

## Abu Mazen's resignation — a chaotic conclusion

By Omar Karmi

OCCUPIED JERUSALEM — With Palestinian Premier Mahmoud Abbas, Abu Mazen, submitting his resignation to Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, an unseemly week in Palestinian politics appears to be reaching a chaotic conclusion.

Guarded and less guarded reactions from significant actors have already been made, ranging from a wait-and-see stance by US officials to a call by a senior member of the Israeli Cabinet to have Arafat ousted.

At the time of writing it remains unclear whether Arafat will accept Abu Mazen's resignation. Three options are open to the president: He can accept the resignation and fire the Cabinet to appoint a new premier and Cabinet in the next two weeks; he can accept Abu Mazen's resignation, but keep the Cabinet; or he can reject the resignation completely. Sources in the PLC suggest that the second is the more likely option.

Professor of Political Science at Bir Zeit University, Hisham Ahmed, is in no doubt which option he would prefer Arafat to take. "I think Arafat should accept Abu Mazen's resignation as part and parcel of the rule of law. [But] whether or not Arafat accepts Abu Mazen's resignation, this government is dead, and I think there will be a considerable degree of relief in Palestinian society if this government is no longer able to pursue its failed policies."

In his speech to a closed session of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) on Saturday, Abu Mazen was reported to have said that his decision was final, and, in a statement released later, he listed a number of reasons for his resignation, including what he said was Israel's unwillingness to implement its obligations under the "roadmap," and "harsh and dangerous domestic incitement" against his government.

In Ahmed's opinion, however, Abu Mazen submitted his resignation after realising first of all that it was going to be impossible for him to successfully carry through any policies, and secondly, and more importantly, that he had become deeply unpopular with the Palestinian people.

The latter, says Ahmed, was obvious in the tumultuous scenes that greeted Abu Mazen on Thursday before he gave a speech to the PLC. In that speech, Abu Mazen called on the PLC to "back me up to carry out my duties... or take them away."

Outside, meanwhile, Fatah activists, many wearing the masks of Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, demonstrated against him, some calling him and Security Minister Mohammad Dahlan "collaborators" with Israel.

Ahmed says the US and Israel hindered rather than helped Abu Mazen over the last couple of months. Most importantly, they only "paid lip service" to the roadmap, and

while Abu Mazen secured a ceasefire with the Palestinian factions, the Palestinian people saw little progress on the ground, as Israel continued land confiscations, the building of the separation barrier, and as closures and roadblocks remained intact.

What next, though, is the question on everyone's lips, especially when it comes to Israeli and US reactions.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's office said in a statement that the resignation was an internal Palestinian matter, but that Israel "will not accept a state of affairs in which control over the Palestinian Authority reverts back to Yasser Arafat or one of his loyalists."

Israeli Minister of Health Danny Naveh, however, immediately called for Arafat's expulsion. "The state of Israel needs to ensure the security of its citizens, and the first step for that is expelling the terrorist Yasser Arafat," Naveh said in a statement.

Such a move, according to Ahmed, would be disastrous, not only in the Palestinian arena, but in the Middle East in general. "The US and Israel must think very carefully before engaging in any ill-considered adventure. Any direct meddling with the internal Palestinian politics, i.e., the removal, in one way or another of Arafat, would lead to catastrophic consequences, not only in Palestine, but in the Arab and the wider world. It would lead to the exact opposite of peace and stability, and the US and Israel would pay the price of such a miscalculation. In addition, no Palestinian leader could step in, in such a situation. Any leader who would try to do this would be looked at with the utmost suspicion."

The lesson the US and Israel must draw from the whole episode, says Ahmed, is that they can "in no way whatsoever impose their own leadership on the Palestinian people," and no party can go beyond the "symbol of the Palestinian resistance, Arafat, who is the democratically elected leader of the Palestinian people, and who still holds the keys to the political process."

For now, the US appears to be waiting to see how the situation resolves itself. In a statement to the press in Italy, US Secretary for Homeland Security Tom Ridge said the resignation would not deter American and international efforts to get Israel and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table, though it will "unfortunately, tragically" delay it.

Sunday, September 7, 2003