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Abu Mazen as Prime Minister

A Capacity Assessment

Ahmed Badawi

In the two months following the appointment of Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as prime minister of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), significant moves have been made, indicating that the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process would be resolved at long last, paving the way for a final agreement to end the decade-old dispute over the territory of historic Palestine. A new peace plan, the Road Map, was formally released, and although a spate of violence threatened to suffocate the initiative in its infancy, Palestinian armed groups eventually announced a truce; in turn the Israeli government began to withdraw from parts of the Gaza strip and Bethlehem, as a prelude to redeploying the Israeli Defence Forces back to their pre-September 2000 positions. It is important at this juncture to adopt positive expectations. It is equally important to be realistic about the formidable challenges that still lie ahead, and about the capacity of Abu Mazen to meet these challenges.

The new Palestinian prime minister is a dove surrounded by hawks and radicalised segments of the Israeli and Palestinian public who are making contradictory demands on him. On the one hand, the Israeli right-wing government of Ariel Sharon insists that a truce with the radical Palestinian groups is not enough, that Abu Mazen should clamp down on these groups and categorically dismantle “the infrastructure of terror.” According to Israeli officials, this is a precondition for Israel to fulfil its obligations in the Road Map.

On the other hand, Abu Mazen has to contend with urgent Palestinian demands for both national independence and institutional reform. According to public

opinion polls published in April 2003, the majority of Palestinians still support armed struggle, coupled with negotiations, as the preferred strategy to end Israeli occupation. Any attempt by Abu Mazen to fulfil Israeli demands by clamping down on radical organisations such as Hamas would be negatively perceived by the Palestinian public, and could lead to a Palestinian civil war. Moreover, economic conditions in the Occupied Territories have been continually deteriorating as a result of the ongoing violence, border closures, and economic mismanagement. Coupled with scepticism about Israeli intentions, these conditions make the Palestinian public unwilling to adopt a less radical stance, when there is no

expected immediate decrease in humiliation and improvement of standards of living, no visible long-term prospects of ending the occupation, of dismantling Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories and of genuine national independence.

What are the chances for the success of Abu Mazen? A brief historical account of his rise to power and an analysis of his *strengths* and *weaknesses* as well as the *opportunities* and the *threats* posed in his environment should assist in assessing his capacity to meet his complex challenges.

Strengths and Weaknesses

From its outset, Abu Mazen has been against the militarisation of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, and in particular against suicide attacks on Israeli civilians. In his view, these types of operations handed the government of Ariel Sharon a convincing pretext to renege on the Oslo agreements and to destroy the infrastructure of the PNA. Instead, he has always favoured direct negotiations coupled, if necessary, with non-violent resistance, characteristic of the 1987–1993 Intifada.

But since the collapse of the Camp David talks in the summer of 2000, such views as those held by Abu Mazen have become increasingly unpopular. And even more so because of his close identification with the defunct Oslo process, Abu Mazen has been perceived by an increasingly radicalised Palestinian public as simply incapable of obtaining an appropriate settlement from Israel. Moreover, recent opinion polls indicate that the majority of Palestinians view him as a puppet installed under pressure from Israel and the US. The Palestinian public's mistrust is Abu Mazen's basic weakness.

His basic strengths, on the other hand, are his seniority in the organisational hierarchies of Fatah and the PLO, his unparalleled negotiating experience with Israelis, and the readiness of the current Israeli government to accept him as a partner for

peace. The legitimacy of Abu Mazen, who is not an elected official, is thus not derived from the people. It rests instead on his institutional affiliation, his knowledge, and, above all, a loose consensus among the most influential segments of the politically relevant elite in Palestine, Israel, and the international community that Abu Mazen is the appropriate alternative to Arafat. This consensus emerged in the aftermath of the so-called Operation Defensive Shield.

At the end of April 2002, ostensibly in response to a suicide attack by Hamas in Netanya, the Israeli forces reoccupied the whole of the West Bank, except Jericho. Arafat was placed under house arrest in his presidential compound in Ramallah. Operation Defensive Shield lasted for more than a month, and left the Palestinian order in shambles.

Defensive Shield marks a turning point in the present history of Palestine. In its aftermath, Palestinians lost a great deal of their capacity to make independent strategic decisions. Ariel Sharon has hijacked the discourse of Palestinian internal reform and imposed his own version at the top of the Palestinian national agenda, by making it a condition for ending the reoccupation and resuming political negotiations. For Sharon, reform basically meant one thing: the removal of Arafat as the prime decision maker. Between the end of Defensive Shield in early May and President George Bush's speech in the Rose Garden on June 24th, there was still a faint hope among Palestinians that the US would not approve of Sharon's stance on Arafat. This hope vanished following the speech, in which Bush clearly called for a new Palestinian leadership not compromised by terror as a precondition for US support toward helping the Palestinians establish their own state.

The Demise of Arafat and the Rise of Abu Mazen

Operation Defensive Shield and its aftermath thrust three key questions on

Palestinians generally, and on Fatah in particular: Who should replace Arafat as chief interlocutor with both the Israeli and American governments? What should be done with Arafat? And what to do about the Intifada? The first question was a tactical question, and it was the easiest. To the leaders of Fatah, a Palestinian leader not compromised by terror, who also happened to be second in command to Arafat, and who is at the same time accepted by Israel, the United States and key Arab countries could be no other than Abu Mazen.

The second question was trickier. Although badly beaten, Arafat was still the most trusted person in Palestine, the elected president of the PNA, and the most significant Palestinian leader during the second half of the 20th century. So the idea of creating the position of prime minister then seemed a good solution: Arafat's grip on power could be loosened but not totally severed. In a meeting with the Fatah Central Committee in August, the majority of those present demanded that Arafat appoint Abu Mazen as prime minister. He categorically refused. Arafat's refusal sparked a mutiny inside Fatah against him. He responded by referring to his opponents as conspirators.

At the behest of Fatah's old guard (see below), in early September the cabinet that had been appointed by Arafat in June resigned en bloc in order to avoid a vote of no confidence at the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Days later, again following a suicide bombing, this time in Tel Aviv, the Israeli Defence Forces invaded Ramallah and renewed the siege on Arafat. On September 21st, 14 senior members of Fatah, from both within and outside the Central Committee, met in Abu Mazen's house and drafted a document demanding, among other things, that Arafat should dismantle the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade and appoint a new cabinet headed by Abu Mazen as prime minister, and that if he did not, they would. Apparently, the hand-written document never reached Arafat, but its content was leaked

to him. From his besieged compound, Arafat feverishly made contacts with the cadres of Fatah in the West Bank, accusing Abu Mazen of conspiring with the Israelis to deport him and establish an "alternative leadership." On September 23rd, a rumour spread in Ramallah that Arafat would be physically harmed, and within minutes, hordes of residents spontaneously flocked to Arafat's compound, defying a curfew imposed by the IDF. By summoning the young activists of Fatah to defend him against the old guard of the organisation, Arafat entrenched divisions within the organisation, and dealt a serious blow to Abu Mazen's image.

But Abu Mazen was not intimidated. He must have received a strong incentive when, in October, a revealed first draft of the Road Map obliged the Palestinians to create the post of prime minister. However, instead of trying to build a broader constituency among the cadres of Fatah, he alienated them further by announcing at a meeting in Gaza in mid-November that a new strategy is urgently required because the Palestinians had been "defeated", which is a taboo word in mainstream Palestinian discourse. This clear defiance of the sensibility of Fatah's broad base widened the divisions within the organisation.

Fatah, Abu Mazen, and the Intifada

The power structure of Fatah is essentially made up of three circles of influence. The core circle consists of Fatah's old guard, people like Abu Mazen and other members of the Fatah Central Committee. These are the leaders of the organisation. The second circle includes the Fatah's so-called young guards, such as Marwan Barghouti, Jibril Rajoub and Mohamed Dahlan, who are all members of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, headed by Sakhr Habash, who is also a member of the Central Committee. Also belonging to this second circle are people like Qadura Fares and Hatem Abdel Kadir, members of the PLC, representing Ramallah and East Jerusalem respectively.

These are the emerging leaders of Fatah, and its backbone. The third circle includes a younger generation, who have been referred to as the young activists. They are, so to speak, the arms and legs of Fatah and the nerves of Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. Their main source of power is the grassroots support they command among thousands of Fatah activists. Abu Mazen enjoys the support of the core and second circles, perhaps a hundred people altogether, a fact that should not lead one to assume that this is a homogenous group. His support among members of the third circle is non-existent. The main reason for this are his views on the question of what to do with the Intifada. This is the third and most difficult question the Palestinians must confront as a direct outcome of Operation Defensive Shield and its aftermath.

Not that it was a new question. Since 1987, the Palestinians have considered themselves in a more or less continuous uprising for independence. Discussion about the nature of such an uprising never ceased, although it might have receded into the background during the euphoric years of 1993–1996. The question has deep implications for the overall liberation strategy of the Palestinians, in particular, what mix of measures should this strategy contain: armed struggle only, armed struggle coupled with negotiations, or negotiations coupled with non-violent resistance. On the eve of the formal invitation made by Arafat to Abu Mazen to form a Palestinian government, the politically relevant elite of Fatah was divided along these three competing views. What was simplistically perceived as merely a power struggle between Arafat and Abu Mazen over the composition of the new cabinet, especially over the interior portfolio, was more significantly a deep ideological struggle between three camps over the essence of a strategy to achieve Palestinian national objectives. It was a power struggle indeed, but this time, Arafat was not the only protagonist. He was just one among many. He still commands a great deal of respect, and as long as he is

alive, his approval of a final deal will be necessary. Nevertheless, it seems that Fatah has already embarked on its post-Arafat era.

The majority of both core and second circle elite, especially those young guards of the 1987–1993 Intifada who joined the peace camp during the interim period but who were radicalised with the eruption of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, hold the view that armed struggle, at least in the Occupied Territories, should continue parallel with political negotiations. This view is at odds with Abu Mazen's. However, members of these two circles support Abu Mazen as prime minister, driven by their common interest in keeping Fatah together. Post-Arafat, the capacity of Fatah to survive as a single organisation will depend on its capacity to coalesce around a new leader and hang on to the institutional structure of the PNA. Abu Mazen is simply the only possible successor to Arafat on whom the various leaders of Fatah could reach a loose consensus. And because of his acceptance by the Israeli and American governments as a partner for peace, he is also the person who could save the PNA from final destruction. It is therefore likely that despite ideological divisions, Abu Mazen would command the support of the leaders of his organisation. This is confirmed by reports that Marwan Barghouti, according to public opinion polls the most trusted person in Palestine after Arafat and Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, has himself drafted the truce agreement to be signed by the radical Palestinian groups from his Israeli prison cell, where he awaits trial for alleged terrorist activities.

It should be noted that, unlike Arafat, Abu Mazen is not a coalition builder, and with a reformed financial management system for the PNA, he does not command enough resources to cultivate supporters. And his dovish discourse is another factor which does not necessarily attract supporters. Abu Mazen's cabinet is rife with divisions, which reflect wider divisions within the Palestinian politically relevant elite in general. He must have been acutely

aware of his weak position when he announced in his PLC speech that “the credibility of the government will be based on the effectiveness of its performance.” Abu Mazen envisages that if he could achieve a one-year period of calm, convince the Israeli government to withdraw its forces to pre-Intifada positions, and to ease restrictions on the Occupied Territories, he would have enough time to improve the living conditions of the people and build the PNA security structures. After this year, elections could be held, and it would be likely then that a de-radicalised Palestinian public would provide Abu Mazen with the legitimacy he needed to maintain law and order, including the confiscation of illegal weapons, by force if necessary. Viewed in this context, the truce agreement with the radical groups represents a necessary step in the right direction. But it is certainly not a sufficient one.

Opportunities and Threats

Abu Mazen’s internal challenge is to improve living conditions for ordinary Palestinians, (re)form the governance structures of the PNA, and reach a historic agreement with Israel that would not fall short of Palestinian national demands. To achieve any of the above, Abu Mazen has to convince the Israeli government to end the border closures, allow for the resumption of normal economic and political activity inside Palestinian territories, and redeploy the IDF to pre-September 2000 positions. These are all immediate steps that should be taken parallel to dismantling settlements built since March 2001. In exchange for withdrawing and ending the closures, the Israeli government demands that Abu Mazen puts an end to attacks against Israeli civilians and military personnel, not only by reaching a cease-fire agreement with the radical Palestinian groups but also by detaining those planning attacks, bringing to justice those who have committed attacks, and disarming radical organisations such as Hamas.

Abu Mazen has neither sufficient legitimacy nor military strength to coerce radical groups such as Hamas to disarm. He therefore has opted for dialogue, coupled with pressure from friendly Arab regimes, especially Egypt, on the leadership of Hamas to acquiesce. These pressures bore fruit, and a truce agreement was reached, initially for a renewable three-month period. The question is: Can the truce last?

Recent history shows that a truce could be sustained if Israel would reciprocate. In December 2001, Hamas and other groups observed a cease-fire called for by Arafat until Israeli forces assassinated Raid Karmi, a Fatah leader in Tulkarem. This was avenged by Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade’s first ever suicide bomb attack inside Israel, in January 2002. In the summer of 2002, Hamas was about to declare a cease-fire, upon the initiative of Fatah, but then pulled out following the controversial assassination of Salah Shehada, one of the leaders of the Izz Eddin al Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas. Finally, in November 2002, various Palestinian factions met in Cairo, but a cease-fire deal brokered by the Egyptian intelligence chief fell through because guarantees of reciprocity could not be obtained from the Israeli government. Can Abu Mazen secure Israeli co-operation, not just on the issue of security but also on other crucial issues, such as the dismantling of check points strewn all over the West Bank and Gaza, and easing the harsh conditions under which the Palestinian people have lived throughout the Al-Aqsa Intifada?

Judging by the recent Israeli withdrawals and other token gestures of goodwill, and more significantly by the remarkable shift in Ariel Sharon’s discourse since his cabinet accepted the Road Map on May 25th, albeit with reservations, one would be tempted to answer in the affirmative. Sharon has gone further than any previous Israeli prime minister, for example by using the term “occupation” to describe Israeli presence in the West Bank and Gaza. This is a taboo word in mainstream Israeli discourse, and

the Israeli legal establishment has always maintained that Palestinian territories are not occupied, but rather disputed territories, the fate of which would be decided through negotiation. It is true that Sharon was rebuked for using the word, and that only one day later he backtracked by saying that he meant occupation of the Palestinian nation and not occupation of territory. Still, using this word marked a major conceptual shift in the Israeli debate. Sharon has even gone further by reiterating, in the Aqaba summit, that he supports the establishment of a Palestinian state, and that he understands Palestinian need for contiguous territory. In fact, Sharon announced this position much earlier, at the annual Israeli National Security Conference in Herzliya at the end of 2002, although then he was talking about a Palestinian state on only 42 per cent of the Occupied Territories. His recent statements do not indicate that the percentage in question has changed. They also do not indicate that he would be willing to dismantle Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories. He uses instead the novel term of “unauthorised outposts”, which describes a few makeshift homes built by individual settlers here and there in the West Bank.

These are serious caveats, leading one to ponder the possibility that Sharon’s transformation did not occur on the level of his worldview, but only on the level of his discourse, as a tactical move to diffuse pressure from the United States and to bolster Israel’s image in the world as a peace-loving nation. If this is the case, this would constitute the single most serious threat to Abu Mazen’s capacity to keep the promises he has made to his people. Because of the asymmetrical power relation which binds the Israelis and Palestinians together, the State of Israel has a compelling incentive to continue pursuing its objective of keeping as much territory as possible, which is the essence of what this conflict has been about, while achieving security for its citizens. This equation of maximum territory as well as maximum

security could never be achieved with the consent of the Palestinians. The strategy of the Israeli establishment has therefore aimed at discrediting the Palestinian leadership, particularly in the eyes of the Israeli people, and delegitimising Palestinian resistance in the eyes of the international community, while simultaneously changing reality on the ground in a way that becomes harder to reverse over time. The fact that 10 years after the signing of the Declaration of Principles, engineered by Abu Mazen himself, the number of settlers in the Occupied Territories has doubled, indicates that the Palestinians have so far failed to counter Israel’s maximising policy as far as territory is concerned.

The Road Map provides some guarantees, for example by obliging Israel to freeze all settlement activity and by placing observers on the ground to monitor performance, two conditions that were notoriously lacking in the Oslo framework. However, it should be noted that the problem of the settlements is not just a problem of physical space; after all, the actual buildings occupy less than 2 per cent of the Occupied Territories. The problem really lies in the municipal boundaries of these settlements, which cover just less than half of the Occupied Territories. This land is mainly allocated for the future expansion of settlements, and they contain valuable water resources. Even if the current Israeli government, for some unexpected reason, decided, for example, to implement the Clinton parameters, which stipulate that the Israelis give back all of the territories occupied in 1967 with the possibility of land swaps within a range of 4–6 per cent of these territories, the Israeli government would still be faced with a formidable challenge. Evacuating 7000 settlers from Sinai in 1982, which was the only time Israel returned territory it had occupied through war, would seem like a picnic compared to the prospect of evacuating tens of thousands of settlers from land that they perceive as given to them by God.

Moreover, the Road Map is not a binding

agreement but a loose mechanism for trust building and negotiations, and one could think of numerous scenarios of the Road Map process being stretched over many years, if not collapsing altogether. Squeezed between the hawks within his own Fatah movement, in addition to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, on the one hand, and the hawks of the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon, on the other, Abu Mazen is powerless to steer the Road Map process toward a sustainable agreement, unless he manages to capitalise on two key opportunities.

The first is the unequivocal commitment made by the international community, most significantly by the US administration, to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israeli commentators have described George Bush as “the American president most loyal to the State of Israel.” It is equally accurate to describe him also as the American president most balanced in his views on the Palestinian question. For example, he was the first American president to publicly declare a vision of a State of Palestine existing side by side with the State of Israel, and he reiterated his view that Israel would simply have to deal with the issue of the settlements. Just like the administration of the senior George Bush in the early 1990s, this current administration realises that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a root cause of instability in the Middle East. After finishing the urgent business in Iraq, the U.S. has begun to devote more energy to this conflict, pushed by pressure from both Europe and the Arab World.

Abu Mazen’s other major opportunity is the burning desire of the Israeli people to live in peace with their neighbours. Public opinion polls in Israel indicate a divergence between the views of the people regarding the Road Map and the views held by the government of Ariel Sharon, notwithstanding the latter’s shift of discourse. Abu Mazen has been the director of the Palestinian non-governmental organisation co-ordinating the Palestinian component of the People-to-People programmes, an outcome of the Oslo process emphasising the

need for trust building and dialogue among ordinary Israelis and Palestinians. This indicates his belief in the value of opening direct channels of communication with ordinary Israelis, especially those who have deserted the Israeli peace camp over the last three years. By cultivating the readiness of the international community to exert pressure on the Israeli government and the willingness of the Israeli public to live in peace and security, Abu Mazen could enhance his own power at the expense of the power of both Israeli and Palestinian radicals.

The European Union, whether as a single entity or as individual nations, have a key role to play in supporting Abu Mazen, which could only be hampered by lack of co-ordination and imagination. Within the EU, there is a division of labour that could allow Europe to exert influence: on the United States, through Britain, on the Arab world to control funding for the armed wings of the radical Palestinian groups through France, and on both the Arab world and the Israeli government through Germany. Europe is also key in providing much needed financial assistance to ease the plight of the Palestinian people on the short term, and to build viable Palestinian institutions on the more long term, an area in which Europe, as opposed to the United States, has valuable experience.

Apart from European governments, non-governmental organisations in Europe should be empowered to play a more significant role on the level of what could be called “people diplomacy.” What is required for the longterm solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a fundamental conceptual shift in the minds of both ordinary Israelis and Palestinians. The European public has a sophisticated understanding of the conflict, and ordinary Europeans could play a decisive role in facilitating this conceptual shift through one form or another of people-to-people programmes. Because of geographical proximity, such exchange could be done on a massive scale, whereby thousands of

encounters could be arranged within a short period of time. Such activities, if properly designed, could yield very significant long term results indeed.

Can Abu Mazen Succeed?

As Abu Mazen himself stated, the credibility of his government will be determined by the effectiveness of its performance. To perform effectively, he has to struggle on two fronts, an internal one and an external one. Any progress made on either front would increase his chances of success on the other, and thus a virtuous cycle would be generated. Obviously, the reverse is also true.

Internally, Abu Mazen will have to improve the living conditions of Palestinians, proceed with the reform process, and stop the armed struggle. For him to achieve that, he has to rely on the active support of the Israeli government. Instead of providing this support, Ariel Sharon has humiliated Abu Mazen by calling him “a featherless little chick who needs to be assisted in his fight against terrorism until his feathers start growing.” Considering Israel’s superior power over the embryonic Palestinian state, it is likely that any concessions made by the Sharon government would be far less than the minimum demands made by the Palestinians. Abu Mazen therefore would have to rely on both the international community, particularly the United States, as a form of pressure from above, and on the Israeli public, as a pressure from below on the right-wing Israeli government to fulfil its Road Map obligations. Europe could play various key roles, particularly on the level of facilitating the required conceptual shift among the radicalised public opinion in both Israel and Palestine. Once tangible progress is made on the ground, Abu Mazen could then seek a proper legitimate mandate from his people, through national elections, which should allow him to either crush the radical groups, or, more ideally, co-opt them into a reformed political system.

Abu Mazen’s success is not automatically guaranteed. The US administration is constrained by its neo-conservative and fundamental Christian constituency, who are unequivocal in their support of Israeli policies. In addition, with increased armed opposition to its presence in Iraq, the US could increasingly identify its position with that of the Israeli government as partners in a similar “war on terrorism.”

On the other hand, the Israeli public has been traumatised by the tactic of suicide attacks, which only helped to reinforce perceptions among ordinary Israelis that the Palestinians are willing to accept nothing less than the total destruction of the State of Israel. Efforts to change these perceptions on a mass scale would require a great deal of imagination and resources, both of which are not necessarily in ample supply.

Abu Mazen is thus in a very tight spot. He can survive only through the support of external actors. If this support is withheld, his minuscule influence within Palestinian society will vanish altogether. It is hard to conceive of an exit strategy for him. If he does not resign, for example, he could continue as a figure head. Perhaps then observers would realise that, for the umpteenth time, their pronouncements of the demise of Arafat, whether as a person or as a symbol, will have been, once again, premature.

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