

“Palestinian Leader Walks a Mideast Tightrope” By Greg Myre- Mitfah

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Date posted: April 26, 2005

By Greg Myre

Ramallah, West Bank - After a swift start as the Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas has lost much of that momentum, with Israelis and Palestinians each saying he has not yet delivered what they had hoped.

Mr. Abbas achieved two significant accomplishments early on. He presided over a smooth political transition following the death of Yasir Arafat last November, and then declared a truce while standing with Israel's prime minister, Ariel Sharon, on Feb. 8, which brought a significant drop in violence.

But since then, Mr. Abbas has struggled. The Israelis complain he has not dismantled armed factions and so they cannot ease conditions for the Palestinians; the Palestinians say he has not been able to persuade the Israelis to ease restrictions on their movement, and that he has not delivered tangible improvements in the economy or won the release of Palestinian prisoners.

Hisham Ahmed, a political science professor at Bir Zeit University in Ramallah, says the current situation bears similarities to Mr. Abbas's brief, unhappy tenure as prime minister under Mr. Arafat in the summer of 2003. At that time he not only felt stymied by Israel but also failed to bring about substantive changes in the Palestinian government.

"We're not at a deadlock yet," Mr. Ahmed said. "The Palestinians do want to give the president a chance. But he's facing a real dilemma. If he can't show movement in the political arena with Israel, then he's going to face difficulties in making changes in Palestinian society."

Mr. Abbas, who now has been in power about 100 days, is a reluctant public speaker. Still, this week he welcomed Israeli journalists to his office in Ramallah, and said Israel was making his job even tougher.

"There has not been a single minute without criticism, without complaints or without incitement," Mr. Abbas told the journalists on Tuesday. "I've never seen such criticism. Only three months have passed. Give us time to act. Give us a chance to act and help us."

Mr. Abbas says that although the Palestinian Authority has foiled attempted attacks on Israelis by Palestinian militants, Israel has not halted its raids in Palestinian territory.

"Israeli incursions make us look like liars, and erode our legitimacy," he said, noting that Israel has pulled back from only two of the five West Bank towns it promised to leave.

Mr. Abbas is facing three crucial questions.

First, can he open full-fledged peace negotiations with Israel? Progress toward talks, as envisioned under the Middle East peace plan known as the road map, has been minimal, but there are signs the pace could be picking up.

Senior Israeli and Palestinian leaders are holding talks on Israel's planned evacuation of Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank. Until recently, Mr. Sharon had described the pullout as a unilateral Israeli action and had shown no interest in coordinating with the Palestinians. Also, discussions are under way to arrange another meeting between Mr. Abbas and Mr. Sharon, each side says.

Second, can Fatah, the movement that has dominated Palestinian politics since the 1960's, beat back the challenge from the Islamic faction Hamas in municipal elections planned for May and, more important, parliamentary elections scheduled for July? The Fatah movement is increasingly divided between men of Mr. Abbas's generation, who had close ties to Mr. Arafat, and a younger generation that feels it is being denied leadership roles.

The last question is the most complicated: how can he pacify the armed Palestinian factions?

The Israelis insist that he confront and dismantle them, but Mr. Abbas is moving cautiously. He negotiated temporary pledges from Hamas and other factions to halt attacks, and started a pilot project to absorb them into his security forces.

The Palestinians say they received from Israel a list of more than 500 wanted militants, and that more than 300 have been tracked down and persuaded to sign pledges to abide by the political decisions of the Palestinian Authority. That effectively means they promise not to attack Israel. Most of them have also filled out a form that is essentially a job application for the security forces, said Abdel Fattah Hamayel, who is heading the pilot project.

New Security Chiefs Are Appointed

The Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, on Saturday appointed three new leaders to the recently streamlined security forces, and he will retire hundreds of officers who have reached 60, Palestinian officials said.

Mr. Abbas recently reorganized the forces into three main services - national security, intelligence, and police - and picked new chiefs on Saturday for each branch. The shakeup included the ouster of Mr. Arafat's cousin, Mousa Arafat, the head of national security in the Gaza Strip. Mousa Arafat will become a security adviser to Mr. Abbas.