

PeaceWatch #523

## Abbas's Missed Opportunities in Washington

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October 24, 2005

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas returned to Ramallah from Washington last week having missed a key opportunity to spur President George W. Bush to reengage in the Roadmap. Instead, the October 20 joint press conference at the White House concluded with Bush acknowledging that his presidency may not witness the creation of a Palestinian state by 2008. His administration, Bush said, might merely “lay that foundation so that the process becomes irreversible.” The same administration that two years ago endorsed the Quartet’s Roadmap to Israeli-Palestinian peace based upon a detailed schedule of commitments now expresses hesitancy on committing to any “timetable” for the creation of a Palestinian state. Bush administration policy has always had a performance-based rather than a time-based approach, but now it is not putting down any time markers.

It did not have to be this way. Abbas arrived in Washington with two significant factors in his favor to encourage further American involvement. New Palestinian leadership and a stable Israeli government provide an opportunity for renewed U.S. diplomatic initiative.

- There is palpable relief in the United States that Yasser Arafat no longer leads the Palestinian Authority (PA). Whereas the Bush Administration viewed Arafat as a duplicitous leader who exhorted suicide bombers to attack Israel, Abbas is seen as a peace partner who has called for coexistence.

- Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza made people believe that the Israeli-Palestinian issue is not hopeless, but that the pullout might provide a springboard for renewed progress. Gaza disengagement broke the stalemate of the intifada years and has ironically stabilized the Israeli political environment in a way that was unimaginable just a few weeks ago. Rivals within the prime minister’s own Likud Party forced a political showdown, which Ariel Sharon won. Even the rival Labor Party is uninterested in bolting a parliamentary coalition that ostensibly was predicated upon Gaza disengagement.

Though renewed U.S. involvement is possible, it is by no means automatic. The administration is occupied with issues ranging from the insurgency in Iraq to hurricane cleanup in New Orleans. During his May White House visit, the first of a Palestinian president since Bush took office, it was sufficient for Abbas to be the un-Arafat. However, to secure greater U.S. involvement, Abbas needs to show he has some plan to reciprocate in the wake of the Gaza withdrawal. For Washington to invest further energy in the peace process, given all the other issues it currently faces, there must be the reassurance that the Palestinian leadership will actively work as a partner in the process.

### What Abbas Could Have Brought to Washington

To signal his readiness for greater U.S. diplomatic engagement, Abbas needed to show his commitment to security and realism.

*Security.* Abbas could have demonstrated progress on the security issue, which the international community sees as a good faith sign of progress. The Palestinians themselves see improved security as critical if Gaza is to attract outside investment to jumpstart its economy. Even if one accepts the Palestinian premise that Abbas

is not strong enough to dismantle Hamas now, there are a variety of steps Abbas could take to demonstrate that he is getting a grip on the situation. Such steps would not just benefit Israelis, but would also benefit Palestinians who complain of general domestic lawlessness and who have witnessed a recent spate of kidnappings. Abbas would have benefited had he been able to demonstrate progress in reducing the number of Palestinian security forces from eleven to three, the focus of Lt. Gen. William Ward's attention as U.S. security envoy. However, there is little expression of progress on security reform. In his remarks at the joint press conference with Abbas, Bush indicated that General Ward's replacement will have a broadened mandate that includes wider security cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. Such a move, which should have happened earlier this year, will raise the bar on Palestinian security performance.

So far, the promised "crack force" of five thousand PA troops in Gaza has not materialized. Qassam rockets are being fired from Gaza at Israeli border towns. In the wake of the Washington visit, there are promises of dismantling the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and perhaps that will occur. That promise would have had more impact had the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in Gaza been disarmed before Abbas's trip. After all, the brigades are part of Abbas's own Fatah party, and Gaza is now completely controlled by the Palestinians. Abbas should be able to offer the Palestinian public the rationale that with Israel no longer occupying Gaza, there is no justification for such a group to be active in Gaza. Moreover, moving against a wing of Fatah would enhance his credibility. The disarmament of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades would not leave Abbas exposed; he would still have a myriad of security forces at his command. Finally, amid Hamas predictions that it will continue its struggle in the West Bank, there are no indications that the PA is working with Israel to deal with West Bank roads, where drive-by shooters killed three Israelis just before Abbas's U.S. visit.

*Realism.* The second mistake of the Abbas visit was his unrealistic focus on the third phase of the Roadmap—Abbas sought to focus on the difficult core issues of the conflict now while skipping phases one and two. (Phase one focuses on security performance by the Palestinians and settlement curbs by Israel.) This preference for the hardest issues at the expense of more immediate and achievable obligations was the thrust of Abbas's public remarks with Bush and the focus of his comments in an article that he penned for the Wall Street Journal on the eve of his visit. Abbas gave no hint as to why he thought such a risky approach would not simply repeat the conceptual deadlock that occurred over the same core issues at the Camp David summit in 2000. Instead, Abbas implied that he did not want to deal with the phases of the Roadmaps that impose obligations on Palestinians as well as Israelis.

While Abbas missed opportunities, it is hard to see what the Bush administration has gained by yielding to Abbas's insistence that Hamas not be required to meet eligibility requirements—namely, that it disarm—for participation in January legislative elections. If the Palestinian Legislative Council does not pass legislation for eligibility requirements now, polls suggest that Hamas could win up to 40 percent of the seats in the Palestine Legislative Council—potentially enough to thwart any postelection legislation requiring Hamas to disarm. The Hamas issue is not going away; it will continue to be the leading thorn in U.S.-Palestinian relations.

## **Conclusion**

The Gaza withdrawal was a significant event to which the Palestinians need to respond by taking major steps of their own. Abbas got a small gain, in that he resisted American entreaties to limit Hamas' eligibility in the elections. But in the big picture, he did not entice American reengagement in the Roadmap. As such, the visit must be seen as a missed opportunity.

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