

## Palestinian leader's militant turn troubles U.S.,

By Andrea Stone, USA TODAY

RAMALLAH, West Bank — What a difference a week makes. Before he made his first campaign speech on Dec. 28, Mahmoud Abbas was seen by Israel and the United States as a moderate whom they welcomed as a possible successor to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.



Once seen as a moderate, Mahmoud Abbas now is talking tough.

By Amr Nabil, AP

But after a series of inflammatory remarks at recent rallies, the grandfatherly front-runner in Sunday's Palestinian presidential election has some State Department and Israeli officials wondering whether they should take Abbas' campaign rhetoric more seriously — including one poster that promises if elected he would be "following in the path of Arafat." The longtime leader's death two months ago prompted the first Palestinian presidential election since 1996 (Arafat won the previous vote).

In the past week, Abbas:

- Called Israel the "Zionist enemy" after seven Palestinians were killed by an Israeli tank shell Tuesday in Gaza.
- Was carried on the shoulders of a leader of the militant Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades group in Jenin and signaled in Gaza that he would protect militants sought by the Israelis for terrorist attacks.
- Made demands that were sure to aggravate Israel including the "right of return" for Palestinian refugees who fled after Israel became a state, the withdrawal of Israeli forces and settlers to Israel's pre-1967 borders, and making Jerusalem the capital of a future Palestinian state.

Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert called Abbas' "Zionist enemy" remark "intolerable and unacceptable." He also said his stump speeches on refugees, final borders and Jerusalem raised questions about whether Abbas could be a productive peace negotiator.

Abbas' statements are the clearest indication yet of how difficult it will be for the former Palestinian prime minister to navigate the political minefield that is Middle East politics. While he's the likely winner in a field of seven candidates, he must appeal to moderate voters without alienating militants and younger Palestinians,

many of whom see Abbas as part of Arafat's "Old Guard." But if his oratory becomes too heated, he risks gaining the same reputation for intransigence Arafat earned among Israelis and the Bush administration.

That may explain why Abbas, 69, also has reiterated his opposition to violence as a means to secure the Palestinian goal of statehood. Militants spurned his plea.

After a lull following Arafat's death, violence has resumed. Wednesday, two Palestinian rockets hit an army base in southern Israel, injuring 12 Israeli soldiers. An armed Palestinian was killed during a gunfight at a Gaza checkpoint.

Despite criticism from Hamas, Abbas has gotten the most flak from some of those who had hoped he would prove the serious "partner for peace" that Arafat wasn't.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said Sunday that he found the sight of Abbas being lifted on the shoulders of wanted gunmen "disturbing." State Department spokeswoman Rhonda Shore said Wednesday that Abbas' rhetoric "has no place in the process of resuming dialogue."

Dennis Ross, the U.S. point man in peace talks during the first Bush and Clinton administrations, says Abbas' tough talk is aimed at winning at least 60% of Sunday's vote, enough to claim a mandate.

Hisham Ahmed, a political scientist at Beir Zeit University here, says Abbas "could not act otherwise" than to criticize Israel, which took over the West Bank and Gaza during 1967's Six Day War. While the sharp words are partly campaign rhetoric, "he cannot cater only to the rationalism of a statesman. He also has to cater to ... the sentiments of his people."