take genuine, active steps toward disarmament.

Abbas has shown that he is committed to the rule of law, nonviolence and coexistence, but he needs help to build his authority and prevail over forces that reject any possibility of peace and reconciliation. Bush must provide that help.

Dennis Ross, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is a former U.S. envoy to the Middle East. David Makovsky, also a fellow at the Washington Institute, is a former diplomatic correspondent for the Israeli newspaper Haaretz.



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