

A New Palestinian Cabinet

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Brief Analysis

On February 24, 2005, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) approved the new cabinet presented by Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei by a vote of fifty-four to ten, with four abstentions, establishing the first official government appointed after the January election of President Mahmoud Abbas. After a week of political infighting over the makeup of the cabinet, Qurei yielded to pressure from the Fatah bloc and offered a list composed almost exclusively of technocrats with professional expertise in the fields of their respective ministries. Nearly all of Yasser Arafat's political appointees from the old guard were removed. The reformers within Fatah who led the opposition to Qurei compromised as well by agreeing that no sitting member of the council (other than the prime minister and the new deputy prime minister, Nabil Shaath) could be in the cabinet, thereby keeping the most prominent political proponents of reform outside the executive branch.

Changing of the Guard

The new twenty-four-member cabinet features seventeen individuals without prior experience at that level of government. This is a stark contrast to Qurei's proposed list of February 21, which contained only four new members. The seventeen new ministers were selected largely as a result of their expertise in specific fields—ten have doctorates in economics, political science, or engineering, and nearly all have experience working as bureaucrats within Palestinian Authority (PA) agencies or nongovernmental organizations.

Two particularly prominent additions are Muhammad Dahlan as minister of civil affairs and Gen. Nasser Yousef as interior minister. Both appointments were expected. Yousef, who led the brief 1996 crackdown on Hamas ordered by Arafat, will be charged with unifying the various security forces into three specific branches under one authority. Dahlan, who served as minister of state for security affairs in Abbas's short-lived 2003 cabinet, is a close political ally of the new Palestinian president. He will replace Jamil Tarifi, widely viewed as corrupt, in a ministry that oversees numerous appointments and privileges. Dahlan has also been responsible for security coordination with Israel over the past few months.

Remaining in the cabinet are Salam Fayad as finance minister and Nabil Shaath, who will move from foreign minister to deputy prime minister. Fayad, a former International Monetary Fund official and a University of Texas-educated economist, has served as finance minister since June 2002 and has been widely acclaimed for spearheading reforms of the PA's finances. Shaath was a longtime ally of Arafat and remains a close associate of

Qurei. Nasser al-Kidwa, a nephew of Arafat who has served as the Palestinian representative at the UN since 1991, will become foreign minister.

Aside from Tarifi, key departures among the cabinet's old guard include Minister of Social Affairs Intisar al-Wazeer (a.k.a. Um Jihad), the wife of former Arafat deputy Abu Jihad who has served in that post since 1994, and Interior Minister Hikam Balawi, the former Palestine Liberation Organization ambassador to Tunisia. Qurei had not included Tarifi, al-Wazeer, or Balawi in his proposed cabinet list, indicating that their appointment would have been a nonstarter for Fatah's young guard. Also missing from the new cabinet will be longtime minister of negotiations Saeb Erekat.

The previous cabinet, appointed by Qurei in November 2003, included three ministers who had served since Arafat established the original twelve-member provisional cabinet in 1994. Only Shaath remains from that group. Seven ministers in the November 2003 cabinet had served since the first official cabinet was appointed in 1996, and twelve ministers (half of the full cabinet) had served since 1998; again, Shaath is the only remaining such minister. Qurei's proposed cabinet would have included (aside from Shaath) one minister who had served since 1994, two who had served since 1996, and three who had served since 1998, none of whom were part of the final approved list.

The Technocratic Compromise

Qurei and the young guard of Fatah battled for nearly five weeks over the composition of the cabinet, with Qurei seeking to keep much of the old guard in place and the reformers pressing for more representation. The confrontation peaked earlier this week when a majority of the Fatah faction (consisting of the reformers and their older colleagues) threatened to reject Qurei's proposed cabinet, a move that would have forced the prime minister's resignation. A series of marathon meetings followed. By February 23, Qurei's aides threatened that he would resign, and his opponents began suggesting names of potential replacements. Abbas, who had stayed on the sidelines of the debate, began participating actively in the negotiations, reportedly urging a solution in order to stave off a wider political crisis. One report quoted him as telling the legislators, "The whole world is watching, and we have a lot to do." Until that point, several Fatah reformers were still pressing for the resignation of Qurei even after the prime minister had conceded to appointing a cabinet composed largely of technocrats.

Despite the remaking of the cabinet, there are no clear victors from the political battle. Qurei lost the most with the repudiation of the old guard, which raises questions about the future of his premiership after the July PLC elections. For now, however, he heads a cabinet with few prominent figures able to challenge his authority. The young guard succeeded in cleansing the cabinet of much of the corrupt old guard, but they conceded to the appointment of technocrats rather than their own members. As mentioned previously, rather than face a prolonged struggle about which of their members would serve in the cabinet, the Fatah reformers—in an underreported move—conceded that no sitting PLC member could be appointed (other than Qurei and Shaath), thus keeping the council's most prominent reform advocates and some of Abbas's most loyal supporters outside the executive. By acceding to this compromise, the reformers put their collective objectives ahead of their personal politics, at least for now.

For his part, Abbas managed to avoid a full-blown political crisis at a time when presenting a unified Palestinian front to the international community will be important for obtaining aid. (The success of next week's London Conference on Palestinian economic development could have been jeopardized had the PA still lacked an agreed-upon government with relevant ministers able to attend). Moreover, two of Abbas's loyalists, Yousef and Dahlan, will hold the key security portfolios. Yet, other close allies (e.g., Nabil Amr, who was slated to become information minister, and Said al-Karunz, Abbas's choice for minister of commerce) were left out of the cabinet as a result of the compromise.

Prospects under the Technocrats

When presenting the new cabinet, Qurei declared, "The first mission will be the drafting of a work plan within a week after every minister has had the chance to become acquainted with his ministry, the programs, and the former cabinet reports in order to draft a three-month plan which will be presented to the PLC so that supervision and follow-up can be conducted." Chief among the many challenges facing the new ministers will be the brevity of their terms, which may last only until the July legislative elections. Will the new ministers be able to implement significant reforms in just five months, or will they be viewed as lame ducks until the elections? Will technocrats be able to function more effectively than political reformers who have independent bases of power? Will the shift to a professionalized executive branch endure, and, if so, would such a trend help Abbas consolidate his own power and secure the reforms he seeks? The fact that approving the cabinet required such extensive political effort indicates the limits of Abbas's influence at a precarious time, when he is trying to demonstrate his effectiveness as a leader. One thing is certain: the de-Arafatization of Palestinian governance has advanced another step.

Ben Fishman is a special assistant at The Washington Institute. ❖

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