

Power to the New Prime Minister

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

Mar 24, 2003

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[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.



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For the first time in its history, the Palestinian Authority has a prime minister. Mahmoud Abbas, better known as Abu Mazin, is assuming this post in what may be a historic development. Not only may power reside in the hands of someone other than Yasser Arafat, the prime minister may also represent a movement among Palestinians to transform both their internal reality and their relationship with Israel.

To be sure, at this stage I am speaking far more about the potential for change than the reality of it. We don't yet know if Abbas will have real powers and, if he does, whether he can translate those powers into a genuine capability to transform the situation. While Arab prime ministers tend to have no power -- the proof of which is that few Arab prime ministers are even known outside the Middle East -- the Palestinian case may be different for several reasons.

First, Palestinians have been insisting on reform of the Palestinian Authority, and they mean not just an end to corruption but also an end to Arafat's arbitrary use of power. Second, the international community is demanding that as the price of support -- politically and economically -- the Palestinian prime minister must truly be empowered. Third, Arafat's standing and support have never been so low among Palestinians. Fourth, Abbas would never have taken the position if it were devoid of power and Arafat were left to pull all the strings. Knowing him as I do, I can say that he has too much self-respect to accept a position that offers responsibility but no authority.

None of these factors guarantees success for Abbas. He knows that he will confront large obstacles as he tries to change course. Arafat will try to hold power and frustrate change in any way he can. He will try to manipulate those around Abbas to limit his choices and effectiveness. Moreover, while Arafat is unlikely to press Hamas, Islamic Jihad or the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade to use violence to subvert any prospect of change, he is likely to do all he can to block efforts by the new prime minister and his new minister of the interior to crack down on these groups. More than anything else, Arafat wants to prove that ultimately nothing can happen without him -- and Abbas must be able to demonstrate that his cabinet will act notwithstanding Arafat's wishes. To date, Salam Fayyad, who is and likely will remain finance minister in the new cabinet, has demonstrated that this is possible in an area where the international community requires transparency and accountability.

Fayyad may well be the model, but even in his case Israeli release of revenue made it far easier for him to do his job. Obviously, the Israelis can affect the environment in which Abbas and his new cabinet will operate. The more they

are seen as delivering, the more credibility and authority they will have among Palestinians. The more the Palestinian public sees an improvement in conditions of living, working and transiting even within Palestinian areas, the more it will have a stake in supporting the power of the prime minister and his colleagues and their determination to end Palestinian violence.

While the Israelis have a stake in the reformers' succeeding, they are unlikely to ease controls and restrictions on Palestinian movement -- or stop their own preemptive military actions -- if they fear that such a relaxation on Israeli checkpoints or presence in Palestinian cities will produce a new wave of suicide attacks against Israelis. Abbas has made clear that the violence must stop because it is wrong -- indeed, because it only inflicts greater suffering on Palestinians and blocks any hope for achieving Palestinian aspirations. For the Israelis to cut him slack, they must see a new direction not only in words but also in actions. They must see his public calls for an end to Palestinian violence punctuated by a systematic effort actually to stop it.

Initially, the new prime minister and his colleagues may not have the capability to stop terror everywhere. If so, a more limited approach makes sense. But to have any chance, even a more limited approach must emerge from a direct dialogue between the Israeli government and the prime minister or his designated representative.

Palestinians must understand what Israelis expect, and Israelis must understand what Palestinians feel they can do. They must see if they can carve out understandings that reconcile Israeli expectations with Palestinian capabilities -- perhaps by identifying particular cities or towns or even villages where the Palestinians would take security steps and the Israelis would either withdraw or take down checkpoints or agree not to act militarily.

It is in this light that the road map that President Bush said will be given to the two sides once the prime minister has been appointed can be best understood. It is not a panacea or even a guide to action. But that is not really the point at this stage. Now the two sides, especially with the potential advent of a credible Palestinian partner, need to start talking to each other again. And the road map provides a convenient public pretext for doing so.

Paradoxically, neither side expects to engage in any real negotiation with us over the road map at this stage because both know we are preoccupied with Iraq. That very preoccupation gives them a reason to do what they can in developing understandings to transform the situation on the ground -- stopping the violence and easing controls -- over the next several weeks. Herein lies another paradox: An Israeli-Palestinian understanding about their respective behaviors has always been essential for launching the Quartet's road map of reciprocal steps and phases. Yet with real understandings between the two sides, there is probably no need for the road map.

Ultimately, the road map may provide a backdrop to direct negotiations. After the war with Iraq, if the two sides have worked out their own reciprocal steps, we can help reinforce the resumption of a peace process with increasing political content in place of the current war process. If they have not yet been able to work out such understandings, that -- not the road map -- is where the initial American effort must be focused. ❖

Washington Post

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