

# Beyond Arafat: Palestinian Politics in the New Era

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## Brief Analysis

**Y**asser Arafat was a leader who actively engaged his people in military conflict with Israel. His death presents the Palestinians with an opportunity to choose a leader who will pull them back from that aspect of the struggle.

### What Abu Mazen Must Do to Win

Upon Arafat's death, former prime minister Abu Mazen (a.k.a. Mahmoud Abbas) emerged as the leading candidate for president. The entry of Marwan Barghouti into the race, however, complicates an already chaotic Palestinian political scene. Abu Mazen and Barghouti share common political objectives, such as putting an end to both the intifada and terrorism. Three recent polls from the Palestinian territories confirm that Abu Mazen is a popular candidate, especially in Gaza, among Fatah members, and among more affluent Palestinians. Yet, Barghouti received considerable support as well, particularly in the West Bank, where he emerged ahead of Abu Mazen in all three polls. Abu Mazen will win the presidency unless he makes a grave political error, or unforeseen developments emerge in the upcoming months. Nevertheless, he will face significant challenges, both leading up to and following the election.

During his campaign, Abu Mazen must avoid criticizing Barghouti, which would spur a backlash against him and jeopardize his popularity. He must also ensure that the Palestinian people do not perceive him as America's choice or a Western puppet—perceptions that could weaken his own base of support and swing the balance toward Barghouti.

Before the first intifada, Arafat created a parallel power structure entirely under his control, consisting of official Palestinian Authority institutions on the one hand (including the security services), and an unofficial alliance of various Palestinian groups on the other (including Hamas, al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Tanzim). Arafat's control over this power structure was based on his personal patronage system, which became deeply ingrained in Palestinian society. This system will be difficult to phase out, since many of the groups in question have come to expect payment in exchange for their loyalty. Currently, Abu Mazen is creating his own patronage system to complement and replace Arafat's. At the same time, he realizes that the only way to move past

Arafat's legacy of patronage is to create institutions that will transform the Palestinian government into a legitimate and effective source of authority.

### Challenges Facing a New Palestinian President

Although the campaign itself will be a challenge for Abu Mazen, the most significant obstacles will emerge after his election. One danger is that he may broker so many deals in order to gain the support needed to win that he will be held hostage by certain factions after the election and rendered unable to assert any real decisionmaking power.

He also will have to deal with violence and various armed Palestinian factions. At the very least, he must ensure that the Palestinian police and security forces reduce such violence and establish a sense of order by getting arms off the street and out of the hands of criminals. If he successfully executes this objective, he will improve opportunities for negotiations with Israel.

In order to change the structure of the Palestinian security forces, Abu Mazen must create a solution that is acceptable to various constituencies. This may include an alliance between Bashir Nafa, Jibril Rajoub, and Muhammad Dahlan, three leaders within the current security structure who each know the limits of their authority within the territories and are willing to be part of a security compromise. By positioning these men as powersharing leaders of a new Palestinian security structure, complemented by the integration of other effective security leaders (e.g., Usama Abu Bakr, a Fatah member from Nablus), Abu Mazen will be able to create a legitimate security organ for his new government.

Regarding Hamas—which poses the greatest threat to security in general, and to Fatah in particular—the organization has experienced a decline in public support since Arafat's death. It is losing its cohesion, both politically and militarily. Indeed, since Arafat's death, there has been a 50-70 percent reduction in Palestinian terrorist attacks. In addition to successful plots, this statistic reflects attempted attacks as well—a very important indicator of overall terrorist activity.

### 'Pulling a Sadat'?

There is a striking parallel between the situation Abu Mazen will face if he becomes the new Palestinian president and the situation Anwar Sadat found himself in when he succeeded Gamal Abdul Nasser as president of Egypt. Both Sadat and Arafat were charismatic leaders whose final departure from the political scene was a momentous funeral. After Nasser's death, Sadat transformed Egypt in six months, both on the domestic political scene and in its policy toward Israel. Sadat proved to be a skillful leader who seized a moment of opportunity and effectively consolidated power to execute reforms.

Abu Mazen understands that he must "pull a Sadat" on both the domestic and Israeli fronts if he is elected. Indeed, he needs to approach the presidency in much the same way that Sadat did—by acting quickly and forcefully to consolidate power and avoid being taken hostage by the chaotic internal situation left behind by Arafat. The fragmented Palestinian political system will not coalesce unless a strong and confident president emerges to lead it.

Abu Mazen has the capacity to execute the same political transformation as Sadat, though his circumstances are certainly different. Sadat was fortunate to have the Egyptian army and the state bureaucracy fully behind him, which facilitated his ability to consolidate power. Abu Mazen does not have such support and may or may not prove to have the personal qualities that enabled Sadat to succeed in his objectives during his first months as president. He lacks the charisma of Arafat and is unable to deliver a speech that will resonate with the masses. Still, he must convey the objectives of his presidency in a way that will garner broad Palestinian support.

### Outside Influence

Several of the key players outside the Palestinian political system have recently adopted new policies that may

positively affect Palestinian elections and the new political era. The framework of understanding between Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak shows that Egypt has become more involved in coordinating the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, making Israel more likely to disengage from the Philadelphia Road on the Gaza-Egypt border. Mubarak is also prodding Syrian president Bashar al-Asad to pressure Hamas leaders in Damascus in order to facilitate a ceasefire.

Sharon can help Abu Mazen by doing what he recently promised Secretary of State Colin Powell he would do—namely, coordinating with the Palestinians before Gaza disengagement takes place. Coordinating the withdrawal from the northern West Bank settlements would help Abu Mazen as well. Many West Bank Palestinians resent being overlooked at a time when all of the focus is on Gaza, a factor that undercuts support for Abu Mazen in that territory. Fortunately, there is already significant coordination and cooperation between Sharon and Abu Mazen's cabinets, which will help facilitate future coordination on disengagement.

After the election, the United States and Europe will have a great opportunity of their own to lead the way on negotiations and reengagement—two very important steps on the path toward peace. In any case, despite the many challenges ahead, there is hope.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Julie Sawyer. ❖

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