

{JANUARY 15 2005}

# WHO ENVIES ABU-MAZEN?

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**N**ow it's official: "the First Democracy in the Arab World" or "the Second Democracy in the Middle East" has been born. The Palestinian elections have impressed the world. Until now, if elections were held in any Arab country at all, there was only one candidate, and he received 99.62% of the vote. Yet here there were seven candidates, there was a lively election campaign and the winning candidate got only 62%.

The truth is, of course, that Palestinian democracy existed already. In 1996, the Palestinians held elections for the presidency and the parliament, monitored by international observers. Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestinian struggle for liberation, was not the only one standing; another candidate, Samikha Khalil, a respected woman, did garner almost 10% of the vote. But because of Arafat's dominant personality, the insufficient separation between the branches of government and the relentless Israeli defamation campaign against him, many people around the world did not recognize the Palestinian democracy.

Now the situation is different. Nobody can deny the near-miracle that has happened: the clean transition from the Arafat era to the era of his successors, and the fair elections held under strict international supervision. And, most importantly, democracy was not imposed from the outside, at the whim of a foreign president, but grew from below. And not under normal conditions, but under a brutal occupation.

The whole world acknowledges the Palestinian democracy. That, by itself, creates a new political situation.

Much now depends on the personality of Abu-Mazen. He is setting out under the shadow of his great predecessor. Those who succeed a Founding Father always have a problem at the beginning, like the heirs of Bismarck or Ben-Gurion.

Just think of the man who succeeded Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, the founder of modern Egypt and the idol of the entire Arab world. When Nasser died, I asked my friend, Henry Curiel, what kind of person his almost unknown successor was.

Curiel, who founded the first (mainly Jewish) Egyptian Communist party, had a

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razor-sharp mind. In Paris he had set up a kind of international center of assistance for liberation movements the world over, while maintaining close ties to his homeland. His answer was short and sharp: “Sadat is a simpleton.”

He was not alone in this view. Egyptians used to tell a joke about the dark spot on Sadat’s brow: “At every meeting of the Free Officers Committee (that was then ruling the country), Nasser would ask his colleagues to express their opinion. One after the other they stood up and spoke. At the end, Sadat too would get up to speak. Nasser would put his finger on his brow and gently push him back into his chair, saying: Oh, sit down, Anwar!”

Yet upon assuming the presidency, Sadat astounded the world. He sent his army across the Suez Canal, achieving the first significant military victory ever over the Israeli army. His visit to Jerusalem was a brilliant act without precedent in history. Never before had a leader visited the capital of the enemy while still in a state of war.

Abu-Mazen has lived all his life in the shadow of Arafat. He was not a military leader, unlike the adored Abu-Jihad, who was murdered by Israel. He was not in command of the security apparatus, unlike Abu-Iyad, who was murdered by Abu-Nidal. Since 1974, he was closely associated with Arafat’s historic efforts to achieve a political settlement with Israel, and in charge of the contacts with the Israeli peace forces. I myself met him for the first time in Tunis, in 1983.

I shall not be surprised if Abu Mazen, as the president of the Palestinian State-in-the-Making, exhibits talents and attributes that did not find their proper expression during the Arafat era. He may yet become the Palestinian Sadat.

Of course, Abu-Mazen is very different from Sadat. The Egyptian leader had a dramatic flair (like Menachem Begin), he loved big gestures (like Arafat). Abu-Mazen’s style is the very opposite.

And another huge difference: Sadat was in absolute control of a big country. He could afford to ignore different views. Abu-Mazen does not enjoy this luxury.

He brings with him to his job a valuable dowry: his relationship with the President of the United States.

George Bush is a simple fellow. He likes some people and hates others, and this decides the policy of the greatest power on earth. He likes Ariel Sharon and fawns on him. Since he has never been in battle, he admires the combat-rich Israeli general. Sharon personifies for him the American myth – the annihilation of the Indians and the conquest of the territories. Arafat, on the other hand, reminded him of an Indian chief, whose language is unintelligible and whose ploys are satanic.

When Bush saw Abu-Mazen in Aqaba, a respectable person in a business suit, without beard or keffiyeh, he liked him on sight. That’s why he congratulated him this

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week and invited him to the White House. The question is whether Abu-Mazen can translate this attitude quickly into political achievements.

The situation presents Sharon with a difficult dilemma. His natural inclination is to do unto Abu-Mazen what he did so successfully to Arafat: demonize him and cut his ties with America. Already he is muttering darkly about Abu-Mazen's unwillingness to destroy the "terrorist organizations".

But Sharon knows that he must behave with the utmost care, so as not to make Bush angry. As long as Bush thinks that Abu-Mazen is O.K., Sharon must not be seen to undermine him. This, too, gives Abu-Mazen a chance.

So what can he do?

His first task is to come to terms with the refusal-organizations. No leader can conduct national policy with armed factions firing in the opposite direction.

Ben-Gurion was in a similar situation before the foundation of Israel, when faced with the Irgun and the Stern Group who acted independently. Once he tried to integrate them into a unified "Hebrew Revolt Movement", at another time he handed their fighters over to the British police. But it is essential to remember: Ben-Gurion started the decisive confrontation – by shelling the Irgun ship Altalena – only after the State of Israel had already come into being. Then the two organizations were incorporated into the new Israeli army.

Anyone who says that Abu-Mazen is ready or able to start a civil war against Hamas does not know what he is talking about. Palestinian public opinion would not stand for it. Most Palestinians believe that without the armed struggle, Sharon would not be talking of withdrawing from Gaza. They are ready for a cease-fire in order to give Abu-Mazen a chance. But they do not want the liquidation of the fighting organizations, because it may be necessary to renew the armed struggle if Abu-Mazen can't convince the Americans and the Israelis to enable the Palestinians to realize their national aims.

In his dealings with Hamas, Abu-Mazen, like Arafat, will prefer a combination of negotiations, political pressure and mobilizing public opinion. He will have to convince the armed factions to accept the national strategy that is adopted by the leadership. In return, he will have to welcome Hamas into the political system, the PLO and the parliament.

The attack at the Karni crossing this week was a demonstration of power by the armed factions. It was a classic guerilla action, much as the recent destruction of an army post on the "Philadelphi Axis". The organizations want to prove that they have not been vanquished, but rather that they have achieved a draw with the Israeli army. If a cease-fire is arranged, it will not be a sign of weakness on their part. In the same way, the Yom Kippur attack preceded the Egyptian-Israeli peace, and the Hizbullah

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guerilla war preceded the withdrawal from Lebanon.

If Abu-Mazen achieves such a cease-fire, he will be able to address his main task: to win over Israeli and international public opinion and to change the policy of the United States.

Sadat succeeded in both. But Sadat was dealing with Menachem Begin, who was willing to relinquish Egyptian territory in order to continue his struggle against the Palestinians and prevent the creation of a Palestinian state. Sharon, too, opposes the creation of a Palestinian state in all of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with its capital in East Jerusalem. But Abu-Mazen, like Arafat, cannot and will not be satisfied with anything less than what is now a sanctified aim.

That is another huge difference between Sadat and Abu-Mazen: Sadat came to Jerusalem only after he was secretly assured that Begin was ready to give back all of Sinai. Sharon, on the other hand, is promising Abu-Mazen nothing at all.

Abu-Mazen was sworn in today. Many hope for his success, very few envy him.

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**AVNER Y | SHARON'S SKIN AND BUSH'S SPOTS**