

The Prime Ministers Nobody Knows

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Mar 17, 2003

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Articles & Testimony

Here's a Middle East riddle: Who are Atef Obeid, Muhammad Mustafa Miro, Ali Abu Ragheb, Mohamed Ghannouchi, Ali Benflis, and Abd al-Qadir Bajamal? Chances are that you're scratching your head.

Here's a hint: They work for Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, Jordan's King Abdullah, Tunisian president Zine Bin Ali, Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Salih.

Still can't figure it out? Answer: They are Arab prime ministers.

In most of the world, prime ministers form governments, run their countries, and lead their people. But in Arabic-speaking lands, the position of prime minister matters little. Except for Lebanon, with its unique confessional system, and Gulf monarchies, where the post is often filled by a brother, son, or cousin of the ruler, the Arab prime minister is just a glorified functionary--often quite able and effective, but a functionary nonetheless. That's why prime ministers are the anonymous men of the Middle East.

Arab prime ministers are usually entrusted with the messy problems (implementing economic austerity measures in Egypt, fighting Islamist vigilantes in Algeria) from which the kings and presidents-for-life prefer to stay aloof. But in virtually no case is the Arab prime minister an independent political force. Indeed, some countries--like Libya, Iraq, Sudan, and Oman--have either dispensed with the position altogether or simply appended it to the ruler's long list of titles.

None of this would merit a magazine article but for the fact that the ranks of Arab prime ministers will soon include a Palestinian. Like these gentlemen--alas, they are all men--the Palestinian premier will probably be an efficient bureaucrat. And like them, he will serve as "head of government" in name only. His tenure will be at the whim of the ruler, whose word, in the Arab world, is fiat. In the Palestinian case, that ruler is Yasser Arafat.

Last June, President Bush conditioned American support for Palestinian statehood on the emergence of a new Palestinian leadership "not compromised by terror." It was clear that Bush meant chucking Arafat in favor of a new generation of reformers, committed to good government at home and peaceful resolution of the conflict with Israel. But because Bush was too diplomatic to say so explicitly, his words allowed some diehard Arafat partisans to concoct a way for Arafat to please the critics and save himself in the process: by appointing a prime minister for the

Palestinian Authority.

To make the strategy more palatable, advocates argued that this would be an "empowered" prime minister. No one has ever defined what that means. But the track record of other Arab prime ministers is crystal clear.

Arab prime ministers are historically weak reeds. Except for a bloodless coup in Tunisia in 1987, none has ascended to his country's top position in nearly forty years. No Arab prime minister has the job because of his constitutional prerogative as leader of the largest party in parliament; rather, all are appointed. No Arab prime minister actually supervises his country's army or intelligence services or determines the country's foreign policy; all this is the province of the supreme leader. Indeed, in most Arab countries, rulers trade in prime ministers as though they were leased cars. Over the past half century, for example, Jordanian kings have shuffled their governments at the rate of once every eleven months.

There is, of course, a chance that the new Palestinian prime minister will break the mold. He may surprise the world and be a strong personality, both eager and able to wrest from Arafat control over Palestinian security forces, finances, broadcasting, and negotiating strategy. But stacked up against Arafat's forty years of experience at the helm of the Palestine Liberation Organization, an Arafat appointee's chances of sidelining Arafat are pretty slim.

So, when Arafat appoints a prime minister--probably his longtime lieutenant, the 68-year-old Mahmoud Abbas--the Bush administration should not let the august description of his powers blur the political reality. Like the U.N. Security Council's minuet on Iraq, this is only a distraction that allows the local despot to divide the allies and play for time.

Nine months ago, President Bush said that the clock on active U.S. support for Palestinian statehood--a just cause in its own right--should not start ticking until the Palestinians had new leadership. Unless the new Palestinian premier shows through deeds that he is something besides a glorified Arafat flunky, rewriting Middle East history in the process, Washington should not let his mastery of English, his soothing, moderate-sounding words, or his good personal grooming substitute for the one act that would truly constitute the coming of new Palestinian leadership: the replacement of Arafat himself. ❖

Weekly Standard

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