

A Crawl toward Mideast Peace

by [Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](/experts/ben-fishman)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](/experts/ben-fishman)

Ben Fishman is a Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics.



Articles & Testimony

The past few years have given the world little to celebrate in its effort to secure peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. One bright spot, though, came early this year with the election of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Real progress again seemed possible. But just four months later, the situation is looking grim again. Where did that optimism go?

- Poll numbers indicate that Palestinians are already losing confidence that Abbas can deliver the economic, political and security changes that will demonstrably improve their quality of life.
- Israelis and Palestinians are deadlocked again over the familiar issues of troop withdrawals and disarmament of wanted terrorists.
- Abbas faces growing criticism at home and abroad that he is moving too slowly in enacting the reforms he promised. No doubt the longer Abbas takes to achieve progress, the stronger Hamas—the Islamic resistance movement—will grow as an opposition force and the less authority he will have.

So what is taking Abbas so long?

Critics have pointed to many factors: He inherited a corrupt system; he is not getting enough outside help; his reluctant personality favors careful progress to dramatic steps; or his strategy of co-opting Hamas and Islamic Jihad rather than confronting them outright requires gradualism.

But there is a more fundamental reason why Abbas has been slow to implement changes. He has yet to create a professional support staff he can trust to carry out his directives, and without which he can do little beyond making speeches.

What's Missing

This absence becomes apparent when visiting the Muqata—the Ramallah headquarters Abbas inherited from Arafat—where the wreckage of the intifada has been cleared away but the administrative chaos sowed by Arafat remains. There are guards, mostly uniformed, and aides in well-pressed suits, but it is unclear who works for Abbas and who is attached to the old-time leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Not even all of the armed men in the compound are loyal to the new president, as Abbas discovered when a group of resident gunmen fired on his office a

few weeks ago.

Abbas has no obvious management staff of his own and has allowed Arafat's tainted and unreliable courtiers to run his office.

The disarray is a microcosm of the situation in the Palestinian territories, a weak central authority with factions angling for power. But in a move late last month on Abbas' 101st day in office, the Palestinian president made a significant appointment that may signal he has finally decided to combat the fawda—the Arabic term describing the chaos. Naming Rafiq Husseini, a highly regarded public health expert, as director of Abbas' office is a critical step in creating some order, and in improving the functional capabilities of the executive branch.

Like any effective decision-maker, Abbas needs a loyal staff. Without one, he has spent his first three months in office riveted primarily on two tasks: managing the national dialogue with the Palestinian factions and trying to implement the long-overdue security reform plan. These initiatives, though still incomplete, have helped produce the calm on which all other progress depends. Even so, the Palestinian president must be involved in economic, political and international efforts if he hopes to strengthen the Palestinian Authority's credibility.

Husseini: A Good Start

By all accounts, Husseini is exactly the kind of professional needed to head the president's office. A member of Jerusalem's most prominent family, he is a British-educated medical chemist and a public health expert who has helped establish the Palestinian health care system. Through his various leadership positions in respected Palestinian non-governmental organizations, Husseini has collaborated with the Israelis and international aid groups, including the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Husseini's appointment also suggests that Abbas is stepping further away from the Arafat shadow. Over the past few weeks, he has begun to clear out remnants of Arafat's entrenched political and security operation, pushing out longtime Arafat operatives and sacking Moussa Arafat (Arafat's nephew) and other security chiefs. These steps indicate that Abbas is serious about ousting the Old Guard, though it will take a significant effort to complete this process.

The more professional newcomers that Abbas brings on and the more corrupt old-timers he retires or kicks upstairs, the more likely he will be able to create a vibrant, loyal staff capable of managing domestic issues and relations with Israel.

Make no mistake, the Husseini appointment alone will not enable Abbas to put his house in order. But it is an encouraging development that the United States and the international community should recognize and support.

When Abbas makes his expected trip to Washington in the next month, the United States can help his languishing administration by developing a plan with him to reinvent the management of the Palestinian Authority, offering training and support to Husseini and similarly responsible individuals. With a reliable cadre of aides in place, Abbas may finally be capable of facing the real challenges that he has so far been slow to openly confront.

Ben Fishman is a researcher and special assistant at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He participated in a 10-day research trip to Israel, Ramallah and Gaza in March. The visit included a meeting with Mahmoud Abbas in the Muqata. ❖

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