

Arafat legacy can lead Abbas to victory - The Scotsman

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MAHMOUD Abbas, the candidate hoping for a landslide victory in tomorrow's Palestinian presidential election, laid a wreath at Yasser Arafat's tomb in Ramallah yesterday to mark the last day of the campaign.

He said Mr Arafat "reminds us of the huge sacrifice made by the Palestinian people to free his land and obtain an independent state".

Associating himself with Mr Arafat's legacy has helped Mr Abbas, candidate of the ruling Fatah movement, to attract votes. Yet, during his campaign, the moderate and veteran peace negotiator has also staked out markedly distinct positions from the Palestinian founding father as he struggles to emerge from his long shadow.

In particular, Mr Abbas, 69, has called for an end to the armed intifada, adhering to his rejection of Hamas rocket attacks, even in the face of scathing criticism. He has also said his first priority after the elections would be to restart peace negotiations with Israel.

Jimmy Carter, the former US president who is leading a team of election observers, said: "My hope is that the Palestinians will establish a government that will be committed to the peace process and the abhorrence and prohibition and control of any violence."

Mr Abbas's campaign has not been without its combative overtones. He reached out to militant, youthful voters by being carried on the shoulders of gunmen in refugee camps and vowing to defend fugitives. He promised militants would be persuaded rather than coerced into a ceasefire and he invoked the hard-line epithet of Israel as "the Zionist enemy" after a tank shell killed seven Palestinians on Tuesday.

Yet, hours later, in Ramallah, he condemned a Hamas rocket attack in which Israeli civilians were killed, saying: "If we are attacked, we defend ourselves, but we do not do something to kill innocent people."

Hisham Ahmed, a political scientist at Birzeit University, said: "The greatest thing he is to be credited for is being candid and frank. I think it will cost him some votes."

To gain real legitimacy, Mr Abbas needs to win big. Mr Ahmed said a turnout of more than 70 per cent and at least 70 per cent of the vote were the minimum needed to claim victory with a clear mandate.

If he falls much short of that "he will be left vulnerable", Mr Ahmed said. Then he would have to "walk a thin rope" trying to satisfy more people internally at the cost of alienating the United States and Israel.

Electoral politics do not come naturally to Mr Abbas, who co-founded Fatah with Mr Arafat and played a behind-the-scenes role in the PLO. Although respected by the international community, he managed only a 2 per cent popularity rating in a poll four months ago.

At a campaign stop in Hebron, Mr Abbas faced a chaotic crowd of supporters. To warm up for his appearance, they listened to tapes of Mr Arafat speeches interspersed with recorded gunfire. Mr Abbas vowed: "We won't retreat, we will not stop, our conscience will not rest until we establish our independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital."

Yesterday, however, he cancelled a campaign stop in Jerusalem, worried that being surrounded by Israeli security forces in front of his own people would be embarrassing. Hours later, militants linked to Fatah claimed responsibility for ambushing Israeli civilians, four of whom were injured, one critically, when they were shot from a passing car near Nablus on the West Bank. The shooting came a day after Mr Abbas met militants in Nablus and declared that they were ready to support his efforts to seek a ceasefire.