

Challenges Facing Abu Mazen's Government

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross), [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

May 1, 2003

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

Mahmoud Abbas—better known as Abu Mazen—represents a moderate course of thinking in Palestinian politics and a marked departure from the policy of intransigence and duplicity that has characterized Yasir Arafat's tainted regime. Specifically, he has challenged the premise of emphasizing national unity before national responsibility; in other words, turning a blind eye to terrorism in order to avoid internal dissent. The prime minister correctly surmises that such a strategy has proven disastrous for Palestinian aspirations by enabling extremist organizations to wield a disproportionate influence on policy. More significantly, he has recognized the role of the Palestinian leadership in these failings: an attribution of responsibility that Arafat has never adopted.

While Abu Mazen's intentions may be clear, the path toward attaining his goals is not. In this regard, Arafat has positioned himself as a serious obstacle to the prime minister's agenda. The chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) has consistently opposed any attempt to diffuse his influence and has outright rejected an influential second in command. Notably, he retains a number of important trump cards, not the least of which include control of the vital portfolio of peace negotiations, retention of several security services, and his opposition to dismantling Fatah's own al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. In addition, Arafat reportedly sought to undermine Abu Mazen by depicting his cabinet nominees as tools of American and Israeli interests. Magnifying Arafat's challenge, both Hamas and Palesinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have been explicit in their refusal to halt attacks on Israeli targets, much less disarm completely. On the Israeli side, coalition pressures serve as a constraint on Prime Minister Sharon to act. However, in the short term, the publication of the roadmap could provide political cover for the Labor party to replace those in the current government unwilling to make difficult compromises. Moreover, throughout the 1990s, the democratic mechanism in Israel has acted as a corrective on the behavior of governments that do not take advantage of opportunities for peace. Simply put, when the Israeli public believes there is a hope for genuine reconciliation, they will vote out incumbents who they perceive as being unprepared to act. In this sense, should

Sharon fail to take advantage of the emergence of a legitimate negotiating partner, he may find himself out of office.

While the Sharon government must not deviate from its responsibility to improve conditions in the territories and deal with dismantling illegal outposts, change on the ground will not be significant if the security situation does not improve. In fairly short order, it will be clear if Abu Mazen can deliver on security issues. Here Arafat's obstructionism may impede confrontation with rejectionists, who remain the biggest challenge to Abu Mazen's success. Both European and Arab states must play a role in marginalizing Arafat's ability to undercut Abu Mazen's autonomy by publicly embracing the prime minister as the sole Palestinian interlocutor. European threats to disengage Arafat from the peace process and insistence on the appointment of Abu Mazen reinforced President Bush's June 24 speech and proved effective. European leaders should recognize that Abu Mazen's success rests, in no small measure, on their ability to redefine international legitimacy. If the Europeans and Arabs fail to disassociate themselves from Arafat, Abu Mazen will likely find his domestic position compromised, vulnerable to rejectionists who would like to depict him as an instrument of the United States and Israel. Conversely, unequivocal international backing of the prime minister—reinforced by political cover for Palestinian compromises and the development of a viable peace culture through the delegitimization of terror—would be tantamount to acknowledging that the Arafat era of Palestinian politics has effectively ended.

DENNIS ROSS

For many critics of Abu Mazen, the question has never been the forthrightness of his intentions but the strength of his capabilities. In this regard, his challenge will be twofold: to sideline Yasir Arafat while confronting extremists. Arafat will exert every effort to remain politically relevant. Most recently, this has meant emasculating Abu Mazen and Minister of Security Affairs Mohammed Dahlan by depicting them as beholden to Israeli and American political agendas. Arafat has also manipulated cabinet negotiations in order to reaffirm his significance internationally, while demonstrating that no move may be effectuated without his consent. More daunting, terrorism threatens to undercut these changes. If Hamas and PIJ continue their activities unopposed, the cycle of violence will persist and the cost to the Palestinian people will rise. Palestinians must understand that no state will manifest itself as a result of violence. In this regard, Syria remains a particular concern, with the rejectionist groups effectively allowing Damascus to veto any permanent settlement. In the post-September 11 environment, the Syrians need to understand that this behavior is unacceptable and will be opposed. To this effect, the creation of a joint manifesto among Palestinians and Arab leaders delegitimizing terror could help shield Abu Mazen from extremist elements.

There is, though, ample reason for optimism. Both Israelis and Palestinians have suffered tremendously in the past two and a half years and are accordingly committed to ending the state of war. Second, while the creation of the prime ministry would probably not have occurred without external pressure, the impetus for reform came from within the Palestinian Authority (PA) itself. At the very least, this represents a serious move in the direction of accountable government, not to mention the establishment of an institutional precedent that will be difficult to eliminate. Third, Abu Mazen has thus far proven steadfast in his commitment to change. While making some major compromises, he did refuse to yield on the inclusion of key figures in his cabinet. When Arafat balked at concessions, Abu Mazen threatened resignation rather than acquiesce to the Fatah chief's demands. Fourth, the Palestinian finance minister Salaam Fayyad has created effective mechanisms for budgeting the PA's revenues while weakening Arafat's monopolization of financial resources by monitoring the flow of money. The appointment of Maher al-Masri can only reinforce this move toward economic transparency, encourage investment, and ultimately improve economic conditions in the territories. Finally, in the past several weeks, the Syrian government has expressed an interest in concluding a settlement with Israel. While these overtures should be treated with caution, the message is significant and worth testing.

In all respects, the United States has a significant role to play in the coming months. The roadmap, while an

important step in reinvigorating dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis, is no substitute for direct negotiations. Accordingly, the United States can help to ensure clear dialogue between the two sides by encouraging a series of Palestinian-Israeli understandings reinforcing the principles outlined in the roadmap, but also creating a measure of accountability for both sides to fulfill stated commitments. As progress occurs, the Bush administration may choose to adopt a more proactive role in the negotiations. At the current juncture, however, it is unrealistic to expect either Abu Mazen or Sharon to concede on core issues. It is not beyond the realm of possibility for each side to recognize the rights of the other to independence and self-determination. Furthermore, a lucid declaration of Palestinian intentions alongside public recognition of Israel as a Jewish state could augment Abu Mazen's stature in Israel as a credible peace partner.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Evan Langenhahn.

Policy #416

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)