

The Next to Go:

Yasir Arafat

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[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.



Articles & Testimony

It has become de rigueur in Europe and the Arab world to proclaim that the problem in the Middle East is that the Bush administration is not "engaged" in restarting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Yet the United States has been engaged in important ways, and hopeful signs are now coming from Israel and the Palestinians. To exploit this moment, the European and Arab states themselves must now also become engaged.

While everyone was focused on Iraq, some promising developments have occurred. First, Yasir Arafat was forced to accept Salam Fayyad, a highly respected veteran of the International Monetary Fund, as the Palestinian Authority finance minister. Then last month, reformers in the Palestine Legislative Council, over Mr. Arafat's fierce objections, ratified the moderate Mahmoud Abbas (widely known as Abu Mazen) as the Palestinians' first prime minister.

These changes did not happen in a vacuum. First, Israel's resolve not to capitulate to violence became clear. Hopes that it would pull out of the West Bank as a result of suicide bombs were dashed when the army went house to house to round up militants last spring.

Second, last June President Bush made clear that Washington would no longer view Mr. Arafat as a legitimate interlocutor. Faced with Mr. Arafat's calls for Palestinian "martyrdom," Mr. Bush insisted on working with "leaders not compromised by terror."

Finally, because Mr. Arafat's legitimacy at home rested in part on his influence abroad, the American move to isolate him aided his domestic critics. Mr. Arafat could no longer deflect domestic complaints about corruption in his regime, authoritarian-style leadership and a general dearth of good governance. Polls of Palestinians started to show a desire to end the violence of recent years, which had not led to progress. Ironically, it was the American position, read by some as a lack of "engagement," that emboldened the authority's Legislative Council, until now largely toothless, to push reform. Breaking from past practice, even the European Union and United Nations envoys threatened to disengage, securing the promotions of Mr. Fayyad and Mr. Abbas.

Yet the elevation of these exponents of reform is likely to come to naught if Mr. Arafat sabotages Mr. Abbas's leadership. Over the weekend Mr. Abbas struggled with Mr. Arafat over releasing his list of cabinet appointments. Mr. Arafat has outmaneuvered many aides and potential rivals over several decades, and it will be disastrous if he is

allowed to do so again.

In the 1990's, Europeans and Arabs spent almost no political capital to modify Mr. Arafat's positions, to spell out consequences for suicide bombings, or to exert leverage in the failed Camp David negotiations in 2000. To avoid repeating that error, they should now say publicly what they all say privately: they have lost confidence in Mr. Arafat's leadership. Since he has already lost American and Israeli support, such a rejection could secure a real succession. The alternative, a slow erosion of Mr. Arafat's authority, would take years and squander a chance for change.

European and Arab leaders also need to provide political cover for compromises reached by Israelis and Palestinians. With Mr. Abbas, they must delegitimize the suicide bombers and the use of terrorism. This also means turning off the flow of money from Arab governments and charities that fuels terrorist activity.

Despite the diplomatic turmoil preceding the Iraq war, America still has leverage over Europe. Europe craves an enhanced role in Middle Eastern peacemaking. Given this eagerness, the United States can insist that Europe and its Arab friends now act.

Israel must show its intention to work seriously with Mr. Abbas. It can do so by dismantling its West Bank outposts, which are illegal by Israeli law, and by halting expansion of settlements. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said this weekend of the settlements: "I know that we will have to part with some of these places."

Unless he takes Israel in that direction, he will be in trouble; experience shows that when Israeli voters glimpse hope for peace, as in 1992 and 1999, they will oust incumbents who ignore the opportunities.

American engagement is not a deus ex machina. Europeans and Arabs, as well as Israelis, must help bring about a post-Arafat era. If not, a hopeful moment will be missed. ❖

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