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## Palestinian front-runner must master balancing act

By **Ben Lynfield**

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HEBRON, WEST BANK — A campaign poster of Fatah candidate Mahmoud Abbas, looking for a landslide victory in today's Palestinian presidential election, shows him standing shoulder to shoulder with Yasser Arafat.

The two gaze confidently ahead, under the caption: "On your path, we will fulfill the Palestinian dream."

Associating himself with Arafat's legacy may be a good way to attract votes. Yet during his campaign, Abbas has also staked out distinct positions as he struggles to emerge from Arafat's shadow. He called for an end to the armed intefadeh, and Thursday in Nablus said his first priority after the election would be to restart peace negotiations with Israel.

But this campaign has not been without combative overtones and the emotive symbolism of militants. Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, reached out to young voters by riding on the shoulders of wanted gunmen during visits to refugee camps where he vowed to defend fugitives.

He promised that militants will be persuaded rather than coerced into a cease-fire and invoked the hard-line epithet of Israel as "the Zionist enemy" after a tank shell killed seven Palestinians on Tuesday. Yet hours later, speaking to a Ramallah audience, he condemned a Hamas rocket attack in which Israeli civilians were killed. "If we are attacked we defend ourselves, but we do not do something to kill innocent people," he said.

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

Hamas, which is not fielding a candidate but has stopped short of calling for an election boycott, joined with six other Palestinian factions this week in condemning Abbas' remarks over the rocket firings. Abbas called the firings pointless and added "they usually fall in the desert or on our houses, killing our children."

Hamas spokesman Mushir Masri said: "Instead of marketing himself to the Americans, Europeans, and Israelis, Abu Mazen should support his own people. The Palestinian leadership should be on the side of the resistance."

### Mahmoud Abbas

**Born:** 1935

**Education:** Law degree from Damascus University, doctorate in history from Oriental College, Moscow.

**Politics:** Founding member of Fatah in 1965; in 1974, assassination target of the Abu Nidal group, due to his moderate views; joined executive committee of Palestine Liberation Organization in 1980; signed Declaration of Principles on Palestinian Self-Rule at the White House in 1993; first Palestinian Authority prime minister.

*Source: "The Essential Middle East," Carol & Graf Publishers*

Israel, for its part, "will judge Abbas by what he does, not by the words he utters in an election," said Raanan Gissin, spokesman for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. "After the election, we will demand that he unequivocally take the necessary steps to stop terrorist activity and incitement and dismantle the terrorist organizations."

Associates and analysts say electoral politics did not come naturally to the reserved Abbas, who cofounded Fatah with Arafat and played a role behind the scenes in the Palestinian Liberation Organization. A short stint as PLO prime minister in 2003 did little to undo the sense of him as a technocrat lacking the common touch.

Although respected by the international community, Abbas tallied only a 2 percent popularity rating in an opinion poll four months ago. But becoming Fatah's candidate for the presidency has forced him to finally meet the Palestinian street.

"This man was used to delivering lectures," his campaign manager, Mohammed Shtayyeh told reporters. "I think we are helping him turn into a speech deliverer who can go into refugee camps and speak to people."

At a campaign stop in Hebron Wednesday, Abbas met a charged-up and sympathetic crowd including Fatah youth activists. "Mercy on the soul of the symbol, the martyr Yasser Arafat. May he rest in peace," he began.

"Abu Mazen, you are the hero!" the crowd shouted in response.

"Mercy on the souls of all the martyrs. Mercy on the soul of Marwan Zaloum," Abbas continued, referring to the Hebron leader of the Al Aqsa brigades militia, who was killed by Israeli forces in April 2002. Israel held him responsible for a suicide bombing and shooting attacks.

Abbas then 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. We will not be quiet until we achieve freedom for all the prisoners, the return of the refugees and a dignified life for all the wanted people."

"I pledge that we will establish the state of law where no one is above the law," he added.

"We offer you our loyalty," shouted the crowd.

Abbas is finally establishing a rapport with the Palestinian public, analysts say. "Suddenly, with this campaign he has been meeting people for the first time, receiving their support and recognizing that he is not anymore the man in the shadow, and that he cannot be a man with a doctrine not representing the pulse of the street," said Mahdi Abdul-Hadi, director of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs.

But Palestinian journalist Khaled Amayreh has been less impressed. "Fatah's support for Abu Mazen is not like its support for Arafat. In Arafat's case there was infatuation, symbolism and irrational love. He had a halo of charisma around him. Abu Mazen lacks all of this. He is not a hero, or a symbol, he is only a fait accompli. Fatah has no way of preserving itself except by backing this man."

"Yasser Arafat could do anything without accountability and criticism; he was Mr. Palestine," Amayreh continued. "Abbas' ability to do the kind of things the West and Israel expect him to do will be limited. Any deviation on the core issues, and he will be finished."

But much will depend on today's outcome and on Israel's policies. A poll released this week by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research gave Abbas 65 percent of the vote, compared with 22 percent for second-place independent candidate Mustafa Barghouthi.

Abbas will need a turnout of more than 70 percent and at least 70 percent of the vote to be able to claim a clear mandate, said Ahmed. If he falls much short, "he will be left vulnerable. Then he will have to walk a thin rope, to try to satisfy more people internally, which will dissatisfy the external actors."

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