

No Grace Period for Newly Elected Abbas

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Brief Analysis

The newly announced ceasefire provides an opportunity for progress in Israeli-Palestinian relations, especially with the newly elected Palestinian leadership and the new Israeli coalition government. The time has come for both Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Authority chairman Mahmoud Abbas (a.k.a. Abu Mazen) to roll up their sleeves and, with international support, get down to the formidable tasks facing them in the coming months: stabilization of the security situation, Palestinian institution-building, Israeli disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank, and Israeli-Palestinian reengagement.

Abbas's Challenges

For Abbas, winning the elections was only the beginning of the long road toward fortifying his weak position and realizing his expressed goals of stabilizing and reforming the Palestinian internal arena, improving living conditions for Palestinians, halting the armed intifada, and opening the way to a renewed peace process with Israel. It is a bumpy, uphill road. Facing him are widespread anarchy and corruption in the Palestinian street, a dire economic situation, Yasser Arafat's legacy of legitimizing terror, diehard rejectionists bent on destroying any hope for peace, and shattered relations between Israelis and Palestinians after four years of bloody intifada.

Despite his initial lack of popularity, Abbas scored a decisive electoral victory because, among other factors, he promised good governance and improved economic and daily living conditions while saluting Arafat's legacy on permanent-status issues. Many Palestinians believe he can best deliver on these promises in dealing with Israel and the international community.

With regard to institution-building, Abbas first set about forming a new government, to be headed by incumbent prime minister Ahmed Qurei (a.k.a. Abu Ala) and to include certain reform-minded individuals who had been sidelined by Arafat. Concurrently, Abbas is preparing the ground for personal and organizational reshuffling in the Palestinian security apparatus, including consolidation of the numerous inefficient security organizations into three services under one chain of command. Expected down the road are reforms in the derelict political, economic, legal, and public media systems. This includes additional elections, the first of their kind in years: parliamentary elections (set for July 2005); institutional elections within Fatah, the backbone of mainstream Palestinian politics (August); and municipal elections (underway and to be completed during 2005).

The most pressing challenge for Abbas, one that may determine his overall prospects for success, is stabilizing the security situation. A violent environment will not only hamper Palestinian institution-building, but also make it impossible for Abbas to deliver improved conditions for Palestinians, since Israel is unlikely to relax its security measures if it is under attack. In recent months, Palestinian militant groups have stepped up their already high-profile terror efforts against Israel within and from the Gaza Strip, striving to portray the impending Israeli pull-out as a retreat under fire and a victory for their “armed struggle.” According to the recently released annual report of the Israeli General Security Services (2004), while Israeli measures succeeded in further diminishing the capabilities and impact of Palestinian terrorism in the West Bank and Israel, there has been a marked increase in certain terror parameters related to Gaza (where motivation and capabilities converge) including Israeli fatalities therein. Particularly noteworthy are the firing of Qassam rockets and mortar shells and the detonating of explosive roadside charges.

On January 13, the day after Abbas was sworn in, three Palestinian terrorist factions (including Hamas and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, from Abbas’s own Fatah movement) cooperated in a bombing and shooting attack at the Karni crossing, the major economic and humanitarian lifeline for Palestinians in Gaza, killing six Israelis. The organizations stated that the attack shows they will push Israel out of Gaza “under fire.” Clearly, this message was a challenge not only to Israel, but also to Abbas. Consequently, Israel suspended official ties with Abbas until he took action against terrorism. Abbas, who seems to have gotten the message, reacted quickly, and under his immediate orders Palestinian security services began deploying in Gaza hotspots with instructions to stop attacks against Israel. His reaction led to the resumption of security coordination between the parties.

The Way Out: Brokering a Ceasefire

Barely two weeks into his tenure, Abbas has found himself caught between the surge of terrorism and Israel’s thinning patience. He needs to curtail the militant groups, but is not ready to confront them. He needs space from Israel and time to consolidate his authority and executive tools, but the deteriorating security situation does not afford him much of either.

For the fledgling Palestinian leader, the only practical way out of this embroilment is a ceasefire to which all relevant parties will subscribe—his own movement’s disgruntled militants, the rejectionist groups led by Hamas, and Israel. Toward this end, he has reportedly hammered out an initial ceasefire understanding with leading Palestinian factions in Gaza; the exact terms of this understanding are not fully clear, but it is temporary and conditional.

In any event, it will not be easy to sustain a ceasefire, given the strong terrorist motivation prevailing in certain Palestinian circles and Abbas’s professed reluctance to confront the militants. Moreover, that motivation is increasingly fueled and manipulated by Iran, which expressed reservations about Abbas’s legitimacy and policies, and Hizballah, which resumed attacks on Israel from Lebanon on the day of the Palestinian elections.

Yet, Abbas does have certain factors firmly in his favor. First and foremost, he enjoys public support for his call to abjure violence. For the first time in years, opinion polls indicate that a majority of Palestinians disapprove of further terrorist activities. This is especially true in Gaza, where Abbas did particularly well in the election. Hamas is unlikely to ignore this reality while seeking to establish itself as a political power in the upcoming parliamentary elections. In addition to wide international endorsement, Abbas can also find support within the neighborhood. Israel needs calm for a smooth disengagement from Gaza and seems willing to grant him the opportunity. Egypt has enlisted for an active role (specifically, to fight weapons smuggling from its soil to Gaza and to help broker a ceasefire and reform the Palestinian security apparatus). Even Syria—to which Abbas recently paid a successful visit in a bid to mend historic fences—might refrain from its traditionally disruptive role through the militant groups it hosts due to external pressure on other fronts.

Assuming Responsibility with Outside Support

Abbas needs American and Egyptian help in brokering a solid ceasefire, in addition to international and Arab financial assistance and breathing room from Israel. Both Palestinians and Israelis need the United States to monitor the security situation, bridge gaps between them, and orchestrate international efforts, all toward ensuring a coordinated and smooth Israeli disengagement from Gaza—one that will embolden the new Palestinian leadership, not the militants.

Ultimately, however, no outside support will make things happen for Abbas if he does not put muscle behind his end-to-violence policy. For a ceasefire to be sustainable it must be based on a thorough reform process within the Palestinian security apparatus, and on a willingness to enforce it and develop it into a meaningful security plan so as not to give the militants a respite in which to regroup. Weak as he may be, Abbas already possesses the necessary public mandate, forces, and capabilities to stop the firing of Qassam rockets, to avert imminent suicide bomb attempts, and to seriously investigate terrorist attacks once they occur. He must take action on these fronts now rather than later—the roiling waters of Gaza will not afford him a grace period.

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