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After Abbas, Palestinians Need Leadership that Can Bring Unity and Hope

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Before the end of 2016, or at the latest before the end of 2017, we can expect the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to have left his position in the muqata, the interim Palestinian government headquarters in Ramallah. A new leadership is needed to bring unity and return hope to Palestinians.

81-year-old Abbas, along with Yasser Arafat, were founding members of the ruling Fatah movement, which was launched fifty years ago in 1965. They are the only two that the vast majority of living Palestinians today have known as leaders.

Abbas and Arafat, however, are different in their rhetoric, tactics and even in their attire. Arafat led the Palestinian struggle for the liberation of Palestine, primarily using the revolutionary’s gun. When invited to the UN General Assembly, Yasser Arafat dressed in army fatigue making it clear that if the olive branch he was holding in one hand was not reciprocated, his people would have no alternative but to use violence to accomplish Palestinian rights.

While Arafat waved an olive branch in one hand, Mahmoud Abbas, dressed in a Western-style business suit, has long discarded the resistance gun and now waves the olive branch with both hands. Abbas, who signed the Oslo Accords and has spearheaded joint security coordination with Israel, has failed to show any success on the ground in Palestine.

Abbas put all his eggs in the negotiations basket and was unable to reach a game-changing deal. Whether the absence of such a breakthrough was due to over expectation on his part or intransigence on the Israeli side, most Palestinians (except the nouveau riche) pinned the failure of the Oslo Accords, which he signed, on him.

The failure of Arafat’s mixed resistance and negotiations strategy and Abbas’ negotiations-only strategy has given a small window for hardline Islamists to try their resistance-only strategy. This appeared to have some kind of success when the Israeli army relocated some 8,000 Jewish settlers and unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip. But that success has since proven to be short-lived, as the Strip has been suffering from a crippling siege and has fought two deadly wars that have left thousands of Palestinians dead and injured.

Whether long-lived or short-lived, Abbas is also blamed for allowing elections which have brought the Islamic movement into power and allowing them to take over Gaza, which has caused a major split both geographically and politically. The loss of Gaza under his watch will long be remembered as a negative for Abbas, with many Palestinians arguing that had Arafat been alive he would have personally gone to Gaza and fought tooth and nail to embolden his people and deny Hamas a foothold.

Despite these failures, Abbas will be remembered as a moderate leader, but also a stubborn one. In that sense, President Abbas has succeeded in pulling the rug from under the Israelis, by claiming that there is no partner for peace. The last two years have shown that the peace-loving Abbas will no longer agree to offer a façade for a wasteful peace process or be seduced by photo opportunities with the Israelis in return for non-substantial negotiations once the cameras are gone.

So although the Palestinian entity became known as the Palestinian Authority after the Oslo Accords and the Government of the State of Palestine after the 2012 UN vote, little has changed on the ground.
The combination of the defeat of the Arafat, Abbas and Hamas strategies has started a slow shift of Palestinian power from resolving the conflict using the traditional channels towards the need to find a more creative use of the strengths of the just Palestinian cause.

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Palestinians in the diaspora, many of whom have put down strong roots throughout the world, and their allies from different fields have succeeded in pushing the pendulum back to the outside. Palestinians outside the occupied territories have no daily pressures from the occupations and are able to move freely and make the appropriate alliances with the single aim of supporting Palestinian national rights.

Three key issues that remain between Israel and the Palestinian leadership inside the Occupied Territories have been indirectly transferred to others. Jordan has been entrusted to follow up on the issues connected with Jerusalem. The Hashemite Kingdom has inserted a clause in its peace agreement with Israel regarding the future of the holy place in Jerusalem. This Jordanian role has grown over time as the Israelis have shut down any attempt by the Ramallah-based leadership to negotiate or even speak on behalf of Jerusalem, its holy place and its people. Settlements and the right of return appear to have been outsourced unintentionally to the self-organized freelance leadership outside the occupied territories. The successful Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions (BDS) network which began in West Bank academic circles ten years ago has gained momentum outside Palestine and recently made some major inroads, causing Israeli officials to panic and pro-Israeli Americans to come very close to violating their previously cherished first amendment, just to put a stop to the popular efforts to boycott Israel and Israeli settlements. The majority of the BDS leaders are also among the main leaders in the right of return efforts, some even calling for a one-state solution as the best way to preserve the right of return to a binational state.

These portfolio shifts don’t appear to have registered for the current resident of the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah. While Mahmoud Abbas has been saying for years that he doesn’t plan to run in any future elections, some of his most recent actions in the spring and summer of 2015 reflect more the actions of an autocratic leader holding onto power rather than one seeking to give it up.

The eminent idea of succession is complicated on many fronts. The regular four-year term of Mahmoud Abbas, who was elected after the death of Yasser Arafat, expired in 2009. The term of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in which pro-Hamas candidates won a decisive majority also ended in 2010. The Palestinian Basic Law – a quasi constitution – states that in case of the absence of the President (through death, resignation or for health reasons), he should be replaced by the speaker of the PLC for a 60-day period, during which elections for a President are to take place. Dr. Abdel Aziz Dweik, a Hamas supporter chosen by the council to head the council’s first general session, has not led the council for years. PLO officials say that Salim Zanoun, the speaker of the 500-strong Palestine National Council, of which the 132 members of the Palestinian Legislative Council account for less than a third, should take over, since Palestine is now a UN non-member state.

What adds to the complication is the absence of a deputy or vice-President for this sovereignty-lacking state. Not only is there an absence of a declared vice-President, but also no single leader that has been groomed or known to be the second in line within the PLO executive committee or within the ruling Fatah movement. This has led many to worry about a freefall once Abbas is no longer politically in the leadership position.

The future of Palestine is certainly not tied to the future of any single individual. While the issue of President Abbas’ succession is important, many prefer a more open mechanism in which the issue will be resolved at the ballot box and the opportunity will be open to anyone to run for this office.
Since Israel only recognizes the byproducts of the Oslo Accords, the position of President of Palestine will only be open to those Palestinians living in the occupied territories. Many are looking again to the PLO, and its worldwide representation will not be directly involved. A more logical process, many argue, would be to call on the larger PLO structure to help create the kind of worldwide leadership of the Palestinian people that can benefit from the support of the 12 million Palestinians, in order to make the final push to Palestinian statehood and liberation after the decades-long occupation.

But personality and succession issues aside, the facts on the ground speak louder than any other issue. Palestinians are increasingly forced to decide whether they are still in favour of the two-state solution, which by all reasonable expectations will be more like a Swiss cheese than a contiguous state. Gaza is becoming more and more isolated and East Jerusalem has more Israelis living in it than Palestinians, hardly a formula that will make it the capital of an independent state.

This absence of a realistic solution on the ground is driving Palestinians in different directions. In April 2016, Palestinian academic and long-term strategist Professor Sari Nusseibeh resurrected the concept of a confederation between the State of Palestine and the Kingdom of Jordan on the condition that there are two capitals, Jerusalem and Amman. This new/old idea was talked about a lot in the 1980s, but was, at the time, rejected by King Hussein, who was quoted as saying "I don't want to hear the term confederation ever mentioned again." While this pledge is not binding to his son, King Abdullah II, it is highly unlikely that Jordan will venture into any deal with Palestine before it has true independence. As one PLO official, Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad), once said, Palestinians need five minutes of independence and then they would gladly agree to a confederation.

But the problems of a confederation or any other plan continue to face the wall of Israeli rejectionism. The most right-wing Israeli government in its history, led by a settler at the helm of the Ministry of Defense, does not bode well for Palestinian aspirations of independence.

A consensus exists among many Palestinians that it makes little difference who is the leader of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict will need strong, continuous and courageous international intervention to be resolved.

The international community, however, having seen so many previous attempts fall at the way side, is unwilling to be embarrassed by yet another failure. The US general elections have given some hope for a more balanced US position in its approach to this vital Middle East conflict. The position of Democratic nominee Bernie Sanders has excited some, despite his inability to win the nomination, because of his insistence on real changes in the democratic platform towards a more balanced US policy.

France and Europe are also showing strong signs of wanting to play a more active role, despite attempts made by the Netanyahu Administration to force them away from making a multilateral effort. The Israelis prefer the bilateral approach in which they can dictate their positions to the Palestinians, while taking pictures with them as if there is a real peace process underway.

Fresh new leadership in the Palestinian camp could help break out of the current deadlock. A leadership that can find ways to engage the Israeli public as well as the international community, while keeping Palestinians united, could produce a formula for success.

At present, one of the few people who have the ability to do that, Marwan Barghouti, is serving a long-term prison sentence in an Israeli jail. Attempts to rally behind the elected member of the Palestinian legislative council and demand his release have taken on an international pace, with South Africa among the most vocal activists calling for his release.

Whoever Palestinians choose to continue the struggle for liberation, they will need to give priority to Palestinian unity while remaining aware that practical solutions must be found, as well as national ones. The level of hopelessness and despair among Palestinians has been driving many to act in a way that has resulted in summary executions by the Israeli occupiers. Giving hope based on a serious and workable strategy will go a long way to changing the current climate of despair to one of hope and national aspirations for freedom and independence.