



## Abbas's Five Non-Options

By Tal Becker

**T**here is one resource that is usually more abundant in the Middle East than oil: bad options. Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas is learning this lesson the hard way. In his eyes, each of his present policy alternatives seems worse than the next. Endless Palestinian deliberation between them has induced a kind of stasis in decisionmaking. The result is not so much that nothing is happening. Rather, it is that the political hole in which the West Bank Palestinian leadership now finds itself gets steadily deeper, to the point where those inside it risk no longer being able to find their way to the surface.

At a time when the Middle East is in upheaval, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been pushed to the margins of the diplomatic agenda. The Islamist surge in the region has emboldened Hamas's political ambitions and is making Abbas's Fatah feel ever more isolated and anachronistic. The loss of former Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak, and the Arab uprisings more broadly, have relegated Abbas to the back burner. As crisis escalates with Iran, the bloodbath in Syria continues, Egypt undergoes unprecedented change, and the region as a whole finds itself in a period of profound uncertainty, the goal of Palestinian statehood alongside Israel seems, to many, neither possible nor pressing.

After years of frustration with the conventional negotiation track, President Abbas has toyed increasingly, though not always convincingly, with other options. Eager to maintain political relevance, and at least the semblance of progress, the Palestinian

Authority has threatened intermittently to embark upon some new initiative (see examples below). Potential for an economic crisis and growing signs of unrest in the West Bank (for example, recent violent protests over PA austerity measures, demonstrations against the harsh conduct of Palestinian security forces, and a decrease in Abbas's popularity in the polls), have only intensified the search for popular policy alternatives. But despite the hype often associated with these proposals, the Palestinian leadership has consistently failed to follow through.

To be sure, some of these initiatives—such as the desire to seek membership in major UN agencies beyond UNESCO—have sometimes been aborted as much because of international opposition as Palestinian indecision. With respect to others, the PA has initiated the pullback, assessing that the near certain costs would outweigh questionable and largely symbolic gains.

In the end, however, the tendency to advance and then abandon these options has served to underscore the emptiness of Palestinian threats and entrench a pervasive Palestinian sense of helplessness about the present situation. For some, it has been evidence of a regular Palestinian penchant for climbing up trees, only to find themselves without a ladder to climb down. In the Israeli arena, those issuing dire warnings about the dangers of Palestinian unilateral actions and threats or of Israeli inaction have been discredited as the relative calm still persists (for now). The overall impact has been to highlight Abbas's severe constraints (some, perhaps, self-generated) rather than elicit the desired response either from Israel or from the international community.

There are, of course, multiple causes for the present impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The deadlock in Palestinian decisionmaking is only one of them. But it is worth understanding the nature of Abbas's indecision in relation to the policy options that regularly feature in Palestinian rhetoric and calculations. Such analysis not only presents a picture of Abbas's mindset. It presents a dire warning about the increasingly untenable state of the current Palestinian leadership, about the growing risk of a steady descent into violence, and about the degree of energy that is required to move things off their present, dangerous, trajectory.

## 1. Negotiations

From a Palestinian perspective, a meaningful negotiating process with the present Israeli government has long been discounted, perhaps even from the outset. But it is too simplistic to attribute this merely to the Palestinian assessment that the kind of deal that could be sold to the Palestinian public cannot be reached with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's coalition. Many other factors are at play, not least the turmoil of the Arab uprisings, and the questions of legitimacy and popularity that cast a shadow over the PA in general, and Abbas in particular.

The present volatile regional environment arguably renders the kinds of heart-wrenching decisions any peace agreement requires of any Palestinian leader exceedingly unpopular and politically

out of reach, virtually regardless of Israel's position. Indeed, even if Netanyahu's coalition were to meet current Palestinian preconditions for negotiations and show exceptional flexibility at the table (neither development seems imminent), Abbas would still find it difficult to take yes for an answer.

The Palestinian president knows only too well that even modest compromises with Israel will have him labeled as a traitor to the Palestinian cause before core Palestinian and Arab constituencies. Hamas, key elements in the Palestinian diaspora, and some of his own Fatah colleagues (eager to gain politically from Abbas's risk-taking) will no doubt be part of this chorus. This has always been a difficult proposition for Abbas, now perhaps even more so given his sense of mortality and his eye toward an honorable exit from the political stage. In the past, his calculation has been that Arab states could provide the legitimacy for a deal and act as a counterweight to public opposition. Presently, he harbors no illusion that this is possible.

Faced with the turmoil of the Arab uprisings, and fearful of backlash against their own rule from internal and external forces, few Arab leaders will stick their necks out to defend any unpopular Palestinian decision, even if some privately support it. Abbas, bereft of allies abroad and fragile at home, sees little legitimacy or political advantage in genuine dealmaking with Israel.

And yet, despite his lack of faith, Abbas remains reluctant to turn his back definitively on the negotiation option. In part, this is because he has still not dismissed negotiations as entirely futile if circumstances change in the future, perhaps some time after U.S. elections. But it is also because he is keenly aware of the potential consequences of definitively abandoning talks, including in terms of potential Israeli and U.S. retaliation, and of his own political legitimacy. Declaring the negotiations dead may offer Abbas a brief moment of bravado before Palestinian audiences, but it weakens his core calling card as Israel's interlocutor and runs against his general aversion for bold action and closing options. In his assessment, a public admission that the diplomatic model he championed was an irredeemable failure would undermine his

international standing, including his relationship with Washington, would offer ammunition to his Fatah and Hamas rivals, and would bring the risk of violence that he opposes closer.

In light of this predicament, Abbas prefers to give lip service to negotiations when necessary, and highlight Israeli wrongdoing and blame where he deems possible. If pressed, Abbas may allow some form of dialogue to proceed—like the five rounds of talks that took place in Amman earlier this year—but in the present environment at least, it will likely be in order to avoid international blame for deadlock rather than to seek a concrete diplomatic achievement.

## 2. Dismantling the Palestinian Authority

Over the last year or so, diplomats meeting with certain Palestinian officials have regularly heard that the Palestinians may have no choice but to dismantle the PA, or repudiate the Oslo accords, and insist that Israel resume all responsibilities and control over the West Bank. President Abbas's much-discussed letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu earlier this year was initially intended to issue this kind of ultimatum.

This option, so the logic goes, would compel Israel to carry the full weight of the occupation and, in so doing, pressure it to make the concessions Palestinians deem necessary for a two-state outcome. According to its Palestinian proponents, this option would also end the unpopular image of a PA that is limited to autonomy in parts of the West Bank but powerless to independently produce the results Palestinians seek in terms of genuine state sovereignty on the ground and resolution of the core issues of the conflict on their terms.

Quite apart from the open question of whether this option, if acted upon, would induce greater Israeli flexibility or just backfire, it seems unlikely to be a real alternative for the PA in the near term. Not only is its actual implementation complex and obstacle laden (what would actually happen to internal security, healthcare, and education, for example?), it is difficult to imagine Palestinian leaders in the West Bank sawing off the branch on which they sit at their own initiative.

Despite its limitations, the PA has given legitimacy and tangibility to the idea of Palestinian statehood. It has provided a significant measure of autonomy, economic stability, and law and order to the Palestinian people, not to mention its role as a critical source of income and power for senior Palestinian officials. Within the Palestinian context, to dismantle the PA not only reverses the clock on considerable Palestinian achievements toward statehood, but is likely to be seen as an act of abandoning the Palestinian people. For these reasons, among others, Abbas was persuaded (after behind-the-scenes diplomacy) to sterilize this threat in the final draft of his much-touted letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu delivered in April this year.

Even assuming the Palestinian leadership was at all serious about this option initially, it now seems unlikely to act upon it absent a total breakdown in Israeli-Palestinian relations, even if reference to it continues to feature in Palestinian talking points. Admittedly, the possibility of violent unrest, or even a third intifada, could theoretically lead to the PA's collapse, but this is not a development that the Palestinian leadership is likely to encourage.

## 3. Reconciliation with Hamas

The option of reconciliation with Hamas appears regularly in the headlines. From time to time, a groundbreaking unity deal is said to be imminent, only to emerge as a mere declaration of intent, divorced from meaningful action and shrouded with ambiguity. Committees are established, meetings held, and, occasionally, documents are signed (as in Egypt in May 2011 and Doha in February 2012). But the Fatah-Hamas split remains essentially unchanged, despite occasional developments at the tactical level.

The indecision and confusion surrounding the prospects of Palestinian reconciliation reflect the competing considerations at play, and no small measure of political infighting and internal power struggles. Unity remains popular with the Palestinian public, even if it has grown tired and skeptical about its prospects. In an era of Arab uprising, where public opinion matters more than in the past, Palestinian leaders from both factions are acutely

sensitive to this fact. As a result, almost every Palestinian leader is rhetorically committed to unity, but many express support so as to cloak, not reveal, their true intentions.

A variety of Fatah and Hamas figures genuinely favor unity, though their motivations may differ. Some see the necessity of internal political legitimacy and cohesion for advancing Palestinian goals in the conflict with Israel. Others see the political dividends in being credited with reuniting Gaza and the West Bank. And some Hamas leaders, including in particular Khaled Mashal, see unity in the context of the regional rise of Islamist forces, especially the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and hope that it offers Hamas the opportunity to emerge from its Gaza enclave onto the national and regional stage.

But the forces pulling away from reconciliation are no less compelling. The deep enmity between the two factions has not abated. Both Fatah and Hamas have senior figures who are loath to give up their current monopoly over certain assets (e.g., security forces in the West Bank for Fatah; control of Gaza for Hamas) in favor of a vague and likely volatile unity deal.

Some doubt the likelihood, or fear the outcome, of elections. Some in Hamas, in contrast to Mashal, question whether compromises with Fatah are even necessary when the Muslim Brotherhood is ascendant in Egypt and across the region. All that Hamas needs to do, they argue, is bide its time as Fatah's political viability inevitably fades. There are Fatah figures who also share this concern, but view national reconciliation as accelerating the trend of Islamist empowerment in the Palestinian arena rather than stemming it.

In the midst of all these competing considerations lie Abbas's concerns about the political and economic consequences internationally of following through on a unity deal. He remains particularly hesitant to cut the umbilical cord with Washington, and continues to hold out some hope that, if reelected, President Obama will recommit significant political capital to the cause of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. A fully fledged deal with Hamas seriously jeopardizes all that. It

invites stern retaliation from Congress and the administration, not to mention Israel, that may leave Abbas badly bruised and even more isolated, and arguably without his greatest asset: international legitimacy.

All these factors, and others, serve to dampen the prospects of genuine reconciliation anytime soon. The drumbeat of headlines about reconciliation efforts will no doubt continue, and the declared intention of leaders from both sides in favor of unity will probably not recede. But seasoned observers of the Palestinian scene should know by now to discern between what is said and what is done.

#### 4. The UN Option

After much of 2011 was spent planning for and agonizing over the consequences of a Palestinian statehood bid at the UN, the initiative has so far produced not much more than a whimper. The process is frozen in the Security Council, with no great Palestinian appetite to force the issue to a vote and confront not only the inevitable U.S. veto, but also the embarrassment that even a favorable nominal majority may not be attained.

The option of pursuing non-member-state status in the General Assembly (GA), where the Palestinians traditionally enjoy broad support, remains potentially open to Abbas and more achievable. Of all the options he has floated, it seems the most likely to be pursued at this stage. Indeed, at the time of this writing, the general view is that Abbas will express his intention to pursue this course from the podium of the GA when he address it in late September, even if he will not necessarily follow through, at least until after U.S. elections.

Abbas comes to this option reluctantly, having shown until quite recently little interest in pursuing it. After prioritizing recourse to the Security Council and belittling the significance of acquiring non-member-state status, Abbas may have feared that turning to the GA would be seen politically as an admission of defeat. In Palestinian politics, as in politics the world over, appearing defiant is usually more popular (or at least less dangerous) than having to explain why you settled for less than your initial objective.

With this option, too, President Abbas has reason to fear Israeli and U.S. retaliation if he were to bring the UN issue to a head. As analyzed in a separate Washington Institute paper, the implications of such a move are complex and to some extent unpredictable.<sup>1</sup> On the eve of elections, the U.S. administration is likely to react harshly to what will be seen as Palestinian unilateral provocation. The U.S.-Palestinian relationship is liable to be severely set back, and Abbas will think more than twice before precipitating this outcome before November. For this reason, the assumption is that he will not pull the trigger until after the U.S. elections, and perhaps treat the entire initiative as a bargaining chip that he may hope to trade for U.S. or Israeli concessions.

This mode of threatening unilateral action and then hoping for concessions if he does not follow through has not served Abbas particularly well of late. Still, it is a play he is familiar with, and of all his options, the GA course may seem to him the “least worst” alternative. With little to show a year on from the launch of his UN initiative, Abbas may simply feel that his hand is forced, and that inaction on this score is no longer viable.

Recourse to the GA, despite the risks, may also become ostensibly more appealing to the PA as a result of an inference arguably contained in a statement of the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued this April.<sup>2</sup> In that statement, the prosecutor could be interpreted as implying that while the PA does not currently have standing at the ICC, it could acquire such standing if it attained non-member-state status in the General Assembly.

Some on the Palestinian side may feel as though avoiding the GA, when the ICC option could potentially be opened before them as a result, will

attract the ire of the Palestinian public. They may well seek to pressure Abbas not to repeat what they perceive as the error of appearing weak and compliant to Washington, when he failed to exploit the UN Human Rights Commission’s “Goldstone report” on the Gaza conflict to full effect against Israel.

In truth, the issue is far more complex than usually assumed, and the PA (not to mention the international community) risks significant fallout should the ICC turn into a real option following a successful bid for non-member status in the GA. Beyond bringing Palestinian-Israeli and Palestinian-U.S. relations to a breaking point, a real danger would be posed to the credibility and reputation of the court as it risks becoming overwhelmed by a flood of complaints and politicized by the bitterness and acrimony of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Once created, the ICC option cannot be controlled by either side, and there is a real concern that competing criminal proceedings would not only poison any future effort at peaceful reconciliation, but empower more radical or rejectionist forces on both sides.

Behind-the-scenes U.S. diplomacy is, in part, engaged in persuading Abbas against this option. Some argue that he is cognizant of the costs associated with this move, as well as the ephemeral nature of its “gains.” But a drift toward the GA is underway. And the problems associated with this course of action are not a guarantee that it will not be pursued.

## 5. Nonviolent Protest

For years, grassroots organizations and Palestinian civil society groups have advocated civil disobedience as the best method for attracting international support for the Palestinian cause and rendering the occupation increasingly untenable for Israel. They argue that the image of Israeli soldiers facing down peaceful protestors marching on east Jerusalem or having sit-ins around settlements is the best way to restore this issue to the international agenda and pressure Israel to concede, or at least to be cast as a pariah.

For Abbas, the case is more complicated. His first concern is that encouraging civil disobedience

1. See Tal Becker, *A Coming Storm? Prospects and Implications of UN Recognition of Palestinian Statehood*, Policy Notes 6 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-coming-storm-prospects-and-implications-of-un-recognition-of-palestinian>
2. International Criminal Court, Office of the Prosecutor, “Situation in Palestine,” April 3, 2012, <http://www.icc-cpi.int/NR/rdonlyres/C6162BBF-FEB9-4FAF-AFA9-836106D2694A/284387/SituationinPalestine030412ENG.pdf>.

involves unleashing forces he cannot control and strengthening elements within Palestinian society that are not necessarily subject to his or Fatah's will. Once initiated, with the support or acquiescence of Palestinian security forces, there is no telling what the consequences may be, where the demonstrations will ultimately be directed, and which new Palestinian leaders will emerge as a result to potentially threaten the current Fatah leadership. There is enough volatility already in Ramallah—with demonstrations against Abbas's security forces, potentially explosive economic unrest, and growing displeasure with his rule—to dissuade Abbas from trying to ride this tiger.

A second problem is that it is likely to prove highly difficult to ensure the peaceful nature of such demonstrations. Peaceful civil disobedience does not have a strong track record in the Israeli-Palestinian context. Palestinian definitions of non-violence tend to be rather broad, as do Israeli definitions of violence. Armed agitators and militants could easily become part of the crowd, turning peaceful demonstrations into violent confrontations that risk undermining the entire logic and appeal of the initiative. As feelings of frustration and hopelessness grow, so do the dangers of ever more violent outbursts, which Abbas continues to oppose.

In short, it seems that for Abbas, this option has some rhetorical value, but it is not something to which he is naturally attracted. Protests, violent or nonviolent, may indeed continue to erupt on the Palestinian street. Those that have already taken place may mutate into more widespread and sustained unrest. The Fatah leadership may find itself, sooner or later, swept up in protests that others sparked. But for Abbas, convinced of the folly of the second intifada and searching for political options that boost not only the cause but also his standing, this is not an alternative he is likely to initiate.

### Looking Ahead

The dwindling options available from President Abbas's perspective to advance his agenda are, of

course, a challenge not merely for the Palestinian leader or for the Palestinian cause. As Hamas tries to solidify its position and Fatah appears increasingly ineffective, regionally isolated, and anomalous, anyone concerned about the future identity of the Palestinian leadership has reason for alarm. In this sense, the PA's problems are Israel's problems too, as they should be the problem of anyone concerned with preventing chaos or Hamas's rise and preserving the viability of the two-state model.

Dealing with this challenge should not be about personalizing foreign policy and strengthening Abbas politically against his rivals. It should, however, be about exploring how to encourage the Fatah leadership in particular to fully appreciate the dire nature of their predicament and to give more attention to options they have previously been less than enthusiastic about. False starts and stumbling from one ineffectual dramatic episode to another has only weakened the PA. If it is to avoid assuming the role of caretaker of its own demise, it is time to consider alternatives.

Given this state of affairs, it is particularly unfortunate that much of the energy and promise that once surrounded the Palestinian state-building project has dissipated, and that the PA faces serious economic dangers. Unlike the five options discussed above, this effort—if revitalized—can make concrete contributions to the creation of a functioning and responsible Palestinian state that could be a viable and peaceful neighbor to Israel. With negotiations unlikely to begin soon, let alone to produce meaningful results, and with other alternatives potentially complicating the situation more than they advance it, working with Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayad on building the institutions and mechanisms of a viable nascent Palestinian state seems more important than ever.

For Abbas and other Fatah figures, one of the difficulties here lies in sharing credit and political gain with Fayad, whom they view with great suspicion if not outright hostility. The fact that the state-building project is more identified with Fayad has to some extent prevented Abbas from overly

investing in it. More diplomatic energy needs to be devoted to easing the rivalry between Fayad and Abbas and creating mechanisms for cooperation between them on state-building efforts.

The challenge for the Fatah leadership also lies in doing something that has often proven difficult for them: favoring, at least for the moment, concrete gains on the ground over symbolic or political ones in the international arena or in the court of public opinion. But increasing popular unrest about the economic situation in the West Bank, and the growing threat to the PA, may finally persuade Fayad's rivals that working with him and directing their energies to improvements on the ground has become a matter of genuine necessity.

Naturally, this is not just about the choices facing the PA. There is much that Israel and the international community can do to help revitalize the state-building project. Devoting renewed resources and initiative to advancing a functioning Palestinian state could include expanding civilian PA authorities into Area C (i.e. the Israeli-administered portions of the West Bank), further intensifying security cooperation and training, and of course addressing the PA's immediate and longer term budgetary challenges. It could also involve re-energizing efforts by the Quartet (i.e., the UN secretary-general, the EU, the United States, and Russia) and other international actors to assist capacity building, facilitate further institutional reform, advance major development and infrastructure projects, and attract economic investment.

Beyond producing real results on the ground for the Palestinian population and promoting a reality that approximates the two-state outcome both sides claim they seek, a renewed focus on state-building has the advantage of breaking the current logjam in Palestinian decisionmaking that makes the West Bank Palestinian leadership appear impotent and outdated. It may seem tedious to some, and lack the fanfare that other Palestinian initiatives attract, but a revitalized state-building campaign can make a tangible difference to the reality on the ground, and help insulate the West Bank from regional turmoil.

For Israel, placing real emphasis on Palestinian state-building requires a certain shift in mindset. If checking Hamas's empowerment, preventing PA collapse, and ensuring the success of the state-building project in the West Bank is truly an Israeli interest, then reciprocity for Israeli concessions in this field—that do not implicate core security concerns or vital interests in future negotiations—should be of less concern to Israeli leaders. Proving that genuine gains toward Palestinian statehood can be achieved through Israeli-Palestinian cooperation should sometimes be its own reward and encourage additional flexibility.

Importantly, a renewed sense of active Israeli initiative in this field can help mobilize international support. The international community, somewhat fatigued by Israeli-Palestinian deadlock and faced with tight budgets and regional upheaval, may need real proof of intensified Israeli-Palestinian cooperation and a shared commitment to achieve results in order to contemplate reinvesting in state-building.

There is evidence that Israel is increasingly concerned about economic and political collapse in the PA, and is willing to take more significant measures to prevent it. In July, agreement was reached between Fayad and Israeli finance minister Yuval Steinitz on improved economic cooperation in order to boost Palestinian revenues and stem black market trade. Reportedly, Israel has sought to assist the PA in securing a loan from the International Monetary Fund. And, most recently, Prime Minister Netanyahu approved the transfer to the PA of a 250-million-shekel advance on tax revenues to assist it in managing its budgetary crisis. These steps suggest that there is an opening to explore further, more far-reaching Israeli-Palestinian cooperation in economic and other spheres, given a shared interest in preventing the PA's demise.

Another field deserving of renewed attention is security cooperation. Given the centrality of security to Israel's interests and to any future peace agreement, the progress made in recent years in reforming and training PA security forces and in Israeli-Palestinian counterterrorism cooperation has been critical. In fact, it stands out as a dramatic

achievement during a period when good news has been hard to come by. But it is also reversible. Without a sense of continued progress toward statehood, the morale and effectiveness of the PA security forces and the legitimacy for cooperation with Israel are jeopardized. The more the security forces are seen as merely doing Israel's bidding, rather than as the vanguard of a future responsible and functioning Palestinian state, the greater the risk of regression and potential breakdown. In this sense, progress in Palestinian security performance and capacities and progress in state-building are intertwined. Efforts must be sustained to advance both, or else one risks advancing neither.

For the international community, a serious effort to advance the state-building project may also require diminishing the amount of political capital spent on trying to advance a negotiated peace that is currently not in the cards. Arguably, too much emphasis has been placed on trying to make deals to get the parties to the table, at the expense of deals that could have been reached to achieve progress on the ground. Even if both are critical, some degree of prioritization between state-building and negotiations is inevitable. In light of both sides' constraints, now may be the time to favor small, tangible steps that can be achieved over the pursuit of laudable but presently unattainable outcomes.

As part of the process of revitalizing the achievable, Israel and the international community should continue to explore interim options. Until now, those who have floated such ideas (for example, a Palestinian state with provisional borders, coordinated unilateralism, and so on) have been rebuffed in large part by the argument that the Palestinian side will never agree. But insufficient pressure has been brought to bear on the Palestinian side

to properly evaluate the dangers of this kneejerk opposition. Crafting interim measures that deal adequately with Israeli and Palestinian concerns will not be easy, but given the current alternatives, it has been given too little consideration.

These kinds of options are, of course, no cure-all. The Palestinian leadership will pay a price for pursuing policies that are not seen as squarely addressing the core issues of the conflict. But they are better than empty promises and empty threats. And they certainly seem preferable to the gradual course the Palestinian leadership is presently charting directly toward oblivion.

It has always been difficult in the Israeli-Palestinian arena to discern genuine political difficulties from mere posturing. Leaders on both sides have sometimes sought to portray themselves as more constrained than they actually are. But in these circumstances, whether Abbas's limitations are the result of his own weakness or external forces is less important than whether his paralysis is producing serious, potentially irreversible damage to the prospects of preserving a two-state outcome.

Before the Palestinian leadership feels compelled to choose an option that does much more harm than good, and before its indecision facilitates violence, the empowerment of more extreme figures, or its own demise, there is good reason to try to help Ramallah emerge from the present impasse in as constructive and pragmatic a way as possible. For all states committed to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, this has little to do with sympathy, and even less with admiration for the way the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank has conducted itself. It has everything to do with self-interest, and with remembering that the only thing more unpalatable than a bad option is a worse one.