



LETTER FROM THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

THE PALESTINIANS AFTER ARAFAT

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The death of Yasir Arafat in November 2004 has given newly elected PA president Mahmoud Abbas the chance to pursue his strategy of cease-fire (with Israel), reform (of PA institutions), and negotiations (over the Quartet-sponsored road map and final status issues). In assessing the prospects of success for this strategy, the author examines three main obstacles: opposition from Hamas and other Palestinian groups; disunity within Abbas's own Fatah movement; and Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's agenda, which is totally at odds with the PA's vision of a Palestinian "state." The dilemma facing Abbas is that the final status issues must be confronted as soon as possible if there is any chance for a viable state, but the kind of struggle necessary to negotiate successfully requires thorough-going reform, which takes time the Palestinians do not have.

YASIR ARAFAT MADE his last rite of return amid the thunder of helicopter blades, a gale of shredded paper, and the most frenzied human emotion. As the helicopters touched down on the tarmac of his blitzed Ramallah compound on 12 November 2004, a deluge of people engulfed them.

Perhaps the most emblematic moment of that day was the sight of Palestinian officials Saeb Erakat and Yasir 'Abid Rabbuh peeking over the chopper's doors, wondering what on earth had happened to the marching band. The most moving moment was the way the coffin was torn from its carrier and passed from hand to hand like a football over a sea of mourners until, finally, it found its shore beneath the shade of three conifer trees.

For an hour machine guns crackled amid the smog and stench of cordite and over the heaving, pulsating chant of "Abu Ammar" (Arafat's nom de guerre). Once he was buried, the storm ebbed, and dozens fell beached on the tarmac, spent by a catharsis that released fear, grief, longing, and love for the man who had stewarded and personified their cause for close to forty years.

At sunset—and the breaking of the last fast of Ramadan—thousands paid silent homage at the tomb built of Jerusalem stone and green and white marble.

Many prayed, most with hands before them, palms upturned, some crossing themselves. Some laid floral wreaths, one saluted, and many, many wept. These were the most eloquent obituaries. There were others.

“For us—the refugees—Arafat will be remembered for his refusal to concede Jerusalem and the right of return at Camp David,” said Ali Hindi, a refugee from Jaffa now living in Ramallah’s Amari camp. “At that supreme moment of historical reckoning he had the patriotism and courage to say ‘No’ to Israel and America. Against that, his failings were nothing.”

“What were the failings?” I asked. He paused for a moment. “He wasn’t a democrat.”

TRANSITIONS

Four months on, one can say the Palestinian transition to a more democratic era has passed with apparent smoothness. Within hours of Arafat’s death, the PLO Executive Committee (PLOEC) elected Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin) as its new chairman while the Fatah Central Committee (FCC) voted for Faruq al-Qaddumi as theirs. On 9 January 2005, Abbas was elected president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) with 62 percent of the popular vote in elections across the occupied territories.

A month later, on 8 February, Abbas secured a “mutual,” if unofficial, cease-fire between the Palestinian factions and Israel at the Sharm al-Shaykh summit hosted by Egypt. It was extended on 17 March with the so-called Cairo Declaration to which 13 Palestinian groups—including non-PLO members Hamas and Islamic Jihad—meeting in Cairo subscribed. Under the declaration, the factions agreed to continue for the rest of 2005 an “atmosphere of calm [*tabdiya*] in return for Israel’s adherence to stopping all forms of aggression against our land and our Palestinian people, no matter where they are, as well as the release of all prisoners and detainees.”

Between ceasefire and calm, a conference in London on 1 March hosted by Tony Blair and attended by twenty-three states generated plans, logistical support, and cash “to build the capacities of a Palestinian state.” Finally, on 24 February, a new Palestinian government was sworn in, consisting of seventeen new “technocrats,” but with Abbas loyalists holding the key portfolios.

This combination of international, Israeli, and domestic support has consolidated Abbas as the legitimate heir to Arafat. In a short time he has come a long way. But, beneath the unanimity, turbulence bubbles.

Even as Arafat lay dying, some on the PLOEC and the FCC (including, according to some sources, Abbas himself) opposed immediate presidential elections to replace him. Their preference was to delay them for six months, with an interim president to be elected by the existing parliament. In what was to be the first of many rebuffs, reformist parliamentary deputies (including Fatah members) voted down the suggested revision, arguing that with Arafat gone “the law alone is sovereign.” And on this point, the Basic Law was clear: a new president must be chosen by general elections within 60 days.

The same forces that wanted to delay the presidential elections also stood against one of the last decisions made by Arafat, i.e., that municipal elections should be held in Gaza and the West Bank in four phases between December 2004 and July 2005. As a PA minister explained, they feared that “the absence of Arafat will shift the balance of power in Palestinian society in favor of the Islamists.” This, too, was voted down, though the fear proved well-founded.

In a first wave of thirty-six local elections held in the West Bank and Gaza in December and January, Hamas-affiliated lists won sixteen (against Fatah’s fifteen), including seven out of ten in Gaza. The turn out averaged 80 percent, considerably greater than that for the presidential elections. The local elections marked the first time Hamas had decided to go head to head with Fatah in a public, quasi-national election in which tens of thousands of Palestinians participated. And the outcome confirmed two trends long known in the occupied territories.

One was that Hamas was ready to enter mainstream Palestinian politics, accepting that “the armed struggle and al-Aqsa intifada had superceded the Oslo accords,” and thus rendered redundant the argument about whether or not anti-Oslo groups like Hamas should participate in the PA institutions that grew out of the accords. The second was that, in any free election, Hamas could rival Fatah as a major force in Palestinian politics, including in areas deemed nationalist strongholds.

These conclusions strengthened Hamas’s leadership in the occupied territories. The “inside” leadership had long argued for greater participation in the Palestinian political system against “outside” leaders such as Khalid Mishal and Osama Hamdan, who feared that the domestication of Hamas could mean its cooption and diminish its regional appeal. Thus, on 12 March, Hamas announced that it would contest the PA’s parliamentary elections on 17 July. Breaking another taboo, its most senior political leader in Gaza, Mahmud Zahar, stated that if Hamas were to be “part of the government, it would participate in negotiations with Israel”—a state his movement officially does not recognize.

The Islamist challenge was not only electoral. Prior to the Sharm al-Shaykh ceasefire, Abbas faced an upsurge of armed resistance in Gaza, culminating in a 13 January ambush on the Strip’s Qarni border crossing that killed six Israelis and raised the very real prospect of a full-scale Israeli retaliation. After Sharm al-Shaykh, a suicide attack in Tel Aviv on 25 February by a rogue Islamic Jihad cell left five Israelis dead and scores wounded. It was the first such operation inside Israel in over three months. In a taped message, the bomber said the attack was because of Abbas’s “pro-American” agenda.

There were other challenges too, closer to home. In December, Fatah’s West Bank General Secretary, Marwan Barghouti (currently serving five consecutive life sentences in an Israeli prison), stood briefly against Abbas for the presidency. According to Qaddura Fares, a Fatah deputy and supporter of Barghouti, it was a protest “not so much against the man as his method of appointment”—a reference to Abbas’s nomination as Fatah’s presidential

candidate not in Fatah-wide primaries, as Barghouti had insisted, but exclusively by the FCC and Fatah's Revolutionary Council (FRC). These bodies are redoubts of Fatah's historic, outsider leadership where the "insider" reformist leadership represented by Barghouti is largely absent. His "independent" run for the presidency, then, was a reflection of the tensions arising from the principal (but not the only) divide within Fatah: between those who spent most of their political lives in exile, came to leadership positions in places like Amman or Beirut, and sought to preserve Fatah's archaic top-down "revolutionary" structure; and those who were born and bred in the occupied territories, who rose to leadership positions during the first and second intifadas and want to transform Fatah into a political party.

Nevertheless, Barghouti's candidacy was fiercely opposed not only by outsider leaders like Qaddumi and Tayib 'Abd al-Rahim, but also by the insiders who had been his core constituencies: the Fatah Higher Committee (essentially the leadership in the West Bank, which Barghouti chaired), parliamentary deputies like Fares, prisoner leaders and Fatah's semi-official militia, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (AMB), which in 2002 had crowned him their "leader." All accused him of divisiveness. Some called for his resignation as general secretary. Qaddumi called for his expulsion from the movement.

Barghouti stood down partly in return for guarantees from Abbas. These included a date for parliamentary elections (15 July 2005) and, critically, a pledge that Fatah would convene a General Conference (FGC) on 4 August to elect a new FCC and FRC, the first such congress in fifteen years. This would be the historic moment when "the old guard will be thanked for their contribution to the cause and told goodbye," predicted Fares.

Fatah's near universal condemnation of Barghouti's candidacy reflected more than a desire for unity, strong though this was in the aftermath of Arafat's death. It also confirmed the extent to which Abbas's calls for reform and a return to negotiations as opposed to armed resistance had taken hold in Fatah. In the garrison realities that now rule in the occupied territories, many prisoners and fighters (including Islamists) view Abbas—and the international and regional respect he commands—as their only hope for release or amnesty.

Other Fatah leaders, including Barghouti allies, were acutely aware that what Palestinians most sought after Arafat was not a bruising struggle for succession but calm, continuity, and a reprieve from four years of overpowering Israeli violence and directionless armed Palestinian revolt. Said Fares:

I know Palestinians will tell you they support the martyrdom [suicide] operations and the armed struggle, but believe me, they don't. The punishment is simply too great. Most want normalcy, reform, institution building, and unity. That's why we don't need Marwan to stand now. We need Fatah united around one candidate so that elections can take place without giving Israel any pretext to refuse to negotiate with us.

But Israel refuses to negotiate. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has made it clear there will be no return to a political process until after the “unilateral” withdrawal of Israeli forces from most of Gaza and four small West Bank settlements in the summer of 2005. Even then, negotiations will be conditioned on whether the PA will “dismantle the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure, disarm and subdue it once and for all.” Abbas has said publicly that he would not carry out such actions, favoring instead incorporating groups like Hamas into the political process and their militias into the security forces.

The course Abbas is trying to steer through these rapids is “a ceasefire, reform, and negotiations.” These, he believes, are the only means to overcome the multiple crises that have beset the Palestinian cause in recent years and return the Palestinians to what he says was Arafat’s last and fundamental will: “the task of ending the occupation, establishing the Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as its capital, and reaching a just and agreed solution to the refugee problem on the basis of international resolutions, first and foremost UN General Assembly Resolution 194 and the [March 2002] Beirut Arab summit resolution,” as he put it in his inaugural presidential speech to parliament on 11 January.

For now, Abbas appears to have most of Fatah and a large swath of Palestinian opinion behind him, as well as the passive support of Hamas and other Palestinian factions. But the mandate is conditional and the task gargantuan. “After all, we have been here before,” said George Giacaman, director of the Muwatin Institute for Democracy in Ramallah, the morning after Abbas was elected President. He was referring to Abbas’s premiership in the summer of 2003.

ABBAS AS PREMIER

Abbas’s tenure as prime minister was born of the public outrage caused by Israel’s military reconquest of the West Bank in spring 2002. Between 28 March and 4 April, following escalating violence capped by a Hamas suicide bombing in Netanya that killed twenty-eight Israelis, twenty-one of them pensioners, the Israeli army invaded all the PA-controlled West Bank towns except for “Palestinian” Hebron and Jericho. At least 250 Palestinians were killed and national institutions, painstakingly built during the previous eight years, were razed, gutted, and looted. As Palestinians emerged from their homes to survey the wreck of their “autonomy,” they blamed not only Israel for the carnage but a leadership, authority, and strategy that had brought them to this pass.

“It’s not a question of challenging Arafat’s leadership,” said Ramallah-based activist Islah Jad at the time. “It’s a question of telling him that the PA cannot be run the way it has been up to now. If we are to have national institutions, they must be run professionally. If there is to be armed resistance, it must be against soldiers and settlers in the occupied territories. And if we are to have peace with Israel, we must convey the message that our struggle is not against its existence as a state. It’s against Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.”

Thus, the rallying cry became reform and on all fronts. It was aired first in early May in “town hall meetings” led mainly by civil society organizations in Ramallah, Bethlehem, Nablus, and Gaza and attended by hundreds. The FHC and Fatah’s parliamentary deputies added their voices, demanding a “national emergency” leadership, a “professional” PA cabinet, and a binding agreement between all factions on the “means and arena” of the resistance.

Even the FCC stirred, aware that without fundamental internal change its own leading position in the Palestinian regime could be rendered redundant. Finally—but only finally—“reform” became the chorus of the United States, the UN, the European Union, and Russia, which had constituted themselves into the “Quartet” for Middle East Peace in autumn 2001.

Confronted with the combination of international pressure and domestic protest, Arafat, who had strenuously resisted any reform that curbed his authority, caved in. In May 2002, he ratified the Basic Law (after a six-year delay), appointed ministers on the basis of competence rather than loyalty (former IMF economist Salam Fayyad, at Finance, being the obvious example), and agreed to a 100-day reform program, including (implicitly) the creation of a prime minister’s post, which would have divested him of some of his executive powers.

But then the clamor for reform stopped, the town hall meetings dispersed, and the domestic urgency over the need to “change the situation” receded. It was arrested by an intervention that few Palestinians had foreseen, but which stymied the reformers’ agenda for the rest of Arafat’s life. Very simply, the United States hijacked the reform movement.

On 24 June 2002, U.S. President George W. Bush gave a speech laying out his vision of a “Palestine” living side-by-side with Israel. The vision involved a return to the status quo ante intifada, the creation of a Palestinian state “with provisional borders” until a full-fledged peace treaty would be reached, perhaps as early as 2005. But it was predicated on Palestinians electing “a new and different leadership . . . untainted by terror.” The speech, with its three stations of change, statehood, and possibly a final settlement, was the skeleton of what was to become the Quartet’s “road map toward peace,” which was charted in successive drafts (and progressively less detail) over the coming months.

It was also the road map—a plan that had no direct input from the Palestinians, that was guided by Israel and authored mainly by the United States (with some tempering by the EU and the UN)—that spelled out to the Palestinians what Palestinian reform was to entail: the creation of an “empowered” prime minister and government separate from Arafat and the PLO; “restructured” police forces under American, Arab, and European tutelage; and the pensioning off of thousands of security and other personnel who were Arafat loyalists within Fatah. The map paid lip service to new Palestinian “general elections” somewhere down the line, but it was clear that neither the United States nor Israel would tolerate them as long as there was a chance that Arafat might be re-elected or re-empowered.

“Reform meant regime change induced from within, rather than imposed from without à la Iraq,” commented one European diplomat involved in the process. The idea was to “de-Arafatize” the PA along the lines of how the

The idea behind the U.S. concept of reform was to “de-Arafatize” the PA along the lines of how the future Iraqi regime was to be de-Ba’thified.

future Iraqi regime was to be de-Ba’thified. The overall purpose was apparently the cultivation of a new, “moderate” Palestinian leadership more attentive to Israel’s security demands, the U.S. regional “war on terror,” and ultimately, perhaps, a final agreement in line with Israeli prerogatives.

Not surprisingly, the road map went nowhere. Its main result was to co-opt what had been a genuine domestic demand for reform and to transform it into a U.S.-led program for containing the conflict on Israel’s terms and removing the Palestinians’ historical, democratically elected, but insufficiently pliant leader. “Reform,” thanks to its sponsorship by the United States, became vaguely “treasonous” in Palestinian minds and was cast as such by Arafat and those loyal to him.

Thus, when Arafat finally agreed in December 2002 to a prime minister and other reforms, it was no longer under domestic pressure but under external duress. According to European diplomats speaking on condition of anonymity, as the U.S.-led war on Iraq became imminent, Quartet representatives had bluntly told Arafat that unless he agreed to the creation of the position of prime minister, there were no assurances that Israel would not do to him what the United States was planning to do to Saddam Hussein.

Arafat, naturally, yielded. He accepted first the principle of a prime minister, then the powers of the office, and finally—under the combined pressure of the United States and the FCC, and only in March 2003—the man: his PLO deputy, Mahmud Abbas. “Arafat was forced to share power with his successor,” said Palestinian analyst Khalil Shikaki. “It was the last thing he wanted.” And it showed. For the next three months, Arafat fought with just about everyone over just about every one of the prime minister’s powers before finally accepting Abbas, his position, and what he dismissively called his “American government.”

It was a charge Abbas never quite shook off, despite successfully negotiating a unilateral ceasefire with the factions, including Hamas, in June 2003. As prime minister, he was blocked in his attempts to institute reform not only by Arafat’s paranoia but also by an Israeli government that promised little and delivered even less, and by a U.S. administration that seemed oblivious to the weakness of his position and the need for it to be shored up by tangible political progress.

The ceasefire lasted fifty-one days before collapsing under a wave of Israeli arrests (including 300 Hamas activists), scattered assassinations (including three Hamas militants in Nablus), and finally a Jerusalem bus bombing by a rogue Hamas cell on 19 August that left twenty-three Israelis dead. The ceasefire was killed “officially” when, two days later, Israel assassinated Hamas leader Isma’il Abu Shanab, the ceasefire’s main advocate within the movement.

Abbas, aware that his government would not win a confidence vote in parliament, finally resigned on 8 September 2003. Arafat appointed Ahmad Qurai’

as his successor, gradually recouping the powers he had transferred to Abbas, especially in the security realm. Abbas reportedly did not see Arafat again until 27 October 2004. He was called by aides to the president's bedside and told that, with Arafat's condition "critical," he and Qurai' would form the axis of the next Palestinian leadership.

The rest is history—including Abbas's premiership. And what that history showed was that while Arafat and his patrimonial system of rule were impediments to democratic change, so, too, were the United States, Israel, and the "international community."

ABBAS AS PRESIDENT

Has anything changed with Arafat's death? The safest answer is yes, probably, at least in the short term. With Arafat gone, the United States and Israel can no longer veto Palestinian elections—local, presidential, or parliamentary. Furthermore, Arafat's demise has allowed Abbas the chance to embark upon the strategy that he was able to pursue only under the greatest constraint during his premiership. The strategy, as noted above, consists of three planks: ceasefire, reform, and negotiations.

The first plank is to achieve a durable Palestinian ceasefire, since without a truce, Abbas will not be able to make progress on domestic Palestinian expectations "that can be met immediately," according to an aide. These include a significant prisoner release, an Israeli military redeployment from West Bank towns, and relaxation of the closure regime to allow Palestinian freedom of movement and trade.

So far Abbas has won the freedom of 500 prisoners, Israel's military redeployment from Jericho, and an oral promise from Sharon not to "initiate" military operations in the occupied territories on condition that "all Palestinians will stop all acts of violence against all Israelis everywhere." From the factions he won the 17 March Cairo Declaration with its pledge to maintain the "atmosphere of calm," as well as an agreement that if Israel violated the "calm" there would be no "individual" responses from the militias but rather reactions determined through a "mechanism of coordination" with the PA. This latter agreement, however, was not absolute: if the Israeli violations were to include the assassination of political or military leaders and/or military incursions into PA-controlled areas, Hamas's Zahar warned that "our response will be the same as in the past." It was a warning echoed by Islamic Jihad and the AMB.

With "calm" in place, Abbas can proceed to his second plank: the implementation of his program of reforms. The most pressing of these is the consolidation of the PA's dozen or so security forces into three under the unified command of new Interior Minister and former Gaza police chief, Nasr Yusuf.

It is through this "restructuring" that Abbas aims to "restore a sense of personal security to the Palestinian citizen." It will also enable him to shed many of the older Arafatist police officers and to replace them with cadres from militias like the AMB and perhaps also Izzeddin al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas's

military wing. The reasoning here is clear: without jobs and protection, these men could well seek “other fathers.” So far, Abbas has sent out retirement orders to over 1,000 security personnel but the process is slow, partly due to resistance from the ranks and partly from a lack of cash to finance the pensions.

Once power is consolidated in the security realm, Abbas will seek to diffuse it in the political realm with further local elections in May and July and parliamentary elections in July. It is on the basis of these elections—and the democratic mandate he hopes Fatah will receive—that Abbas will pose the disarmament of the Palestinian militias in line with his “one authority, one law, one gun” injunction: only the PA has the right to bear arms in Palestinian areas, and the factions (including Hamas) must transform themselves from extralegal guerrilla forces or militias into legal political parties. Abbas hopes, postelections, that he and his police forces will have the capacity, will, and political legitimacy not only to decree this directive but also enforce it.

The third plank of Abbas’s strategy is resuming negotiations on the road map and final status issues, with emphasis on a “parallel” implementation of Israel’s obligations—above all, a settlement freeze. This was Abbas’s main political demand at the Sharm al-Shaykh summit and the London Conference; he will make it again when he meets Bush, who invited him to Washington for a visit sometime in April.

Aside from a speech in Brussels on 22 February where Bush urged Israel to freeze settlement construction in the occupied territories, Abbas’s call has received a muted response. At the London Conference, the most the Quartet would offer was that it saw Israel’s “withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the West Bank as an important first step toward a return to the road map.” It made no mention of a settlement freeze, final status, or indeed the fact that there is an occupation.

Israel has said less and more: Abbas’s moves toward a ceasefire and domestic reform are “pre-road map” commitments, according to government spokesmen, and will remain so until the PA takes concerted action against “terror.” This stance appears to have the blessing of the United States.

OBSTACLES TO ABBAS’S STRATEGY

Abbas’s three-plank strategy faces three obstacles: opposition from the Palestinian factions led by Hamas; ongoing disarray in his Fatah movement; and Sharon’s separation plan. The first is perhaps the easiest to circumvent, at least in the short term.

Hamas

In February 2004—a month before he was murdered by Israeli helicopter gun-ships and a month or so after Sharon declared Israel’s intention to withdraw from Gaza—Shaykh Ahmad Yasin set down Hamas’s strategy for the “new phase.” It has remained operative ever since, despite the assassination in April of Yasin’s replacement ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Rantisi, Hamas’s current de facto existence

as an underground movement due to Israel's relentless assaults upon it, and the consequent shift in power to the leadership "outside." It too has three planks.

The first is that for the duration of Israel's Gaza withdrawal (on condition it is complete, including from the Egyptian border), Hamas would bow to the PA's demand to hold fire. This is a shared position with Islamic Jihad and the AMB.

The second is that until Israel's withdrawal, Hamas would "escalate" the armed resistance in Gaza while at the same time curtailing operations inside Israel. This essentially is what took place prior to the Sharm al-Shaykh summit. Together with other militias, Hamas guerrillas launched sophisticated and spectacular attacks on Israeli military outposts and settlements while raining mortars on Israeli border towns so relentlessly that their denizens began to have a glimpse of what Palestinians in Rafah and Khan Yunis had been experiencing for the previous four years.

The aim of this military upsurge was largely political. It reinforced the Palestinian and regional perception that Israel was leaving Gaza under duress rather than choice. It demonstrated that however many of its leaders had been killed, Hamas remained a formidable guerrilla force that no foreign or Palestinian force could quell. Finally, it strengthened Hamas's hand in the "national dialogue" between the factions and the PA that has been going on intermittently since late 2002. As a PA official involved in the dialogue commented, "Hamas understands that there is a world of difference between entering negotiations as a defeated party and entering them with the conviction that you are the victor."

The third plank of Hamas's strategy, as spelled out by Yasin, was to reach—within the framework of the "national dialogue"—a "national accord" with the PA and other factions on power sharing in a post-Gaza withdrawal Palestinian administration.

Following months of negotiations, the Cairo Declaration extending the "atmosphere of calm" also confirmed that agreement in principle had been reached on several other issues: (1) a "formula for decision making" between the PA and Hamas pending the parliamentary elections; (2) establishment of a committee to reactivate the dormant institutions of the PLO, enabling Hamas and Islamic Jihad's participation within them; and (3) a commitment by Hamas and Jihad to participate in the parliamentary elections, and on the basis of their popular strength as demonstrated in these elections to become an integral—but also accountable—part of the Palestinian political system.

These understandings represent the greatest organizational harmony that has ever existed between the PA and Hamas since the Islamist movement emerged in the late 1980s. But two fundamental differences remain unresolved.

The first is Abbas's commitment—mandated by the road map—to disarm all non-PA militias in the Palestinian-controlled areas. Hamas has made it clear this will not happen, not only because of its ethos that armed resistance is a strategy and not simply a tactic in the struggle against Israel, but also because arms remain its only deterrence as long as Israel refuses to give guarantees that it will end its policies of assassination, incursion, and (in the case of Gaza)

reoccupation. Any move by the PA to disarm the militias forcibly is therefore likely to be met with resistance, either directly or through a resumption of attacks inside Israel.

The second is Hamas's refusal to tolerate a peace agreement that would involve *de jure* recognition of Israel. Instead, Hamas appears to be readying itself for a more active promotion of its vision of a long-term *budna* (armistice) with Israel whereby any withdrawal from the occupied land would not entail renunciation of religious and national claims over Palestine as a whole, claims to Jerusalem, or the refugees' right of return to their homes in what is now Israel.

The *budna* idea would mark a clear political alternative to Abbas's desire to reach an "end of conflict" settlement with Israel, especially if such an agreement is to be submitted, as he has pledged, to a referendum among all Palestinians. First, it would enjoy support from the Palestinian refugee diaspora for whom a "return" to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza has little appeal. Second, it would have resonance with Sharon, for whom any final agreement involving the partition of Jerusalem and withdrawal to the 1967 lines is no less an anathema than it is for Hamas.

Fatah

Arafat's death imposed an unwonted unity on Fatah, aware that this was the only way to "fill a vacuum that could not be filled," as one Fatah leader put it. But while unity prevailed on the choice of his successor, it foundered on the ground on the question of internal organizational reform and, to a lesser extent, Abbas's strategy.

The division was spurred by Fatah's losses to Hamas in the municipal elections, particularly in Gaza. At a meeting of the FRC in Gaza on 7 February, "insider" representatives argued that the only way the movement could avoid a similar debacle in the coming local and parliamentary elections was through a radical organizational overhaul. This would entail clearly defined criteria for membership in Fatah, agreed policies, and regional elections to determine lists for the local and parliamentary elections and delegates to the FCC. "Outsider" or old guard representatives argued that such changes must remain the prerogative of bodies like the FCC, the highest decision-making body within the movement.

The result of this division has been stasis and disintegration. On 4 March, some thirty-two regional West Bank Fatah leaders, some of them parliamentary deputies and most of them associated with Barghouti's reformist stream, resigned their positions. There were rumblings that some 250 Fatah cadres in Gaza were threatening to do the same, again in protest over the FCC's refusal to institute democratic reform in the movement.

Thus, two months before the May municipal elections and four months before the parliamentary ones, Fatah is a movement in disarray, unable to agree on united lists for either and torn by disputes that sometimes turn violent. Many in the movement—and not just the FCC—believe that the only way to avoid

defeat is through postponing the elections until after the FGC in August. But Abbas cannot postpone these without unraveling the agreements that he so laboriously stitched together at the Cairo meeting of the factions.

Nor is the dissension only about organizational reform. As Fatah leader Ziyad Abu 'Ayn points out, Barghouti's presidential challenge to Abbas was not just over the way the latter was chosen. It was also about policy. "Marwan supports negotiations with Israel only if they end the occupation. Otherwise he believes the intifada must continue. Abu Mazin is against any kind of struggle. He believes only negotiations and international pressure will force Israel to accept a Palestinian state."

This was a policy difference that came to the fore two months later at the intrafactional Cairo Conference. There, Barghouti, in a public statement issued from his prison cell, came down clearly on the side of Hamas and the other resistance factions, arguing that the Palestinians must "stick to the intifada option and struggle alongside the political process, conditioning any lull (*tabdiya*) on a total cessation of settlement construction, construction on the [West Bank] wall, and the release of all the prisoners." Abbas had wanted an open-ended ceasefire or *budna* to end the "militarized intifada" once and for all, so that Israel would have "no excuses" before the world not to implement the road map.

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Where does Abbas stand on these wrenching differences within Fatah? Aides close to him say he will eventually "put himself at the head of the democratic stream within Fatah, the young guard, attempting to marry his policy of negotiations with its strategy of reform." But he cannot do that now, says another PA official. Instead, he must keep all wings of Fatah behind him if he is to secure a ceasefire, implement reform, and ensure a Fatah majority in the parliamentary elections.

"Abu Mazin is caught between two fires," the official went on. "Given his commitment to reform, he cannot reject opposition within Fatah to officials widely seen as corrupt. But neither can he risk the political instability caused by an irreparable split within Fatah. So he is acting as a bridge between generations. He is simultaneously head of the old guard in body and head of the young in spirit. But in the end he will have to choose mind over matter."

The problem is that the more Abbas tarries, the less there will be a coherent movement to hold together, raising the specter of rival "official" versus "independent" Fatah lists in the coming elections. And without a united Fatah behind him, he cannot guarantee a ceasefire, a parliamentary majority, or the authority of his leadership, the three keystones on which his entire strategy rests.

Sharon and Separation

On 20 February 2005, the Israeli cabinet took two decisions that, taken together, put flesh on the bones of Sharon's separation plan. The first gave final authorization to the evacuation of Israeli soldiers and settlers from most

of Gaza and from four miniscule settlements in the northern West Bank. The second approved the latest and perhaps final route of the separation barrier in the West Bank, in which some 7.5 percent of West Bank territory will fall on the "Israeli" side of the wall. Of the two decisions, it is the second that matters, because it is the route of the barrier that will almost certainly determine those areas of the West Bank that Israel wants for outright annexation.

Put simply, "separation" means Israel's unilateral determination to withdraw from areas in the occupied territories that are of little strategic value and/or densely peopled with Palestinians, with Gaza being the obvious case. Conversely, it also means Israel's determination, through the barrier, unilaterally to isolate and effectively annex areas of strategic significance, especially the Gush Etzion and Ariel settlement blocs in the southern and northern West Bank and the settlement blocs and their satellites defining Israeli Greater Jerusalem.

Depending on the number of settlements that remain "beyond the wall" (there is now a solid Israeli and U.S. consensus that those *behind* it will be formally annexed to Israel), the Palestinians will be left with between 53 and 89 percent of the West Bank. The former figure assumes that all the existing West Bank settlements will remain in place and that Sharon will build the so far unapproved "eastern barrier," effectively annexing much of the Jordan Valley to Israel. The latter figure is the preferred solution of Israel's Labor Party. It relinquishes most of the Jordan Valley to Palestinian control and mirrors almost exactly the "state" Ehud Barak "offered" the Palestinians at Camp David.

Whatever the eventual territorial disposition, however, that "state" will in no way be independent, territorially contiguous, or viable. Massive and constant inflows of foreign aid (including for the renovation of a Palestinian road system "separate" from a Jewish one) will be necessary for it to function at all. Nor will the creation of such a state address the final status of those issues that Palestinians and much of the world view as comprising the core of the conflict: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders, and the share of water and other resources. Rather, what creating the state will do is to bequeath to Israel the infrastructure for managing, on its own terms, a "long-term interim arrangement of non-belligerency," long seen by Sharon as the only shore the conflict can reach.

Finally, the "state" Sharon has in mind, far from resolving the multiple crises that plague the Palestinian national movement, will aggravate them, raising the prospect of further disintegration, defeat, and demise. This, too, say Palestinians, is part of Sharon's "separation" plan, transforming a conflict between occupier and occupied into one among Palestinians. The question is: what can the Palestinians do to avert the conflict and combat the plan?

THE TERRIBLE DILEMMA

Few have an answer, other than that democracy must be an integral part of any strategy. There is now a near universal Palestinian consensus that reform and elections are necessary to unite and revive a national movement that has fallen into political decadence and organizational disarray. In the words of

Shikaki: "elections are the only means through which the PA can regain popular legitimacy, Hamas can be integrated into Palestinian politics, and Fatah can be united behind a single political will."

The greater question is whether elections will become the means to contain the conflict in line with Israeli and American dictates, or, finally, to provide the forum for the crucial but long suppressed policy debates on the kind of final status agreement the Palestinians could accept, as well as the political, diplomatic, and military means to achieve it. Some in Abbas's camp believe that he has to initiate those debates now.

"Abu Mazin has to get the United States to address Israel's ongoing construction of the settlements and the wall and answer how this squares with a viable peace process. This is what lies behind his demand that the two sides implement the road map and go directly to the final status negotiations. In other words, he has to get George Bush to put some flesh on his vision of two states for two peoples," says an aide.

In the short term, this would mean Abbas's extracting the same kind of commitments from Bush that Sharon got in April 2004, when Sharon's planned disengagement was rewarded by Bush's endorsement of long-standing Israeli positions. Most important was Bush's confirmation that Israel would not be expected under any final agreement to withdraw to the 1949 armistice lines or agree to the return of Palestinian refugees to homes, lands, and properties in what was Mandate Palestine but is now Israel.

According to Abbas's aides, "U.S. commitments" to the Palestinians would have to be of a like magnitude, including perhaps a pledge that territory annexed by Israel in the West Bank must be compensated by lands of similar value transferred to the Palestinian state from inside Israel. The Palestinians would also need assurances that the final status of Jerusalem, settlements, borders, and refugees must be based on international legitimacy as enshrined in UN resolutions and be left to negotiations between the two parties. At the very least, Palestinians would want to see concerted U.S. action to freeze construction of the settlements and the wall.

Beyond this, some say that Abbas and Fatah should propound more clearly their terms for a final peace agreement. "It should be a combination of the Clinton parameters [issued in December 2000], the Taba negotiations, the Arab peace initiative, and the [unofficial] Geneva Accord, and subject to a Palestinian referendum," says the aide. A referendum would be necessary because this would be the only way to neutralize potentially violent opposition from Hamas, elements of Fatah, and refugee representatives, whether in the occupied territories or the diaspora, he says.

Some in Fatah go even further. They believe that Abbas should tell Bush that he and Fatah are ready to advocate and sign a Geneva-like accord (though, again, subject to a Palestinian referendum). The hope is that the potential prize of ending the Israel-Palestinian conflict would persuade the U.S. president to persuade Sharon to go back to final status negotiations.

There are some officials around Sharon who genuinely fear that this might happen, which is why they wish to delay a return to the road map—to say

nothing of final status negotiations. But most Palestinian analysts (and some Western diplomats) believe that a darker scenario is more likely. This is where the world, led by the United States, would exert massive pressure on Abbas to defer all talk of a final status deal in favor of the road map's Palestinian state "with provisional borders." Such a scheme fits Sharon's long-term interim arrangement like a magazine fits a gun. For the foreseeable future, this would reduce the conflict to the status of a border dispute.

This is Abbas's dilemma. On the one hand, there is an absolute urgency—given the colonial reach, ambition, and actual realization of Sharon's separation plan—to confront Israel as soon as possible on the strategic issues of Jerusalem, settlements, and the wall. For "the more we postpone them, the more Israel will create facts that prejudice them and the less credible the two-state solution becomes," says Palestinian parliamentarian Hanan Ashrawi. On the other hand, to wage any form of struggle that can be effective, the Palestinians need to have far-reaching reform, to "clean their house" from top to bottom. This takes time—and time, now, is massively in Israel's favor.

This dilemma is another of Arafat's legacies, together with his steadfastness on Jerusalem and the right of return. "He wasn't a democrat," as the refugee from Jaffa remarked. Like many of his political generation, he believed that democracy, reform, and governance were luxuries in the struggle for liberation and were consequences of independence. A decade after Oslo—together with the Lebanese and Iraqis—Palestinians are discovering that democracy may not be a sufficient condition for authentic decolonization and self-determination. But it is surely a necessary one.



Campaign posters cover the streets of al-Amari refugee camp in Ramallah on the eve of elections, 8 January 2005. (Patrick Baz/AFP/Getty Images)