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Oslo's revolving door

One decade after the signing of the failed Oslo Accords, one of its architects comes to power

Jennifer Peterson

A full decade after the sunny signing ceremony for the Oslo Accords on the White House lawn, many Palestinians conclude that the peace process is finally over.

"The Israelis killed Oslo themselves, they sentenced it to death," says Sameh Samha, a Palestinian farmer from the West Bank village of Jayyous.

After all, September 2003 finds Palestinian President Yasser Arafat under house arrest in the remains of his Ramallah headquarters. Last spring, the Israeli military largely destroyed the presidential compound, symbolically reducing much of it—and Palestinian self-rule—to rubble. And Mahmoud Abbas, who traveled with Arafat to Washington ten years ago to sign the historic peace process document, has just resigned from his post as the first Palestinian prime minister. Citing insurmountable obstacles placed

by the Israeli government and his own Palestinian Authority, Abbas packed his bags on 6 September, barely 100 days into office.

But is the show really over? Arafat's appointment of Ahmad Qurei as the new premier indicates that the curtains have yet to fully close. A key player in the secret Oslo talks and considered a chief architect of the peace process, Qurei is no stranger to negotiations. And many Palestinians, finding few viable options for resistance while refusing to capitulate to the Israeli occupation, seem willing to let international diplomacy run its course. "We need a new agreement that will give us our rights, and give us hope," stresses Samha.

Whether Qurei, better known as Abou Alaa, is able to deliver, however, is another question altogether. Many observers point out that the future of the Palestinian cause is no more in his hands than it was in his predecessor's. "I don't think that Ahmad Qurei will be more powerful than Abou Mazen [Abbas], because in the presence of [Israeli Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon, he won't be able to achieve any political or security success," says Ghazi Hamad, editor-in-chief of Al Risaala, an Islamist newspaper based in Gaza.

Yet Israel is not the only target of blame for the nascent premiership's shortcomings, Palestinians point out. "America's lack of commitment to pressuring Israel over the implementation of the road map is what caused Abou Mazen's failure. And the same fate will befall Abou Alaa," Samha warns.

"If there is any success for Abou Alaa, it will be through [international] pressure on Israel to continue negotiations and the peace process. If there is no pressure on Israel to implement the roadmap, or on the issue of the separation wall, I don't think there can be success for any government," adds this farmer, whose village is losing its livelihood as Israel constructs a winding barrier through West Bank land.

The external circumstances facing Palestine's new premier seem grim indeed. In a letter addressed to Arafat that was published by the London based pan-Arab daily Al Hayat, Abbas explained that he resigned "in view of the difficult, nay, impossible, circumstances my government has gone through, whereby the Israeli government erected a wall blocking the path to any advancement of the peace process." His literary Arabic played on both the slow moving US-sponsored "road map" to a gradual political settlement and the construction of Israel's "separation wall" that is devouring Palestinian natural resources while placing concrete facts on the ground.

But many say that the premier's downfall was also triggered by lack of trust in his leadership and a crisis over control of the Palestinian security agencies. According to Birzeit University political science professor Hisham Ahmad, opposition to Abbas "skyrocketed" during his last two weeks in office, both from the opposition and within Fatah, the ruling party of which Abbas was co-founder. And while deeming security squabbles only "the tip of the iceberg," Ahmad says it was unwise of Abbas, "who wasn't democratically elected, to try to pull this power away. It is dictated by law that Arafat is the commander-in-chief of the Palestinian armed forces."

Indeed, Abbas addressed various personal gripes in his resignation letter. "As long as you are convinced that I am the Palestinian Karzai, and that I betrayed your trust and was unable to fulfill my

responsibilities, then I return those responsibilities to you to do as you please with them," he wrote to Arafat, referring to the US-backed president of Afghanistan and implying outside criticism of himself as a puppet leader, hand-picked by the Americans.

While Qurei's close relations with Arafat may preclude such internal power struggles, the new premier still has to win the trust of a public grown weary of the old guard and disillusioned with the Palestinian Authority. One grandfather in East Jerusalem, when asked what advice he would give to the new prime minister, shot out, "The entire Authority should resign and we should just go back to simple Israeli occupation. At least the Israelis shouldered their responsibilities for us," he griped.

Although expressed in the harshest of terms, his statement reflects a popular sentiment that the Palestinian leadership has let its people down repeatedly over the last decade. Ahmad is not optimistic regarding imminent change in this trend. "Whoever the Palestinian leader is, he must adopt a daring and decisive position and be able to say no to Israel," he asserts. "Unfortunately, however, Abou Alaa is prepared to resort to negotiations, and Mahmoud Abbas was ready to continue negotiating even as the separation wall was being built—these are the fatal mistakes of the Palestinian leadership."

Despite, or perhaps because of, the myriad challenges he faces, Qurei commenced his premiership with a demand for international support of his government and a halt to the assassination of Hamas leaders. The day of Abbas's resignation, the Israeli military attempted to assassinate Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, wounding 13 Palestinians in the attack. Then on 7 September, another assassination attempt on a Hamas activist in Gaza wounded 12. After two Palestinian suicide bombings killed 15 Israelis on 9 September, an assassination attempt on Hamas's Mahmoud Zahhar on 10 September killed three Palestinians, including Zahhar's son and bodyguard. Meanwhile, Washington has offered no promises of support.

Notwithstanding this shaky start, Ahmad of Birzeit opines that Qurei must secure two elusive diplomatic stances in order for Palestinians to rally around him: an Israeli retraction of the decision to expel Arafat and recognition by the US administration that the occupation is the root of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. "Short of that, we may be in a vicious circle, in a Catch-22 sort of situation," Ahmad fears.

But regardless of whether Qurei manages to hit the diplomatic bull's eye, repeat scenarios seem likely to appear on the horizon of this Oslo craftsman. A veteran of the Palestinian cause and historic negotiations, Qurei will need to break the cycle of responding and conceding to the Israeli occupation if he wishes to win widespread support from his people and push the "peace process" to new horizons.

"To really have a genuine, lasting settlement for the conflict would require doing something about the tenacity and belligerence of the Sharon government, or, I'm afraid to say, we will have another chapter, or perhaps chapters, of fierce bloodshed in the area," predicts Ahmad.

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