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Abbas pushes back

Media Mention of Hussein Ibish in Politico - November 6, 2009 - 12:00am

http://www.politico.com/blogs/laurarozen/1109/Abbas_pushes_back_with_threat_to_q... [1]

A day after Hillary Clinton returned from a swing through the Middle East where she pushed the Palestinians to go into peace talks with Israel short of a full Israeli settlement freeze, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is threatening to not run in Palestinian elections he has called to be held in January, reports say.

Abbas is expected to give a major speech at 1:30pm EST. His expected announcement that he will not run in Palestinian elections "set off a flurry of calls from regional leaders, with the presidents of Egypt and Israel, the king of Jordan and Israel's defense minister all urging Abbas to change his mind, aides said," the AP reports.

Washington Middle East hands say Abbas is trying to "leverage his weakness" to push Washington and Jerusalem to consider where the peace process would be if he is not around.

"What Abbas is trying to do is leverage his weakness to the extreme," said one Washington Middle East hand who asked for anonymity. "'Give me something or you will have no leadership here.' Conceivably what he is asking for is a settlement freeze. His sense is that 'Hillary tried to push me around. And I will show her.' Then fine, you [try to] go on without me."

"This is vintage Abbas ? a good man trapped in an untenable situation ? by Hamas on one hand, Netanyahu on the other and now by Obama," said veteran Middle East negotiator Aaron David Miller. "Like elections themselves (unlikely to be held) the threat of resignation is a ploy as well -- reflecting his personal frustration, but also designed to grab attention and get others not to take him for granted. On balance the threat changes nothing, although an actual resignation would."

"Look, if Abu Mazen does not run for reelection, and says 'I'm out of here, you do it. ... You will rue the day,'" one former U.S. official said, was the intended message to Washington and Jerusalem.

Abbas' expected threat comes a day after Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat reportedly floated an idea circulating in Palestinian intellectual circles to abandon the push for a two state solution in favor of one state in which Palestinians would demand equal rights to Israel's Jewish citizens.

"I think it is a warning shot to the Israelis," the former U.S. official said. "We don't want

independence. We want you to impose Israeli law on all of us, with passports, etc.' This is something being talked about in closed intellectual circles in Palestine."

One Palestinian American analyst said the move lets Abbas flex his muscles a bit at a time when he is feeling cornered by multiple forces.

"It seems clear that [Abbas] is both tired and fed up, and was never particularly keen on being President anyway," said the American Task Force for Palestine's Hussein Ibish. "However, the lack of any obvious successor, the clear factional disunity within Fatah, his position as unchallenged party leader coming out of the party congress in Bethlehem in the summer, and his position as chairman of the PLO all make it very hard to imagine him being able to stick with this position in the event of actual elections. It may be his intention at the moment, but if elections actually take place, he may be persuaded to change his mind due to the consequences of him not running."

The move may also decrease the likelihood Palestinian elections will be held at all, Ibish said. "I really doubt that Hamas is going to permit elections and hardly a day goes by without them insisting that can't happen without national reconciliation being achieved first," Ibish said.

The Obama administration has ramped up efforts to try to get Arab states to encourage Abbas to go into final status negotiations with Israel short of Israel agreeing to a full settlement freeze, saying the Palestinians would have more leverage in the process once the two sides are actually sitting at the table. But Abbas has been coming out of a slump in domestic political opinion after recent events, including initially succumbing to Washington's urging that he defer from requesting United Nations action on a recent report by a commission led by Judge Richard Goldstone on possible war crimes committed in Israel's Gaza campaign earlier this year .

U.S. officials did not immediately respond to queries.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to speak at the UJC/Jewish Federation conference in Washington on Sunday, and President Barack Obama is expected to address the same forum on Tuesday. Obama's first major address to a Jewish group since becoming president comes at a moment when his administration has decided to try to get the Israelis and Palestinians to the peace table as soon as possible, before Israel agrees to a full settlement freeze, a demand Abbas has so far rejected. It also comes as the Obama administration has been trying to ramp up his outreach to Jewish American and Israeli audiences, where his approval rating is in the single digits.

UPDATE: Abbas says he won't run, decision is final.

Asked about the development at the press briefing, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said, "We respect Mr. Abbas. We think that ... he's an important player in this whole process. He's been an important interlocutor for us, and we respect his work and we look forward to continuing to work with him." Abbas "has been committed to the ? to our shared goal: to a two-state solution, to creating a better future for his people," Kelly further said. "And we hope that he will continue to play that kind of productive role."

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