

THE APPOINTMENT OF ABU MAZIN: SYMBOLS AND SUBSTANCE

Asher Susser

Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

The appointment of Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin) as the Palestinian Authority's Prime Minister is being heralded as a major step toward Palestinian political reform and the long-awaited diminution of Yasir Arafat's hitherto constitutionally unchallenged supremacy. Arafat has been coerced into this move by a combination of domestic and foreign forces, but he is a tenacious, experienced and crafty political operator. He is not likely to succumb to those who wish to hasten his denouement without seemingly endless maneuvers and manipulations of mental attrition, deliberately calculated to exasperate domestic contenders and external meddlers alike.

The pressure on Arafat to make the change came not only from the US and other members of the "Quartet" and Israel, but from within the young guard of his own Fatah movement. For quite some time, there have been rumblings of disaffection with Arafat's handling of affairs and his virtual loss of control. The Palestinian war against Israel has resulted in massive Israeli retaliation which has crippled the Palestinian Authority, disrupted daily life, and devastated the economy. Moreover, the war has also led to the constant rise in the popularity of Hamas at the

expense of Fatah, as the bloodshed with Israel drags on inconclusively with no real Palestinian gain in sight.

The US, the other members of the "Quartet" and Israel would have preferred a change of the guard in generational terms. After all, one of the most serious disadvantages of dealing with Arafat is the symbolic and substantive significance of his belonging, in the deepest historical and emotional sense, to the 1948 refugee generation. Arafat is driven by the obsession with rectifying what is seen by Palestinians of all persuasions as the historical injustice of 1948, above and beyond independent statehood.

Israelis would prefer to see "insiders," i.e., people from the West Bank and Gaza, in the saddle, rather than the arch representatives of the "outsider" refugee constituency. Israel has no real solution for the Palestinian refugee Diaspora that would satisfy Palestinian national aspirations. Israel could, however, accept a Palestinian state in much of the West Bank and Gaza and would therefore much prefer to negotiate with credible representatives of this "insider" constituency.

Abu Mazin is neither an insider nor a member



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of the young guard. He is Arafat's veteran deputy and, in his late sixties, one of the PLO's old guard. Born in Safad in the mid-1930's, he, like Arafat, is of the 1948 generation and a representative of the Diaspora refugee constituency. Abu Mazin is one of the founding members of Fatah and he served for many years on the PLO Executive Committee. Nor should the procedure of his approval as Prime Minister, first by the PLO Central Council and only subsequently by the Legislative Council of the Palestinian Authority, be ignored. This deliberately calculated procedure is of both symbolic and substantive importance. It maintains the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of all Palestinians wherever they may be and as the supreme source of political authority of the Palestinian people, "insiders" and "outsiders" alike, whereas the Palestinian Authority's Legislative Council speaks only for the West Bank and Gaza. This a way of saying that not only the West Bank and Gaza are on the table but the entire cause of historical Palestine.

On the other hand, Abu Mazin's rise to prominence does represent positive change. He was one of the few PLO officials who were involved in the secret talks that led to the Oslo accords, and despite his origins, he has become a firm believer in the real need for a settlement with Israel. Perhaps most importantly, Abu Mazin has gone on record with a courageous and scathing critique of the Palestinians' political conduct in the two years of the latest "militarized" *intifada*. "What have we achieved?" he asked an audience in Gaza in November 2002. The Palestinians were well on the way to statehood and now after two years they were left with "the total destruction" of all they had built. Instead of drawing Sharon to the negotiating table where the Palestinians might have cornered him, they resorted to the use of armed force, where the Israelis had the upper

hand, not only over the Palestinians but over the Arabs as a whole. The Palestinian Authority was in desperate need of reform and a "redirection of [its] path," he concluded.

For all of his sober realism, Abu Mazin does not have an independent power base. But he does have the firm support of key figures in the Fatah new guard, who have had their own differences with Arafat. One such individual is Jibril Rajoub, formerly Head of Preventive Security in the West Bank, who in February 2002 had a widely publicized skirmish with Arafat, in the midst of which the pistol-toting *ra'is* slapped Rajoub in the face.

With allies like Rajoub, Abu Mazin could also serve as the bridge between the new and the old guards and between insiders and outsiders. He and his supporters in Fatah, and the representatives of the "Quartet," are relentlessly pressing Arafat to empower Abu Mazin with the authority of a Prime Minister in a parliamentary regime and to allow him to assume the mantle of credible interlocutor with Israel. Arafat is fighting tooth and nail to preserve his own flagging authority, and he has considerable popular support. There is widespread opposition to the appointment of a Prime Minister, coming as it does in the wake of external pressure. Hamas is not happy with Abu Mazin's appointment either. After all, he stands for everything they flatly oppose. In the recent futile talks in Cairo, as part of the Egyptian effort to obtain a consensual Palestinian acceptance of a cease fire with Israel, Abu Mazin was forever at loggerheads with the Hamas representatives.

So long as Arafat is not incapacitated, it will be very difficult to sideline the wily old "Mr. Palestine." Abu Mazin is, therefore, unlikely to emerge immediately as a serious rival to the historical Palestinian leader. His appointment is not the end of Arafat by any means. But it may well be the beginning of the end.