

# Leader without Glory

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October 10, 2015

I FIRST MET MAHMOUD ABBAS in Tunis at the beginning of 1983.

I knew that he was responsible for the Israel desk in the PLO leadership. Said Hamami and Issam Sartawi, the PLO delegates with whom I had been in permanent contact since 1974, told me that he was in charge. But he was not present at my first meeting with Yasser Arafat in Beirut during the siege.

I came to Tunis with General Matti Peled and Yaakov Arnon, in an official delegation of the Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, which we had founded in 1975. Before meeting with Arafat himself, we were asked to meet with Abu Mazen (as Abbas is called) and discuss our ideas, so as to present the leader with an agreed, detailed proposal. That was also the procedure in all the many meetings that followed.

Abu Mazen was very different from Arafat. Arafat was flamboyant, spontaneous, extrovert. Abu Mazen is rather withdrawn, introverted, cautious, meticulous. My first impression was that of a schoolmaster.

When Arafat was murdered (as I believe), there were two obvious candidates to succeed him: Mahmoud Abbas and Farouk Kaddoumi, both members of the PLO founding generation. Kaddoumi was far more extreme, he did not believe that Israel would ever make peace and admired the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad. The PLO leadership chose Abbas.

WHEN ABBAS assumed “power” (in quotation marks)—he found himself in an almost impossible situation.

Arafat had accepted the status of the Palestinian Authority under Israeli occupation as a calculated risk.

First of all, he believed Yitzhak Rabin, as we all did (and as I advised him to). We all believed that Rabin was well on the way to accepting a Palestinian state next to Israel. Within five years, the State of Palestine would become a fact. No one could have foreseen the murder of Rabin, the cowardice of Shimon Peres and the ascent of Binyamin Netanyahu.

Even before that, Rabin had bowed to the pressure of his “security chiefs” and reneged on crucial parts of the Oslo agreement, such as the free passages between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Abu Mazen entered into this situation—Rabin was dead, the Oslo agreement only a shadow of its former self, the occupation and the settlement enterprise in full swing.

It was an almost hopeless task from the start: a dubious autonomy under occupation. According to the Oslo deal, which was meant to last for five years at most, the greater part of the West Bank (“area C”) was under direct and full Israeli control, and the Israeli army was free to operate in the two other areas (“A” and “B”), too. An additional Israeli withdrawal, provided for in Oslo, never materialized.

Palestinian elections held in these circumstances led to a Hamas victory, helped along by the competition among the Fatah candidates. When Israel and the US prevented Hamas from assuming power, Hamas took the Gaza strip over by force. The Israeli leadership was full of glee: the old Roman maxim *Divide et Impera* served its purposes well.

Since then, all Israeli governments have done everything in their power to keep Abbas in “power” while reducing him to a mere underling. The Palestinian Authority, conceived in the beginning as the embryo of the Palestinian state, was shorn of any real authority. Ariel Sharon used to refer to Abu Mazen as a “plucked chicken”.

TO REALIZE the extreme danger of Abu Mazen's situation one has only to remember the most recent historical precedent of “autonomy” under occupation: Vichy.

In the summer of 1940, when the Germans overran Northern France and occupied Paris, the French surrendered. France was divided into two parts: the North, with Paris, remained under direct German occupation, the South was granted autonomy. A venerable marshal, Henri Petain, a hero of World War I, was appointed leader of the non-occupied zone, the capital of which was set up in the provincial town of Vichy.

A lone French general resisted the surrender. Charles de Gaulle, with a small band of adherents, fled to London, where he tried by radio to arouse the French people to resist. The effect was negligible.

Against expectations, the British continued the war (“Alright then, alone!”) and the German regime in France became inevitably harsher and harsher. Hostages were executed, Jews deported, Vichy became more and more

a byword for collaboration with the enemy. Slowly the “resistance” gained ground. In the end, the Allies invaded France, the Germans occupied the Vichy territory and were vanquished, de Gaulle returned as a victor. Petain was sentenced to death but not executed.

Opinions about Petain were divided, and still are. On the one hand, he saved Paris from destruction and saved the French people from many of the cruelties of the Nazis. After the war, France recovered quickly, while other countries were in ruins.

On the other hand, Petain is regarded by many as a traitor, a former hero who collaborated with the enemy in wartime and turned resistance fighters and Jews over to the Nazis.

OF COURSE, different historical situations cannot be equated. Israelis are harsh occupiers, but they are no Nazis. Abu Mazen certainly is no second Petain. But some comparisons may be in order.

One way to judge a policy is to ask: what are the alternatives?

It is no exaggeration to say that all forms of Palestinian resistance have been tried and found wanting.

In the beginning, some Palestinians dreamt of Indian-style civil disobedience. It failed completely. Palestinians are no Indians, and the occupation army, which has no real antidote to civil disobedience, simply started to shoot, compelling the Palestinians to turn to violence.

Violence failed. The Israeli side enjoys infinite military superiority. With the help of informers and torture, Palestinian underground cells are regularly uncovered, including the last one this week.

Many Palestinians hope for international intervention. This has been prevented by successive US administrations, all of which served the occupation on request of the US Jewish establishment. Sympathizers of the Palestinian cause, such as the international boycott movement (BDS) are far too weak to make much of a difference.

The Arab countries are good at making declarations and proposing plans, but largely unwilling to help the Palestinians in any real way.

What remains? Precious little.

ABU MAZEN believes—or pretends to believe—in “international pressure”. Many Israeli peace activists, despairing of their own people, have reached the same conclusion.

With a lot of patience, Abbas is slowly gathering points at the UN. This week, the Palestinian flag was raised at the UN headquarters among the flags of member nations. This has raised national pride (I remember a similar event in our own past), but does not really change anything.

Abbas may also hope that the growing personal antagonism between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu will induce the Americans to withhold their veto in the Security Council the next time a resolution against the occupation comes up. I doubt it. But if so—the Israeli government will just ignore it. The same will happen if Abbas succeeds in getting some Israeli officers indicted for war crimes at the International Criminal Court. Israelis believe only in “Facts on the Ground”.

I assume that Abu Mazen knows all this. He is playing for time. He is trying to prevent a violent uprising, which he believes will only benefit the occupation, deploying his American-trained “security forces” in cooperation with the occupation army. This is close to the abyss.

He has one consolation: the Hamas authority in the Gaza Strip has obviously come to the same conclusion and is now keeping a kind of armistice (“hudna”) with Israel.

ONE OF the main differences between Jewish Israelis and Arabs is their attitude towards time. Israelis are by nature impatient, Arabs are patient to a fault. Arabs admire the camel, an animal of infinite patience. The Arabs have a very long history, while the Israelis have almost none.

I assume that Abu Mazen believes that at this point in time there is very little Palestinians can do. So he is leading a holding operation: endure the occupation, prevent violent confrontations the Palestinians are bound to lose, wait for the situation to change. Arabs are good at this kind of strategy, called *sumud*.

However, the occupation is not just staying around. It is active, taking away Arab land, relentlessly building and enlarging Israeli settlements.

In the long run, this is a battle of wills and endurance. As has been said, a battle between an unstoppable force and an unyielding mass.

HOW WILL Abbas be judged by history?

It is much too early to say.

I believe that he is a true patriot, no less than Arafat. But he is in danger of sliding, against his will, into a Petain-like situation.

I definitely do not believe that he is corrupt, or that he represent a small class of “fat cats” who are getting rich under and from the occupation.

History has placed him in a situation that is well-nigh impossible. He is showing great courage in trying to lead his people in these circumstances.

It is not a glorious role. This is not a time for glory.

History may remember him as a man who did his best in disastrous circumstances.

I, for one, wish him well.