

Assessing Mahmoud Abbas's PLC Address:

Many Messages, Many Audiences

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Brief Analysis

Addressing the Palestinian Legislative Council Tuesday, new Palestinian Authority (PA) prime minister Mahmoud Abbas outlined a bold program of domestic reform and commitment to diplomacy that balanced loyalty to Yasir Arafat with an evident desire for fundamental political change. The speech's most positive aspects were Abbas's affirmation of negotiations as the route to achieve Palestinian aspirations, his assertion of the primacy of the rule of law, and his promise that "the unauthorized possession of firearms . . . will be relentlessly addressed." He hinted at, but was not conclusive on, plans to have paramilitary groups like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades forcibly disarmed rather than just invited to reach "an internal understanding" on their opposition to a peace strategy. Abbas's ambiguity on whether attacks against Israeli targets inside the West Bank and Gaza constitute terrorism left a serious question mark. An important aspect of his address, overlooked by most observers, was his frequent reference to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), not the PA, as the institution to which he owed first allegiance.

Domestic Reform

Abbas, or Abu Mazen, began his address by focusing on the urgency of domestic reform. He directly linked the struggle against Israel with the need to put the Palestinian house in order: "We all commit to ending the occupation in all its shapes and forms. This requires that we direct our main efforts to internal housekeeping." The sequence of reform that he outlined was instructive: first, implement the "rule of law" which requires structural reform of the judicial system; second, develop a system of real security, defined primarily as a defense of individual Palestinians against the capricious, arbitrary behavior of the Palestinians' own security forces; third, secure freedom of political expression, recognizing that "pluralism does not extend to security;" fourth, improve economic performance and raise social welfare levels; and fifth, ensure fiscal transparency, combat corruption, and professionalize the civil service.

As the candidate of Palestinian reformers, Abbas was playing to his core constituency, one that may blame Arafat's leadership for the regression of Palestinian political, social, and economic well-being even more than it holds him responsible for the failure of the Palestinian uprising to break Israel or secure visible political dividends. "You may

have noticed that I intentionally began this statement with the government's vision of the internal situation and the areas of major concern," he said. "This is a message that we are conveying to Palestinian citizens who seek wide-scale reforms in all aspects of their lives and related to their rights." Importantly in this regard, he placed the contentious issue of security reform in the context of the domestic agenda, trying to signal that this new approach is borne of internal needs, not external pressures.

A Time to Negotiate

The second part of his speech was targeted toward those Palestinians who may support "armed struggle" but have seen its use since September 2000 lead the Palestinians only further away from their political objectives. "Our people fought with honor," he said, using the past tense. "Every means of struggle has its time." Now, he said, is the time to capitalize on the Saudi peace plan, the roadmap, and the interest of the international Quartet to press forward through diplomacy to "reach a permanent solution to the Palestinian question." Even here, though, he left an exit strategy: all diplomatic efforts will be "meaningless" he said, without an immediate halt to Israeli settlement activity, "the major threat to the creation of a Palestinian state with genuine sovereignty." He specifically cited two items—Israeli construction in and around Jerusalem and the building of the "separation wall"—as variables that will "destroy the Roadmap and any other peace initiative." While noting that his "government will address" these issues, he did not specifically warn Palestinians against taking matters into their own hands by acting violently against what he termed "threats." Indeed, later on, he cautioned Israel that its choice was "peace without settlements or a continuation . . . of conflict."

Message to Israel

The third part of Abbas's speech was a direct appeal to Israel, both its government and its people. This included a commitment to Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 (but, interestingly, not to UNSCR 1397 of March 2002, the first to affirm a two-state solution; nor did he make any direct reference to the Oslo Accords); his recognition of the Jewish people's suffering, asking recognition for Palestinian suffering in return; a denunciation of terrorism "by any party and in all its shapes," without further definition; the unqualified demand for full withdrawal to the 1967 borders; and the creation of a "genuine, contiguous state without any settlements," a general formulation on refugees that was designed not to be provocative to Israeli ears. (On refugees, he emphasized that a solution must be "agreed upon," "acceptable," and "consistent with"—not "according to"—UN Resolution 194.)

Primacy of the PLO

A little noticed aspect of Abbas's speech concerned the undiminished role of the PLO as the principal source of Palestinian political legitimacy. Indeed, throughout the speech, Abbas seemed pulled between his twin roles as PA prime minister and PLO executive committee secretary-general. Concerning the PLO, Abbas said the following:

"[E]nding the occupation . . . requires solidarity and unity among all Palestinian forces under the leadership of the PLO, the sole representative of our people authorized by the major Palestinian institutions, foremost among which are the National and Central Council." Note that he did not refer here to the Legislative Council, the body confirming his appointment as prime minister, "to negotiate and conclude agreements on behalf of the Palestinian people."

The "government, which is part of our national system, the PLO, is fully committed to the programs and decisions of our [Palestine] National and [Palestine] Central Councils [i.e., the highest deliberative bodies of the PLO] on political and strategic levels."

"Our government will work side by side with the PLO Executive Committee and its Higher Negotiations Committee, under the direction of President Yasser Arafat, President of State and of the Palestinian Authority, Chairman of the PLO . . ."

"The post of the Prime Minister . . . and all the institutions of the National Authority are an integral part of the Palestinian political system, the framework of which is the PLO."

In the event that Abbas's government is able to rein in extralegal militias and earn enough confidence of Israelis to restart the negotiating process, Abbas's own conflicted set of loyalties could pose a major hurdle to success. The PLO, of course, is an umbrella organization that claims to represent the interests of all Palestinians, not just approximately half of the world's Palestinian population that resides in the West Bank and Gaza. Finding a formula to reconcile the aims of all Palestinians—from Lebanese refugee camps to the one million Arab citizens of Israel (to whom Abbas's speech directed a paragraph)—is more daunting than securing an agreement to satisfy the West Bank and Gaza population, which is no easy feat itself.

Abbas, himself a refugee born in Safed, would have been expected to press the demands of many refugees to return to their homes and property inside pre-1967 Israel. Surprisingly, he hinted at a different approach—flexibility on refugee demands, rigidity on territorial demands—a position that actually highlights concerns of West Bank and Gaza "insiders" over refugee "outsiders."

While it is not unreasonable for Abbas to try to counter accusations of being "Washington's man" (or worse, "Tel Aviv's man") by offering an opening bargaining position much tougher than the one on the table at Camp David and Taba, Israeli diplomats and American mediators may one day have to contend with the difficult conundrum that he might represent: a Palestinian leader committed to peace who will brook no territorial compromise to achieve it. Perhaps that is the formula Abbas hopes will permit him to fulfill responsibilities to both his PLO legacy and his PA constituency.

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