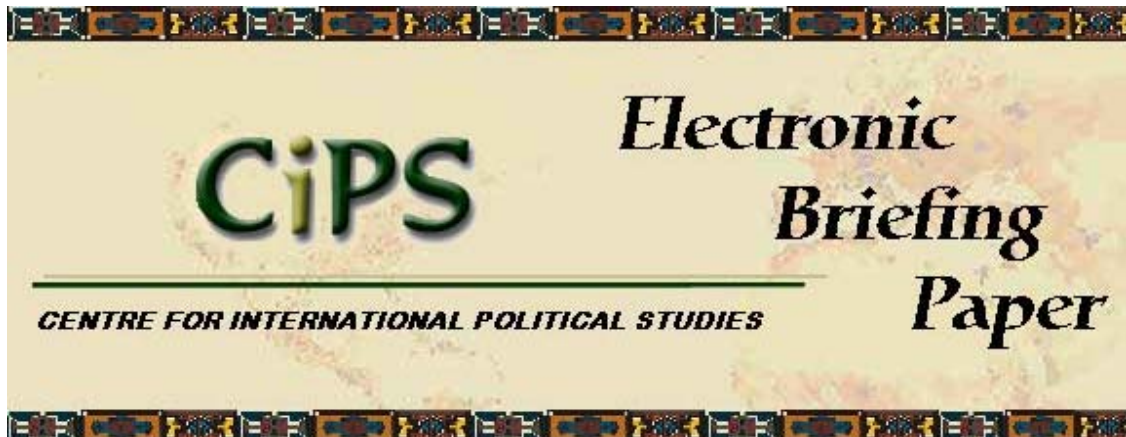




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The Election of Abu Mazen: Will it Make a Difference?ⁱ

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The death of Yasser Arafat - for 35 years the undisputed leader of the Palestinian National Movement - and his replacement by Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as head of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, is widely seen as providing an opportunity to put the Palestinian-Israeli peace process back on track after more than four years of violent conflict. Are the optimists justified? Or will 'Arafatism' – the underlying principles and modus operandi that characterized Arafat's leadership and ultimately led Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza to a new *nakba* ("catastrophe", a loaded term referring to the defeat and uprooting of 60-65% of Palestinian society in 1948) – survive Arafat, and thus impede the alleviation of Palestinian suffering and the realization of Palestinian aspirations? Will the Israeli government under Ariel Sharon see Abu Mazen as a viable partner for political dialogue in order to break the cycle of violence and restore momentum to the long-derailed peace process? Alternatively, will Israel keep Abu Mazen at arms length while pursuing unilateral policies, including the disengagement from Gaza and the removal of Jewish settlements there, in order to make the continued control of the bulk of Palestinian territory in the West Bank easier? Moreover, how will the international community, namely the US and the other members of the 'Quartet', conduct themselves?

Perhaps Arafat's single greatest failure during the last decade of his life was in the realm of state-building: the skeletal structure of the Palestinian Authority that was established with great fanfare in the mid-1990s, as the foundation for the soon-to-be-born Palestinian state, turned out to be hollow. Instead of creating institutions based on the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and a monopoly on the means of coercion, Arafat chose the path which had served him well during the long years of semi-clandestine 'liberation movement' politics: the personalization of power based on the manipulation of factions and individuals, the creation of multiple, competing security services, an utter lack of financial accountability, endemic corruption and intimidation. In other words, Arafat's Palestinian Authority was a poor man's imitation of neighboring Arab states. In addition, Arafat never completely renounced violence as a tool in his relationship with Israel. Nor were his messages to his own people unequivocal: he spoke both of the "*peace of the brave*" which he had signed with "*my partner, Rabin*", and of the "*march of a million martyrs*" to liberate Jerusalem.

Ideologically, Abu Mazen adheres to the PLO's basic principles as expounded by Arafat. These are: the establishment of a Palestinian state in all of the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital; the dismantling of Jewish settlements there, and the recognition of Palestinian refugees' Right of Return to their homes in sovereign Israel, according to the UNGA resolution 194 of 11 December 1948. The latter issue, perhaps even more than defining the precise status of Jerusalem's holy sites, was, and remains the single greatest impediment to a permanent status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Yet both in style and substance, Abu Mazen differs from Arafat in a number of important respects, which may bode well for the coming months. He lacks the flair and charisma of Arafat, preferring business suits to military jackets and kaffiyes. Although he was one of the founders of Fatah, the PLO's core group, he was a bureaucrat rather than a guerrilla fighter. For a population battered and exhausted by conflict, a non-charismatic but still-experienced leader may actually be a welcome relief. To be sure, Abu Mazen embraced Arafat's legacy during the election campaign to choose Arafat's successor. At the same time, he had already spoken openly of the need to end the 'armed intifada', because of the damage it caused to Palestinian interests. His election by just over 60% of Palestinian West Bank and Gaza voters, in an impressive exercise of nascent democracy under occupation, legitimized his standing both at home and abroad. Ultimately, though, the extent of his legitimacy will depend mainly on his actions.

It didn't take long for Abu Mazen to be tested. Palestinian opposition groups and armed elements within his own Fatah movement sharply escalated their rocket and mortar attacks and the bombings of Israeli targets, both within Israel proper and in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli response was swift, and the threat of a large-scale military operation reminiscent of Israel's re-occupation of West Bank cities in April 2002 loomed. The Hamas and Islamic Jihad opposition, in particular, desires to take credit for Israel's impending withdrawal from Gaza (scheduled to begin in July), and to demonstrate that Israel is retreating under fire, along the lines of its withdrawal from

southern Lebanon in May 2000. No less important, Palestinian factions were determined to signal to Abu Mazen that they were not to be ignored as he strove to consolidate his authority.

The Sharon government, for its part, was unwilling to give Abu Mazen a lengthy grace period, demanding that he immediately undertake concrete action to end Palestinian attacks and establish his authority on the ground. Abu Mazen's initial efforts to cajole Palestinian factions into agreement were met with scorn in Israel. With a shaky governing coalition and vociferous right-wing opposition over the impending dismantling of Jewish settlements, Sharon emphasized that there would be no withdrawal under fire, announced the suspension of all contacts with the Palestinian Authority, and positioned Israeli forces for action.

Within just a few days the situation changed dramatically and the number of violent incidents dropped off to practically zero. After going to Gaza to meet with Palestinian opposition leaders, Abu Mazen ordered the deployment of two thousand members of the reconstituted Palestinian Security Forces to 'protect Palestinian borders' and to prevent the firing of Palestinian rockets and mortars into Israel. Palestinian officials declared that there would be zero tolerance for violence, and insisted that while a 'pluralism of views' could be tolerated, 'pluralism of armed groups' could not. Concurrently, Egypt renewed its long-standing efforts to broker a comprehensive set of understandings between the PA and the opposition groups that would entail the end of Palestinian violence.

Abu Mazen's assertiveness may have come as a surprise, but the larger context for his action was favorable. There exists a widespread feeling of exhaustion among the Palestinian population; a growing belief that the armed intifada has run its course and henceforth would be counterproductive. At the same time, a sense developed that the Sharon government was actually serious in its intention of going through with the dismantling of Jewish settlements, and an understanding grew that Arafat's departure from the scene had opened up new possibilities for Palestinian diplomacy. Indeed, Palestinian spokesmen emphasized that Abu Mazen's actions were in keeping with Palestinian commitments to the 'Road Map for Peace', the international community's current blueprint for Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. Moreover, the successful election of Abu Mazen was proof of Palestinian commitment to democracy, the mantra of the Bush Administration.

The overall situation remains fragile. Any type of significant violence, either from Palestinian opposition groups or from Israeli extremists despairing of blocking Israel's dismantling of Jewish settlements, could quickly re-ignite the cycle of violence and hatred. The task of Palestinian institution building will be an arduous one. Successfully managing the demands of Islamic opposition movements have posed major challenges throughout the Middle East, and one can expect this to be the case in the future state of Palestine as well. Efforts by well-meaning governments and individuals to jump-start the peace process and return quickly to final-status negotiations are likely to run up against the same obstacles which derailed the talks in 2000. No one should underestimate the difficulty in establishing a working

relationship, let alone genuine trust, between the parties after more than four years of violence. Nor should one underestimate the domestic political constraints on the leaderships of both Palestinian and Israeli societies. In sum, the conflict is not ripe for resolution. However, Arafat's passing and Abu Mazen's ascent to power introduce important new elements into the equation, so that there is now a chance to delicately nurture the Palestinian-Israeli relationship in ways which will be beneficial to all concerned.

ⁱ *The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for International Political Studies (CIPS)*



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