

# Abbas Keeps His Eye on the Big Picture

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**A**s the American envoy to the peace process during the Clinton administration, I worked closely with Mahmoud Abbas, often sitting across a table from him around the clock, seven days a week. Of course, I knew him by his patronymic, Abu Mazen -- "father of Mazen."

Abu Mazen is a man of many parts. A devout Muslim, he did not drink alcohol -- even though in private dinners many of his colleagues did. Adherence to his own faith made him respectful of all who practiced their faiths. Once, we broke a negotiating session so that my deputy, Aaron Miller, could say Kaddish for his mother. (In the Jewish tradition, the observant says this prayer daily for 11 months after the death of a parent.) I recall Abu Mazen being deeply touched by Miller's act of devotion and asking me questions about the derivation of the prayer. He commented on some of the similarities in Islamic and Judaic traditions and noted that he found it easier to trust "those who live their faiths."

Although he was formally the head of the Palestinian negotiating team, Abu Mazen preferred to discuss the broader concepts and principles and let others work out the details. He always kept his focus on the bigger picture.

For him, that bigger picture was peace with Israel. He was an early advocate of dealing with Israelis and recognizing Israel, telling me at one point how he had started in the 1970s "swimming against the stream" to get Fatah to adopt this position. He was used to opposition but felt the ultimate logic of his position would prevail. He understood that there was no future except as a state next to Israel, not in place of it. And that the sooner Palestinians understood this, the sooner their -- and his -- aspirations would be achieved.

Palestinian independence and the pursuit of the cause defined him. As such, he was as nationalistic as any Palestinian I dealt with, including Yasser Arafat. But unlike Arafat, he saw that violence had been disastrous for Palestinian interests. After the second intifada began in the fall of 2000, we sat together and he said he would do all in his power to convince Arafat that this had to stop -- not as a favor to the Israelis but because, in his words, "our interests require it. No one will gain from this; we will both lose." Later, lamenting that he could not get Arafat to act, he confided his fear that "we will risk everything we have achieved and destroy our partners in Israel."

For all his seriousness, Abu Mazen also has a wry sense of humor. At one point during a particularly protracted round of talks, he joked that he and I should develop a special code to convey instantly how things were going: If he

answered my question with "not bad," that meant "not good." "OK" meant "not bad." Naturally, when I called and asked how things were going, he laughed and said, "Not bad, OK?"

The Middle East isn't a place where men -- even those negotiating high-level peace agreements -- always walk around sporting ties. Yet I don't recall ever seeing Abu Mazen without one. His formal attire just added to the sense of dignity with which he carried himself.

That dignity also held in his dealings with Arafat. When Arafat would undercut him during the negotiations by not backing what Abu Mazen had accepted, Abu Mazen would simply leave the negotiations. In fact, during the negotiations that eventually led to the agreement giving the Palestinian Authority control of West Bank cities, he left the negotiations and the West Bank for several months. My entreaties for him to return were unavailing. He wouldn't come back until he was satisfied that Arafat understood that he needed him there.

Through the years, Arafat in my presence belittled every one of the Palestinian leaders -- except Abu Mazen. Arafat knew that the others would accept his demeaning them but that Abu Mazen would not. Abu Mazen had too much self-respect for that, and Arafat understood the limits of what he would tolerate. Arafat, no matter his desire to cut Abu Mazen down to size so he could not be a competitor, never truly wanted Abu Mazen to leave.

Throughout his career, Abu Mazen has been more a leader in shaping new directions than in producing them. At this stage of his life, he did not seek the new responsibilities he has now.

He has never had the "fire in the belly" to lead, but today he feels a deep sense of obligation to do so. He sees the last years as being ruinous for the Palestinians, and he acts now to stop the suffering and save the cause itself.

Should we take seriously his threat last week to resign? Yes, it is in character. He will not put up with subterfuges by Arafat. Nor will he tolerate those who try to tie his hands and ensure the failure of his efforts. He will try hard to succeed, but he will not humiliate himself or violate his principles in the process.

Assuming Abu Mazen's threat of resignation gives him the maneuvering room he needs, he will face a moment of truth in the next few months when persuasion is unlikely to work with Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade and others.

Can he deliver? If he has a period of calm that allows him to build his authority, perhaps he can. The world should hope so. ❖

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