

The Invisible Man? Abu Mazen in the Palestinian Media

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Abu Mazen has been essentially boycotted by Palestine Television and Voice of Palestine, stations run by allies and aides of Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasir Arafat. His nonappearance in the Palestinian electronic media cannot be chalked up to Abu Mazen's diffidence or lack of public support. Indeed, for much of a month, there has been no Palestinian media coverage of Abu Mazen at all. His recent press conference at the White House with U.S. president George W. Bush was not covered live on PT as it was on Arab satellite television channels, and was not even rebroadcast on the following day's PT newscasts. In the Palestinian media, he is not referred to by his title of "prime minister," but rather as *sidi*, or "sir." Not even a picture of Abu Mazen accompanied the announcement on PT of Bush's invitation to Abu Mazen. Instead, PT ran a photo of Arafat, as it reported that the latter had authorized Abu Mazen's visit to Washington. After a month of this boycott, PT finally ran three minutes of Abu Mazen's remarks via Jordan Television—but even this segment was buried in the newscast after a story on Arafat's meeting with a variety of minor dignitaries and local functionaries. Notably on August 3, for the first time since the Aqaba summit and apparently amid criticism from abroad that Abu Mazen remains invisible, PT ran a forty-three-minute interview with Abu Mazen, rebroadcasting it on August 5.

The three Palestinian newspapers have not boycotted Abu Mazen. However, each one is rigorously careful on its front page to show Abu Mazen either in the presence of Arafat or balanced with a separate photo of Arafat meeting minor dignitaries or children. In this regard, the most blatant of the three newspapers is AA, run by Akram Haniye, so close to Arafat that he was at the latter's side throughout the 2000 Camp David summit. Abu Mazen's name tends to show up in headlines most often when he is quoted as restating that Arafat is the leader of the Palestinian people. Abu Mazen's best chance of getting coverage is in AHJ, which is partly owned by Information Minister and Abu Mazen-ally Nabil Amr. Yet, even in AHJ, coverage of Abu Mazen is consistently scant. (Notably, in the wake of the ransacking of Palestinian analyst Khalil Shikaki's office, AHJ was the only newspaper of the three that would run in full Shikaki's front-page ad complaining about the attack. AQ, the largest of the three, refused to run the ad at all. AA ran the ad but doctored the text.)

Issues of the Day

Israel's security barrier is routinely called the "apartheid wall" in all Palestinian media. Baseless charges that this barrier will consume 66 percent of the West Bank are not backed up by evidence, but reported as fact. (Israel's Defense Ministry says the western fence will take up 2.9 percent of the West Bank.) At the same time, Israel's release of more than 100 prisoners identified with Islamist groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad was reported only as an Israeli assertion.

There is no mention in any Palestinian media of the fact that the Quartet Roadmap requires the Palestinian Authority to begin to dismantle terrorist group infrastructure; the issue is presented only as an Israeli demand. The image painted by the Palestinian media is that the Palestinians have complied with the Roadmap because the "martyr" (suicide) operations have stopped, and the onus is now on Israel to perform. Rejectionist groups like Hamas are portrayed as honoring the truce in the name of Palestinian unity and because of the desire of the Palestinian public for quiet. As a result, Hamas not only shores up its public credentials but also asserts that anyone who dismantles the group's terrorist capability is undermining Palestinian unity. Israel's allegations that Hamas is rearming receive no investigative attention to ascertain their truth.

The Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary (TMNS)

The Palestinian media has been singularly effective within the last month in getting Israel to reinstate its ban on non-Moslem tourists from visiting the TMNS. Since Aqaba, Israel has allowed both groups to enter in coordination with the PA-backed wakf functionaries of the mosque. Yet, this allowance is being portrayed differently by the Palestinian media, where Arafat is personally identified with whipping up passions on the issue and suggesting that Israel is trying to take over the site revered by both faiths. A front page July 23 headline in AHJ reads: "President: Attempts by Jewish extremists to enter the Al-Aqsa is a big crime." The story contains a picture of Arafat in his Ramallah office briefing Arab ambassadors to the PA on developments related to the TMNS. In AA, he is quoted as saying that he "asked the governments of the states concerned to intervene in order to curb the after effect of this attempt which is able to explode the situation and in order to prevent its repetition." This issue was on the front page of all three dailies that day.

On the day that Jewish tour groups were permitted by Israeli authorities to visit the Temple Mount—they did not enter the al-Aqsa mosque—VOP declared, “Jewish extremists storm al-Aqsa Mosque under the protection of Israeli police.” AA reported that extremists actually “began to pray in the Mosque until the religious guard and employees stopped them.” There are no confirmations in any other media about such an alleged occurrence.

Soon after the barrage of statements and fear-mongering, Israel quietly reinstated the pre-Aqaba ban. While the reinstatement was mentioned in the Palestinian media, PT broadcast a sermon delivered last Friday, August 1, by a PA-salaried imam; the major theme of the sermon was that al-Aqsa was under attack. Here is an excerpt from the sermon as it was broadcast:

“The Aksa mosque is being assaulted every day ... the mosque is now being subjected to demolition, a programmed and organized demolition. The occupation is destroying the Blessed Aksa Mosque!... O’ Muslims! They are working towards destroying the mosque under the pretext of searching for the purported Temple. They are destroying it, they are desecrating the sanctity of the blessed mosque.... They are depriving the people of Palestine from entering through its gates!...The Aksa is calling on you, O Muslims, O believers, to save it.... Isn’t there an Omar [Ibn al Khattab] amongst you? Isn’t there a Salah Eddin amongst you? Doesn’t the Aksa mosque deserve that we sacrifice all what is dear and precious for us in order to liberate it and defend its dignity?”

Incitement

VOP opened its July 23 morning news program with a report that the Israelis had used “poisonous gas” during an Israel Defense Forces raid in Kalkilya. Israel has consistently denied these allegations. The broadcasting of music video clips that have seemed to either justify or exhort violence against Israel has become less frequent since the Aqaba summit, yet the clips continue to appear. The videos may take up a few minutes in primetime PT, presented after the end of one program and before the start of the next. One clip from July 21 is called, “I am called people of Palestine,” and has the following lyrics: “Today, I die. Today, I fight. Today, I live for Tiberias and Arab Jerusalem.” The clip also calls for the need to “resist imperialism.” On the same evening, another video clip contained a song by Palestinian singer Jamal Najar. He praises Arafat while children are shown throwing pictures of Israelis. Najar calls for the liberation of al-Aqsa, while a picture is shown of an Israeli soldier who is shot and bloodied, slumped in the back of his jeep.

A music video clip broadcast on August 8 and sung by popular Arab singer Kazem Saher shows a beautiful Palestinian woman seeking to be reunited with her boyfriend. She is shot by Israeli soldiers when she dodges a checkpoint. The video goes on to show her boyfriend subsequently arrested by Israelis and killed once he tries to escape. Both are reunited in a beautiful paradise. The message is that life on earth is a prison, and paradise is the true source of happiness.

Economic Reforms

Finance Minister Salaam Fayyad, an ex-International Monetary Fund official, seems to be the one Palestinian reformer who consistently receives favorable attention in the Palestinian media. Since he does not threaten Arafat as a Palestinian leader, even AA gives him prominence. He is cited favorably, for instance, in announcing the end of monopolies on cement and petroleum. Fayyad also presents figures to support the success in reforming the sale of petroleum. His remarks are reflective of his refreshing tone. Fayyad has said reforms are undertaken “with team spirit...for the sake of serving the citizen and his interest and that everything we have undertaken from reform and the building of institutions, its goal is to live in an independent state in the long run.” He is portrayed as consistently conditioning Palestinian society, making sure Palestinians understand that reform will take time, but that the goal is transparent government designed to help the average citizen.

Conclusion

A central premise of international support for Abu Mazen as the first Palestinian prime minister has been that his stature is linked to broad domestic support, which derives from his success in obtaining benefits for the Palestinian people and communicating those achievements to the public. Yet, the realization of this premise is predicated upon a free Palestinian media. Instead, it appears that Yasir Arafat has constructed his own “security fence”—an information barrier seeking to prevent the Palestinian people from having unfettered access to the statements and activities of the new premier. Instead, the public is treated to a ubiquitous Arafat in the state-run media.

In the short run, this communications barrier can be overcome by having Abu Mazen appear more often on Arab satellite television channels that are more open and popular with Palestinians. If Arafat is seeking to deny media time to Abu Mazen, it is only symptomatic of a much broader problem, namely, Arafat’s unambiguous drive to thwart Abu Mazen’s tenure as prime minister.