

# The Post-Arafat Stage: Justified Optimism?

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The election of Abu Mazen to the Presidency of the Palestinian National Authority has placed the Palestinian leadership and people at a crossroads. The alternatives are to continue with the revolution initiated by the late Yasser Arafat, or to forge ahead along a second revolutionary path led by Abu Mazen. Today, the Palestinians are in an intermediate phase between the old revolution and the new. A full transition can only be realized when the leader, the population, and the path converge together. Of course, this must be complemented by Israel embracing her responsibility to work with the new leadership, and by international efforts to nurture and support the process.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the first revolution, spearheaded by Arafat, succeeded in placing the 'Palestinian issue' at the forefront of regional and international agendas. It granted legitimacy to the cause of Palestinian self-determination, and advanced the Palestinian dream of statehood. Such revolution simultaneously employed violence, terror and incitement as well as statesmanship, diplomacy and negotiation, in order to achieve its goals. The geopolitical reality of the twenty-first century, however, makes it impossible for a stable and viable state to emerge when its inception is accompanied by violence. The world, and of course Israel, would fight against the foundation of a violent undemocratic state, particularly if it is characterized by corruption, anarchy and gangs of militants. Abu Mazen laid the groundwork for the second Palestinian revolution during the late 1980s, immediately following the eruption of the first Intifada. His vision and leadership brought about the dramatic change that steered the PLO in 1988 towards its

historic decision to formally accept U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 – a move that naturally led to the recognition of Israel, the Madrid Conference, the Oslo Accords, and the commencement of peace negotiations. Throughout this period, Abu Mazen stood firmly behind these historic advances.

His political views were predicated on the understanding that the goal of the Palestinian people must be limited to the creation of a state within the boundaries of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with its capital in Arab East Jerusalem. He understood that the accomplishment of such an objective could no longer include terror, violence and incitement against Israel.

In line with this understanding, Abu Mazen began taking steps to capitalize on the achievements of the first revolution. He employed a strategy based on *Realpolitik*, which sought to bring about the creation of a state with democratic foundations and stable and legitimate institutions that could best serve the interests of its populace. He envisioned a state that would create economic, social and cultural prosperity, and which would co-exist peacefully with Israel, receiving universal acceptance and support. This is the essence of the 'second revolution.'

Clearly this goal is not an easy one to realize, but judging from the vast support on the Palestinian streets, it can be concluded that the Palestinian populace is open to, and perhaps even ripe for, a transformation which abandons the first revolution and embraces the second. Indeed, events of the first few months of 2005 have illustrated that the majority of the Palestinian population are ready to accept and advance the 'second revolution.'

However, in practice, there are many obstacles along the way, including conflicts within Fatah between the younger and older generations, between conservative and liberal ideologies, between the Gaza

Strip and the West Bank, and of course, with Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and various other armed militias. Thus, the real challenge, which will have the greatest impact in the long term, will be to win over those who support the continuation of yesterday's struggle, such as the armed militias who wish to continue to rule and dictate the fate of the Palestinian people.

Already in the first weeks since Abu Mazen's January 2005 election, we have witnessed a new sense of euphoria in the region. Recent developments such as the Sharm el-Sheik summit of February 2005 and the renewed commitments of the Palestinian and Israeli leadership have restored a sense of hope and optimism. This euphoria embodies both dangers and opportunities. It is likely to generate too high a threshold of expectations that will not pass the reality test. On the other hand, this new sensation could restore the hope that has been so absent in the last four years and create a positive psychopolitical atmosphere among the relevant publics. And that atmosphere, in turn, would ensure greater survivability for the process and a readiness on the part of the leaders to take more chances than in the past. Both sides' enhanced commitment to embark on a new political path can generate rapid changes and processes on the ground that will accelerate the peace process and assist in returning it to the path it followed prior to the *intifada*. The Palestinian government must institutionalize the 'second revolution', and as a complement to the new Palestinian leadership, Israel must be willing to develop more incentives to further the goal of peace. By releasing prisoners, removing road blocks, changing the negative attitude towards Palestinians, and eventually entering into real political discussions that will lead to a permanent status agreement, Israel can help Abu Mazen to transform the Palestinian streets from the logic of violence towards one of peace and reconciliation.

However, the issue of what will happen to the process the day after this preliminary arsenal is spent remains unanswered. The inherent danger is that the peace process will proceed up to the completion of the withdrawal planned in the context of disengagement, and there it will stop. The surprising disengagement plan was born with the objective of serving a conservative goal: to prevent or at least delay the political process designed to lead to a permanent settlement.

In an optimal situation, following the stabilization of the security situation and the withdrawal from Gaza

and northern Samaria, the two sides would enter intensive negotiations over permanent status on the basis of the Geneva Accord. Following the historic precedent of returning to the 1967 borders in the Gaza Strip and removing all the settlements in those areas that the IDF leaves, it is only natural to continue the process in the West Bank.

The Israeli and Palestinian publics know almost precisely what final status will look like. Accordingly, we should implement it: an independent Palestinian state, sovereign, viable and demilitarized, side by side with a secure state of Israel, along the 1967 borders, with minor adjustments based on a 1 to 1 territorial swap; two capitals in Jerusalem, the Jewish populated parts to Israel and the Arab parts to Palestine; the Old City in the heart of Jerusalem under partitioned sovereignty with an international security presence; and a fair solution to the Palestinian refugee problem including compensation, rehabilitation, a right of return to the Palestinian state and proactive Israeli involvement in the implementation of these parameters.

However, political realities are not necessarily optimal. The man heading Israel's government today is not a leader capable of making the leap to a real and fair permanent settlement, but rather one who has not yet internalized the fact that there is no other option. Yet the historical imperative appears to be stronger than the leader and his party.

Accordingly, in order to generate and strengthen the right dynamic that will move the process and oblige the Israeli side to enter serious negotiations on permanent status as early as possible, we have to reexamine the existing tools in our long-term arsenal. Regrettable as this may sound, the only relevant tool to be found is the Quartet's Roadmap. Hence we must return to the implementation of this plan, with the goal of exploiting it as a means of moving us in an agreed and organized manner out of the intermediate phase and into a period of renewed peace negotiations.

Paradoxically, we are talking here of a limited plan, a fairly sloppy patchwork document that was outdated the moment it was published, and even then would not have stood the test of reality. But it is the only document that is agreed, at least at the level of principle, by both sides. Further, this is the program to which the American president is committed, and it is he who must become involved in pushing the Israeli side to join the "permanent status tango."

The day after withdrawal from Gaza, progress is the name of the game. The Palestinians cannot allow themselves to stand still, just as they cannot enter negotiations over an official interim agreement that is not based on a clear delineation of final status arrangements. The Roadmap, as it stands today, is insufficiently equipped to facilitate the required level of progress and momentum. Phase II which is the establishment of a Palestinian state with interim borders not based on 4th June 1967 lines is liable to be a deathtrap for the process. Rather, an updated version of phase II which seeks deep withdrawals in the West Bank along the lines of the Oslo "further redeployments" (that is, completion of the gra-

dual Israeli pullouts from Palestinian areas in the West Bank) accompanied by enhanced and more detailed parameters for phase III, could constitute a possible solution.

The onus now lies on the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships to nurture and maintain this positive psycho-political atmosphere, through concrete political discussions and developments, and a return to the only currently available tool – the Roadmap. However, such progress will justify this new sense of optimism only up to a certain point. Beyond that, a revamping of the Roadmap is necessary to continue and complete the process.