

Crisis of the Palestinian Authority: Popular Uprising in the Occupied Territories against Mahmoud Abbas?

Till September: The PA's Meaningless Deadlines

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Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and his supporters in the Fatah party want us to believe that dramatic changes are underway in the occupied Palestinian territories.

This is part of a strategy intended to offset any public dissatisfaction with the self-designated Palestinian leadership in the West Bank. The PA hopes the 'news' will create enough distraction to help it survive the current climate of major public-regime showdowns engulfing the Middle East.

Anticipating a potential popular uprising in the occupied territories – which could result in a major revamping of the current power, to the disadvantage of Abbas – the PA is now taking preventive measures.

First, there was the resignation of the chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat on February 12. Erekat was clearly implicated in negotiating, if not squandering, Palestinian rights in successive meetings with Israeli and American officials. This was revealed through nearly 1,600 leaked documents, which Aljazeera and the Guardian termed the 'Palestine Papers'.

Erekat was hardly representing himself, as he readily gave away much territory, including most of Jerusalem. He also agreed to a symbolic return of Palestinian refugees to their land, now part of today's Israel. By keeping his post, the entire PA 'peace process' apparatus would have remained ineffective at best, and at worst entirely self-seeking, showing no regard whatsoever for Palestinian rights.

With Erekat's exit, the PA hopes to retain a margin of credibility among Palestinians.

Erekat, who made his entrance to the world of 'peace process' at the Madrid peace conference in 1991, opted out in a way that conceded no guilt. He claimed to have left merely because the leak happened through his office. The PA expects us to believe that, unlike other Arab governments, it functions in a transparent and self-correcting manner. Erekat wants to be seen as an "example of accountability", according to the Washington Post (February 16). He claimed: "I'm making myself pay the price for the mistake I committed, my negligence. These are the ethics and the standards. Palestinian officials need to start putting them in their minds."

The message is neatly coined, although it belittles the real issue at stake. This has caused

much outrage in Palestinian intellectual, political and public circles. Negligence is one thing, and relinquishing a people's rights is another entirely.

Two days after Erekat's departure, the PA cabinet in the West Bank also suddenly resigned. The cabinet had met earlier that day, and its Prime Minister Salam Fayyad then submitted his resignation to President Abbas. The latter, in turn, accepted the resignation and immediately reappointed Fayyad to form a new government. An exercise in futility? Of course, but for a good reason.

The resignation was merely tactical. It aimed at quelling the current popular discontent and preventing it from spilling over into street protests. But it was also tactless, for it reintroduced the very man who formed the old government to assemble a new one. If indeed Fayyad's political performance was lacking – and thus deserving of rebuke and mass resignation – then what is the point of putting the same man in charge of yet another phase of inefficiency and ineffectiveness?

The dramatic move was meant to show the people that the PA did not need a popular uprising to initiate reforms and change. Fayyad was reappointed because he is valuable to the current political structure of the PA, and he's also the most trusted Palestinian official as far as the US is concerned.

Then, on top of all this, the PA cleverly set September as a deadline for elections in the occupied territories. This date acquired a compounded value when Western officials began assigning other great expectations to September as well. One such call was made by EU foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, who expressed her hopes – along with those of the 'international community' – that a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians would be reached by September.

Based on the current political reality – a rejectionist Israeli front, a Palestinian front that is polarized and largely self-seeking, and a US-led Western front that is incapable of doing much more than pressing the Palestinians for more concessions – we know only too well that no peace will come in September.

Abbas, a pragmatic man by his own admission, knows this as well. The September deadline is largely aimed at creating further distraction. If all eyes are focused on that date, there will be no need to worry about the here and now.

But September is also not too far off, a reality that calls for some early steps. Hamas expectedly rejected the call for elections without a platform of political and territorial unity. Why should Hamas get involved in another election if any unfavorable outcome will only bring further punishment to the Palestinian people? A sound concern, of course, but that rejection allowed Abbas, on February 17, to condition the elections based on Hamas' participation. In other words, Hamas is once more positioned as the hurdle that stands between the Palestinians and unity, political normalcy and democracy. Now Hamas will be continually derided for delaying the 'Palestinian national project', until September leisurely arrives and disappears, leaving behind no mark of meaningful change.

Abbas and his trusted men already know the outcome of this endeavor. In their defense, the strategy also has little to do with September, elections or Hamas' position. It is aimed at deepening the divide among Palestinians, and distract from the main problem, which is the fact that the PA serves no purpose other than managing the administrative side of the Israeli

military occupation. The PA is devoid of any national value to the Palestinian people, and only serves the interests of those involved in subjugating them. The Palestinians are now required to move past this dismal political moment and seek an alternative – an all-inclusive, representative and truly democratic institution to lead the next stage in their fight for freedom.

The PA wants to stall until September. But will Palestinians wait that long?

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