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Palestinian Authority's Future Is in Question

Media Mention of Ziad Asali in The New York Times - November 11, 2009 - 12:00am
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/10/world/middleeast/10mideast.html?_r=1 [1]

The collapse of the Palestinian Authority, Israel's negotiating partner, was raised as a possibility on Monday, as several aides to its president, Mahmoud Abbas, said that he intended to resign and forecast that others would follow.

"I think he is realizing that he came all this way with the peace process in order to create a Palestinian state, but he sees no state coming," Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian peace negotiator, said in an interview. "So he really doesn't think there is a need to be president or to have an Authority. This is not about who is going to replace him. This is about our leaving our posts. You think anybody will stay after he leaves?"

Mr. Abbas warned last week that he would not participate in Palestinian elections he called for, to take place in January. But he has threatened several times before to resign, and many viewed this latest step as a ploy by a Hamlet-like leader upset over Israeli and American policy. Many also noted that the vote might not actually be held, given the Palestinian political fracture and the unwillingness of Hamas, which controls Gaza, to participate.

In the days since, however, his colleagues have come to believe that he is not bluffing. If that is the case, they say, the Palestinian Authority, which administers Palestinian affairs in the occupied West Bank and serves as a principal actor in peace negotiations with Israel, could be endangered.

Four top officials made the same point in separate interviews. Mr. Abbas, they say, feels at a total impasse in negotiations with the Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has declined to commit to a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, including East Jerusalem. Mr. Netanyahu favors negotiations without preconditions.

Azam al-Ahmad, head of the Fatah bloc in the Palestinian Legislative Council, said that he spoke with Mr. Abbas on Saturday and that the Palestinian president was likely to resign in the next month or so.

"Nobody will accept to be president under this situation," Mr. Ahmad said. "We could witness the collapse of the Palestinian Authority."

Ali Jarbawi, the minister of planning, spoke in similar terms in an interview, asking: "Why do we need anybody to take his place if the whole process is failing? If the authority is going to go on forever, who needs it?" But he suggested that the crisis was aimed at persuading the United States and Europe to become more actively involved in bringing about a two-state solution.

The Palestinian Authority was set up in 1994 as an interim governing body on the way to proper statehood, but that process stalled long ago with the second intifada in 2000 and Israel's reoccupation of the West Bank.

The officials who spoke said they were no longer interested in being part of an artifice that effectively masked Israeli occupation. While others might come forward to take their places, the new leaders would lack legitimacy with the Palestinians.

Since the 2007 split between the West Bank, dominated by Fatah, and Gaza, run by Hamas, parallel authorities have been established that refuse to recognize one another, blurring the legal definitions in Palestinian politics.

What is clear is that Mr. Abbas and those who work closely with him were shocked when the United States backpedaled on a demand that Israel freeze settlement building in the West Bank.

Mr. Netanyahu met with President Obama in Washington on Monday night, and Mr. Abbas's threat to leave office had been expected to be a part of their talks. When Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was in Jerusalem last week, she asked Mr. Netanyahu to include in negotiating guidelines specific references to the creation of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and in Jerusalem. He declined. President Obama took his time before granting the prime minister's request for a meeting.

Mr. Abbas, who is 74, is not only the president of the Palestinian Authority, but also the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the chairman of the Fatah political movement. Known as Abu Mazen, he took over from Yasir Arafat upon Mr. Arafat's death five years ago and was hailed by Israeli and American leaders as a very different man.

Rather than military fatigues, Mr. Abbas wore suits. He made a point of condemning Palestinian military actions against Israel as "terrorism" and saying that the second intifada was wrong. He gained the confidence of former hard-liners like Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, and he was widely admired on the Israeli left. Some of those on the left now worry deeply about his decision, blaming the Israeli government.

As Ephraim Sneh, a former liberal cabinet minister, wrote in an opinion article in the daily newspaper Haaretz on Sunday, "The conduct of Abbas, the most courageous partner we have had, is in large measure a byproduct of our missed opportunities."

Not everyone regrets the expected departure of Mr. Abbas, saying his problem is not Mr. Netanyahu but the fact that he does not control Gaza and has no way of gaining control of it. Those critics, even moderate Israelis, say that a year ago Mr. Olmert, while still Israel's prime minister, offered Mr. Abbas a deal that included nearly all of the West Bank, land swaps for limited settlement blocks and shared sovereignty over Jerusalem. But Mr. Abbas turned it down.

Then, after first agreeing not to press the United Nations report by a team led by Judge Richard Goldstone of South Africa, which accused Israel and, to a lesser extent, Hamas, of war crimes during the recent Gaza war, he reversed position, thus first upsetting Palestinians, then ruffling Israelis.

‘Abbas’s tenure as Arafat’s successor has proved an unmitigated disaster,’ David Horowitz, editor of The Jerusalem Post, a newspaper that leans right of center, wrote Friday. ‘He lost the Palestinian parliamentary elections to Hamas in 2006. He lost Gaza physically to Hamas in the coup of 2007.

‘He lost much of Israel in spurning Olmert, and even more of Israel, right now, in leading the calls for the Goldstone-facilitated international prosecution of Israel,’ Mr. Horowitz said. ‘And, with quite spectacular ineptitude, he has managed to simultaneously doom himself among the Palestinians over the selfsame issue.’

Mr. Abbas misunderstood the political significance of the Goldstone report, some who know him say, because like the Israelis and Americans he actually has little faith in international bodies like the United Nations. He felt blindsided when attacked over this by some of his own aides and Arab leaders, and then switched positions on the report.

The aides said that given the split with Hamas, frequent accusations of being an Israeli collaborator and the American reversal on a settlement freeze, Mr. Abbas had simply lost any appetite for staying in power.

‘He feels betrayed on all sides,’ said Nasser al-Kidwa, a former Palestinian foreign minister.

But while aides and colleagues of Mr. Abbas say they understand, they also fear his departure, and many have been urging him to stay. Some thousands turned out to urge him to change his mind when he appeared in Hebron and Bethlehem on Sunday.

The maneuvers of the coming weeks will be complicated, and for Mr. Abbas to change his mind there will have to be clear gains.

Martin S. Indyk, vice president of the Brookings Institution and an adviser to George J. Mitchell, the administration’s envoy to the Middle East, was not optimistic.

‘At the end of the day, I fear that the United States, Israel and the Arabs will fall short of meeting Abu Mazen’s requirements for staying on,’ he said. ‘More than likely, we are entering a new era.’

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