



Abu Mazen: A Man in Search of a Legacy

Dr. Ido Zelkovitz*

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The Palestinian President has recently announced his resignation from the position of Chairman of the PLO Executive Committee. This move took place in parallel to the intensification of power struggles within the Palestinian Authority and to speculations about Abu Mazen’s possible successors. In this article, Dr. Ido Zelkovitz analyzes the complexities of the Palestinian political arena. He concludes that Abu Mazen is in the process of cleansing the centers of power within the Palestinian Authority in order to weaken his opponents, and of showing that he is a strong leader who is unafraid of confrontation.

The news of Abu Mazen’s (Mahmoud Abbas) resignation from the position of the Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Executive Committee are not to be considered a regional political earthquake by any stretch of the imagination. The reason for this is that Abu Mazen is still, albeit temporarily, holding this important and powerful role – the sole and legitimate representative of all Palestinians. He holds this office alongside two additional political titles – that of President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and that of Chairman of Fatah.

The complexity of the Palestinian arena requires making a few comments. Politically speaking, the PA was born as a result of the negotiations between Israel and the PLO and was supposed to turn into an independent and fully sovereign state at its conclusion. This culminating moment would occur upon the merging of the institutions of the PLO and those of the PA and the creation of a political tapestry that represents a modern Palestinian state – a state that accepts the principle of sovereignty in accordance with the spirit of UN Security Council resolution 242, and lives alongside the State of Israel in peace. This would have been the culmination of a process which began in 1994 and was never completed.

* Dr. Ido Zelkovitz is a fellow at [Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies](#). He teaches in the Department of Middle Eastern History and is a research fellow at the Ezri center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies, both at the University of Haifa. His book “[Students and Resistance in Palestine](#)” has recently been published by Routledge.

Abu Mazen inherited the mantle of absolute ruler from his predecessor, Yasser Arafat. As such he wore three hats: In addition to serving as the Chairman of the PLO Executive Committee and the President of the PA, Abbas is also the Chairman of Fatah, which is in fact the faction that controls the PLO's institutions and is the political spine of the PA. The justification for the centralization of political power resulted from the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations of the 1990s.

Abu Mazen's resignation, along with that of nine of his friends, stems from a desire to strengthen his hold on the organization and to ensure that the Executive Committee is subordinated to his authority. Towards the end of his term, Abu Mazen is attempting to bolster his base of support, to pave the way for his successor to lead the PLO and PA, and to strengthen the Fatah within the Palestinian arena. The resignation of Abbas and his close colleagues and his call for an emergency meeting of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) aim to reshape the PLO's Executive Committee, an entity that served as a Palestinian government in exile before the PA was established.

The Palestinian President's resignation has been done as a complimentary measure to the firing of the Secretary General of the PLO Executive Committee and the organization's second-in-command, Yasser Abd Rabbo, who is not a member of Fatah but rather the chairman of the Palestinian Democratic Union (known as FIDA), a small party that split from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) following the signing of the Oslo Accords. Saeb Erekat, a member of Fatah and the head of the Palestinian Negotiation Affairs Department (NAD) was appointed in Abd Rabbo's place. The NAD is the entity which handles the PLO's political affairs vis-à-vis Israel.

Abu Mazen, who is on the final leg of his term, wants to build a legacy, to set policy parameters and to make clear who his successor will be. The question of succession has the potential to ignite internal wars within Fatah, which despite its strength seems to be incapable of establishing itself as a ruling party.

Mouhammad Dahlan, who was banished by the president from the Central Committee of Fatah and currently resides outside the Palestinian Territories, is Abu Mazen's primary adversary within Fatah. Dahlan invests large sums of money in Palestinian refugee camps with the help of philanthropic foundations from the United Arab Emirates. His support for the needy and students has bought him pockets of support in the West Bank. However, it is clear to him that he must form political alliances in order to be a relevant political player.

To this end, he must create a coalition with Marwan Barghouti who is currently serving a prison sentence in Israeli jail and is considered to be a very popular figure amongst the Fatah membership, and with Jibril Rajoub the Chairman of the Palestinian Olympic Committee and the Palestinian Football Association. Rajoub's public positions have accorded him broad public support. These only

add to the appreciation the Palestinian public feels toward him as a result of the terror attacks he carried out and commanded against Israel before the Oslo Accords.

The fact that Dahlan is the son of a refugee family from the Gaza Strip is a thorn in his side as he attempts to lead Fatah. Without a set of alliances with the membership of his generation within Fatah, which is the second generation within the movement, he will be unable to return to a leadership position.

Abu Mazen is preoccupied not only with internal political struggles within Fatah and the PLO. The president also faces a political struggle with Israel and a fight for the primacy of his faction over Hamas amongst Palestinians. The deep distrust between Abu Mazen and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in light of the reports of ongoing talks between Israel and the Hamas leadership, put him in a complicated position. In fact, the secret talks that Israel has reportedly been holding with Hamas, and the search of the latter's political arm for regional and international legitimacy, keep the Palestinian president awake at night.

The PA leadership in Ramallah will not allow a long-term solution in Gaza without it playing a central role in it. Abu Mazen worries about the Hamas leadership's desire to be incorporated into the PLO's institutions and through that to achieve political and legal legitimacy.

The very existence of the PA and the PLO are premised upon negotiations with Israel and the hope that was planted in the hearts of Palestinians during Abu Mazen's tenure. The end of negotiations and the Israeli preference of engaging in tactical dialogue with Hamas forces Abu Mazen to reorganize vis-à-vis the Palestinian public. In the last year, he has worked diligently in order to shore up his support amongst the public. The regional council heads of Fatah arranged ceremonies in which allegiance was sworn to the Palestinian president. In return, Abu Mazen would accede to their every demand that aligned with his needs, such as the firing of Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad from the "Third Way" party.

Abu Mazen is continuing the process of cleansing the centers of power within the PA in order to weaken his opponents. At the same time as he is recruiting Fatah's regional council heads, the Palestinian president is closing foundations and organizations that are associated with his political adversaries and is taking action against non-governmental organizations that do not follow his lead or that do not completely identify with Fatah. Recently, he even ordered that the Palestinian Peace Coalition cease its activity. The group is the Palestinian branch of the Geneva Initiative and is politically aligned with Yasser Abd Rabbo. This decision, however, has been later reversed due to European pressures.

As he nears the end of his term, Abu Mazen is trying to show that he is a strong leader who is unafraid of confrontation. Sometimes his moves run against the

current, but he does not seem to be deterred from political maneuvers that serve his purposes. However, Abu Mazen's steps are also well calculated. He is not interested in breaking with the principle of unity within the PLO. Therefore, despite his interest in changing the nature of the PLO Executive Committee, he eventually decided to postpone the PNC emergency meeting by three months. He was concerned of criticism against his move from the second largest faction in the PLO, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Abu Mazen's despairing of Israel and his fear of what is to come, have caused the Palestinian president, the most pragmatic leader to have emerged from within the Palestinian national movement, to adopt more extreme views. It is unclear if his successor will follow in his footsteps, which championed non-violence, rejected terror, and challenged Israel in the international arena.