

# Effort to Diminish Arafat Is Said to Strengthen Him

By [FRANK BRUNI](#) AUG. 29, 2003

When the United States pushed Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, to appoint a prime minister three months ago, American and Israeli officials hoped that Mr. Arafat would recede from the scene, profile diminished and power diluted.

But by making that wish so clear, those officials may have accomplished just the opposite. Recent events have shown that Mr. Arafat remains at the center of Palestinian politics and the efforts to banish him may be a major reason.

"They just decided to say that he was irrelevant and that they were going to ignore him," said Qadoura Fares, a Palestinian legislator.

He was among a group of legislators who pressed Mr. Arafat to share power with the prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen. But, Mr. Fares said, "One reason that Yasir Arafat has remained and re-emerged as so strong is because the Americans and the Israelis were talking and acting like Abu Mazen was perfect and Arafat was all mad."

"This moved people closer to Arafat," he said today.

Just how much closer is impossible to gauge right now. But it has become clear in the past week and a half that Mr. Arafat feels emboldened and that he has reason to.

His re-emergence presents a serious problem for Israeli and American officials. While both have declined to negotiate with him and have cast him an impediment to an American-backed peace process known as the road map, they may not be able to navigate around him.

Some of those officials seem to know that. Israeli officials have recently talked about deporting Mr. Arafat to get him out of the way.

But last week, when militant Palestinian groups declared an end to a seven-week cease-fire and threw the road map into uncertainty, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell appealed to Mr. Arafat for help.

This week, as Mr. Arafat and Mr. Abbas plunged deeper into a bitter power struggle, Palestinian politicians and political analysts said that Mr. Arafat was the one with the upper hand. "Abbas was superimposed on Palestinian society, and Arafat has always been a good chess player," said

Hisham Ahmed, a political science professor at Bir Zeit University. "I would not rule out that he expected this kind of scenario."

Mr. Arafat certainly seems determined to wield influence. On Monday, he appointed a new national security adviser, a reminder that he controls the majority of Palestinian security forces. It was also a signal that he would not accede to international demands to give that authority to Mr. Abbas.

On Wednesday, he called on militant groups to reinstate the cease-fire, stepping into a situation that Mr. Abbas was trying to handle.

While Mr. Abbas was appointed -- by Mr. Arafat -- Mr. Arafat was elected, and his status in Palestinian society is iconic.

Although he remains trapped in his ruined compound here, his face smiles from posters on buildings and from framed pictures inside offices throughout the West Bank.

The road map requires a consolidation of security forces under one authority, which would theoretically help Palestinians dismantle militant groups. Mr. Fares, a member of Mr. Arafat's Fatah party, described a plan in the works that would preserve Mr. Arafat's voice on security matters. He and another legislator with Fatah, to which Mr. Abbas also belongs, said that party members would propose the formation of a seven-person national security council, with Mr. Arafat at its head and Mr. Abbas beside him. The council would decide security policy.

Israeli officials say Palestinian leaders have been slow to crack down on militant groups, and the Israeli military has taken matters into its own hands. In the Gaza Strip tonight, an Israeli air strike killed a 35-year-old man whom witnesses identified as a Hamas militant. Israeli military officials said he was preparing to fire mortar shells at a nearby Jewish settlement in Gaza.

Earlier today, militants in Gaza fired several Qassam rockets toward Israel; one landed in the city of Ashkelon, about five miles north of the Gaza boundary. No injuries were reported, but it was the farthest a rocket had been fired into Israel since the latest conflict between Palestinians and Israelis began almost three years ago.

Israeli tanks and armored bulldozers then entered Gaza to destroy tress and shrubbery that the militants were using for cover. Israeli military officials said that the number of mortars and rockets fired by militants in Gaza had greatly increased in the past week.

In another development, Palestinian leaders followed through today on a pledge made this week to freeze bank accounts of charities linked to the militant group Hamas. Hundreds of Palestinians took to the streets in Gaza in protest.

The volatile state of events has unsettled the Palestinian leadership and given Mr. Arafat a new opportunity to assert himself.

Asked today if Mr. Arafat had always planned to do that, Muhammad Horani, a Fatah legislator, said, "I will answer the question this way: Arafat will always work to say, 'I am here. I exist.' "