

Palestinian Prime Minister Will Go Nowhere If He Attempts a Solo Act

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For the first time in Palestinian history, there is a Palestinian prime minister. Though the timing of the appointment can be attributed to the Bush administration's determination not to deal with Yasser Arafat and the pressure of the international community, the idea of having a prime minister came from Palestinian reformers within the territories who were sick of corruption and wanted to see the Palestinians institute a rule of law.

These reformers -- like legislator Ziad abu Amr and pollster Khalil Shikaki -- understood there was no possibility of changing course as long as all power resided with Arafat. In their eyes, Arafat might remain the icon of the Palestinian cause but he could no longer be the arbiter of Palestinian decisions.

The result was the appointment of Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, as prime minister of the Palestinian Authority. But whether Abbas will ultimately become the first prime minister of a new, independent Palestinian state will depend on whether he can, in his words, stop the "armed chaos."

Already in his speech to the Palestinian legislative council, Abbas denounced terror "by any party and by all its forms" -- language Arafat never used. He also declared that weapons must be held only by the Palestinian government (leaving no place for independent militias) and acknowledged that Israelis as well as Palestinians had suffered.

Abbas has begun to chart a new path. His intentions are clear and, having worked closely with him throughout the Oslo process, I know he is determined to act on them. But will he be able to translate them into reality? He faces several obstacles.

The first is Arafat. The chairman will continue to resist any efforts that erode his power and build Abbas'. He will seek to block efforts to confront Hamas, Islamic Jihad or the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade -- and, indeed, has already opposed disarming the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.

The second are the very groups that continue to carry out terrorism. Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual head of Hamas in Gaza, has already rejected the idea that Hamas will give up its arms or its violent struggle, and there have been two suicide attacks in Israel in the last week.

Abbas' third challenge will be to overcome the impression that he is doing the bidding of Israel or the U.S. -- an impression that Arafat has sought to cultivate by spreading the word that Abbas' appointments on security were focused on Israeli, rather than Palestinian, needs.

To overcome these obstacles, Abbas must show that he can deliver for the Palestinians. He must show that life gets better: People and goods can move again. Israeli checkpoints are lifted and controls relaxed. Schools can be reopened. At least some Palestinian prisoners are released. Israeli incursions and targeted killings stop. Unauthorized Israeli settler outposts are closed down, signaling that land that Palestinians considered to be theirs is no longer going to be grabbed.

In short, Abbas must show his people that his way works.

The Israeli government must be prepared to cooperate in taking such steps. But it will not do so if it believes that such a relaxation will lead to a renewed wave of suicide killings.

For Abbas to deliver for Palestinians, he must be able to stop or at least profoundly curtail the violence. He must reach concrete understandings with the Israelis on security -- what he will do, when he will do it, how and where he will do it.

In turn, he must be assured that the Israeli military won't undercut him. He must be promised where, when and how Israeli controls will be eased.

There is no substitute for reaching such understandings now. It's imperative that both sides interpret things the same way and know they will be held accountable.

Finally, if Abbas is to overcome the obstacles he is certain to face, he will need the help of Arab leaders from neighboring countries. They must publicly support him and back him in any confrontation with violent Palestinian groups. Ultimately, for Abbas to succeed he must take difficult steps, but he must also have the help of the Israelis, the Arabs and the U.S. as he does so. ❖

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