

A Strategy for Mahmoud Abbas

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For Palestinians, the January 9 elections represented a mechanism both for filling the void left by the death of Yassir Arafat and for adopting a path to a different future. Mahmoud Abbas, better known as Abu Mazen, won a decisive victory, nearly two-thirds of the vote, despite calls by Hamas militants to boycott the elections or vote for Mustapha Barghouti, a rival candidate. Why did Palestinians vote this way and what should Mr. Abbas do now?

More than anything else, Palestinians want a normal life. They want an accountable leadership to restore their economy and establish law and order. They certainly want to be free of Israeli control and dependence on handouts from the international community. Such changes were impossible under Arafat. Now, Palestinians hope that Mr. Abbas will deliver those changes.

The election has given him legitimacy, but he must prove to Palestinians that he can produce the change they crave. His task will not be easy. Arafat left behind 14 competing security organisations designed not to provide security but, rather, dependence on Arafat. However, Mr. Abbas cannot afford to be timid. He is already being challenged. The coordinated attack by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in Gaza after the election was a test for Mr. Abbas, not for Ariel Sharon, Israeli prime minister. These groups want to see if Abu Mazen will begin to impose limits.

While he currently lacks a mandate to depart from the Arafat legacy on the final-status issues of Jerusalem, borders and refugees, Mr. Abbas does have a strong mandate to end Arafat's other legacy of stoking chaos and violence. That gives him leverage and will make it difficult for Hamas and others to resist when he is operating with an aura of public support. He must respond to their tests, while insisting that any dialogue with them to stop the violence must not be open-ended. Hamas and others will want him to negotiate detailed agreements with each Palestinian faction, but it would be a mistake to engage in drawn-out discussions that can only sap his newly won authority.

It is essential for Mr. Abbas to move quickly. Crucially, he can build his authority through early steps to signal his commitment to change. First, he needs to dismiss those most identified in Palestinian eyes with Arafat-era corruption. Reclaiming some of Arafat's wealth and reinvesting it in public works programmes would be another strong signal against past corruption. Second, he needs to act on the reorganisation of the security forces, get armed Palestinian police patrolling cities such as Nablus and station loyal security forces in border areas such as Karne,

scene of the last attack. Third, he needs to appoint reformers and the younger guard of the Fatah faction to his cabinet and have them develop a 100-day plan for creating good governance. Fourth, he must gain immediate assistance from the international community (preferably from the Gulf states, with their windfall oil revenues of nearly \$60bn) to finance infrastructure projects that can also provide jobs.

Of course, what every Palestinian wants now is freedom to move throughout the West Bank. They want an end to the Israeli siege and a cessation of arrests and targeted killings. But Israel is not going to lift the siege if the consequence is dead Israelis. Herein lies the essence of the bargain between Israelis and Palestinians: Israeli security for Palestinian freedom.

Even before his election, Mr. Abbas announced he wanted to resume talks with the Israelis. After the January 13 Gaza attack that killed six Israelis, however, Mr. Sharon suspended official contact with Palestinians and lifted limits on Israeli operations to stop mortar and Qassem rocket attacks in Gaza. Both decisions no doubt prompted the Palestinian cabinet to urge Palestinian security forces to prevent further attacks. Given the danger of losing valuable time if both sides keep operating on separate tracks, the US should push the Israelis to resume direct discussions and urge Mr. Abbas to maximise the impact of his security reforms.

The talks must initially focus on a mutual ceasefire. Rather than repeat the mistake of 2003, when a ceasefire among Palestinian groups was negotiated and the Israelis were not a part of it, the challenge is to ensure the two sides know the exact terms of such an agreement. Clearly, the US must be part of early discussions between the two sides -- not least to help ensure that understandings and expectations are precisely the same.

Palestinians have an unprecedented chance for responsible leadership. George W. Bush has said he is willing to expend political capital to see a Palestinian state emerge during his second term. If Mr. Abbas can succeed in building his authority, if he can show unmistakably that his way works, Mr. Bush's vision may yet become a reality.

The writer, a former US envoy to the Middle East, is author of *The Missing Peace* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) and counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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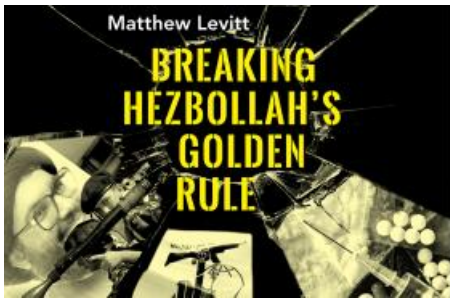
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