

The Disastrous Presidency of Mahmoud Abbas

By [Rannie Amiri](#)

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After five long years, and at great expense to a state hoped-to-be-called Palestine, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has finally realized that subservience to the United States and Israel pays little in dividends. Indeed, what he has done to the cause of Palestine, the unity of its people, and the advancement of their rights has been nothing short of unmitigated disaster.

Last week, Abbas said he would not seek re-election in polls scheduled for January 2010. His resignation however, was quickly rejected by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and as of today, no one has announced their intent to run in his place.

In truth, many consider the move a tactic to exert additional pressure on the Obama administration, especially after Abbas' demand for an Israeli settlement freeze prior to talks went largely ignored.

It came, after all, on the heels of Secretary of State Clinton's meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu, in which she rewarded Abbas for his years of servility with the following humiliating statement:

"What the Prime Minister has offered in specifics of restraint on the policy of settlements ... is unprecedented."

Nevertheless, a host of regional leaders publicly urged him to stay on as president (the list of which is quite telling): Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Jordanian King Abdullah II, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, and President Shimon Peres (who referred to him as "my old friend"). As quoted by the Ynet news website, an Israeli state official candidly stated, "It's an Israeli interest to have Abbas stay in office."

Because elections are unlikely to be held if Abbas chooses not to run, it may be that he remains the *de facto* president regardless (lest we forget, his four-year term *already* expired in January of 2009, but was unilaterally extended for an additional year). This appears increasingly probable since the Palestinian election commission just announced their recommendation that the January 24 ballot be postponed. Even if Abbas were to step down, the complicated political bureaucracy still leaves him as head of both the PLO and Fatah, ensuring he remains highly influential.

Broken Leadership, Broken Country

Despite the logistical challenges of occupation, Palestinians took it upon themselves to hold free and fair parliamentary elections in January 2006. The winner was the Islamist group

Hamas, which, to the chagrin of the self-entitled Fatah faction, earned them the right to form a government. Tensions between the two groups quickly came to a head though, after Abbas called on Hamas to not only accept a two-state solution, but recognize Israel's "right to exist."

In Abbas, Israel found a valuable partner; one who was willing to compel fellow Palestinians to accept conditions to which Israel itself has never agreed.

Hamas did form a unity government, including in it members of Hamas, Fatah and independents. But in their ongoing dispute, Abbas dissolved this government in the summer of 2007, and (illegally) appointed Salam Fayyad as prime minister. This eventually led to the outbreak of violence in Gaza, the expulsion of Fatah forces from the territory and a fracture in the Palestinian leadership that persists to this day.

Sitting comfortably in Cairo, it was Abbas who blamed Hamas for Israel's savage December 2008 assault on Gaza, adopting the Israeli strategy of blaming the victim. Under a crippling siege prohibiting the most basic of humanitarian supplies, and one that left many of Gaza's children malnourished or starving, Israel indiscriminately attacked militants and civilians alike; firing at those waving white flags of surrender and despair, using white phosphorus in densely populated areas, and striking at U.N.-operated schools and food warehouses.

Then came the report by Justice Richard Goldstone, head of the U.N. Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict. Bowing as he always has to U.S. pressure, and hoping to curry favor with the Americans and Israelis, Abbas shamefully asked the United Nations Human Rights Council to shelve discussion of it and its allegations of Israeli war crimes. Evoking outrage even amongst his supporters, the decision was eventually reversed.

Symbolic of his behavior over the past five years, Abbas' stance on the Goldstone Report brought to the fore the embarrassment and shame many Palestinians have long felt over his actions. Capitulation to Presidents Bush and Obama, and Israeli Prime Ministers Sharon, Olmert and Netanyahu, has only led to the unabated expropriation of Palestinian land and progressively worse relations between the rival *elected* and *appointed* governments.

Though it appears doubtful the quisling Abbas will actually resign, its mere suggestion should still be cause for celebration among Palestinians. Even if it ultimately does not come to pass - at least for now - let them rejoice.

Rannie Amiri is an independent Middle East commentator. He may be reached at: rbamiri@yahoo.com.

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