

Abbas threatens resignation and collapse of the Palestinian Authority

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President Mahmoud Abbas's threat to resign is a desperate gamble made necessary by the Obama administration's undermining of its leading Palestinian ally.

This undermining is the immediate result of the overt support extended by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu over his refusal to freeze settlement construction in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Clinton had praised Netanyahu's offer to limit settlement building as "unprecedented," in the process destroying any remaining political credibility Abbas had among the Palestinians. Coming after he initially accepted President Barack Obama's appeal not to endorse a United Nations report condemning Israeli war crimes in Gaza, it exposed Abbas as not merely a stooge, but an impotent one. His insistence that giving the US what it wants would ensure Washington's support for a negotiated settlement with Tel Aviv, leading to the creation of a Palestinian state, lies in tatters.

Obama will not even call a halt to an illegal settlement construction program that was formally outlawed by President George W. Bush.

Abbas has no real constitutional position, remaining in power after his term of office has ended. He has belatedly issued a decree announcing that presidential and parliamentary polls would take place on January 24, but Hamas does not recognize his authority and has instructed Palestinians in Gaza not to take part. Even so, Abbas faces electoral humiliation even on the West Bank.

In an attempt to shore up his domestic position, Abbas announced that he would not stand for re-election until Washington called Netanyahu to order. He told his supporters Monday that whereas the Israelis "do not want peace, do not want to stop settlement construction and do not want the vision of two-states.... We must remain believers in peace."

To underscore his argument that it was Netanyahu who was preventing a settlement, Abbas said that he was "very close" to reaching a peace agreement with Israel before Likud assumed power at the end of March. "We sat and negotiated with the Israelis over drawing borders and we negotiated these borders with (then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud) Olmert and (then Foreign Minister Tzipi) Livni," he told Palestinian businessmen in his West Bank headquarters. "We had started to exchange maps."

Abbas's threat to resign was accompanied by warnings that the entire Palestinian Authority would collapse, and Washington would be left to deal with Hamas. Abbas's chief negotiator, Saeb Erekat, told the *New York Times* that Mr. Abbas was "realizing that he came all this way with the peace process in order to create a Palestinian state, but he sees no state coming."

"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?"

"How would Israel like to deal with Hamas?" Erekat asked later.

Another senior Palestinian official told AFP that if Abbas resigns, "the Authority will fall, and there will not be a Palestinian Authority or any of the institutions of a Palestinian state."

Abbas's threat to press the self-destruct button on the entire PA should have carried weight in Washington. It certainly set in motion an international "Operation Save Abbas," involving European and Arab leaders, as well as Israel's President Shimon Peres.

In Cairo the head of the Arab League urged Abbas not to step down as "the Palestinian arena has already enough problems."

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu said he hoped "the decision by Mr. Abbas is not his final decision," while the Moroccan Foreign Ministry praised

his “proven leadership” and ability to renew peace talks.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said that Abbas’s decision not to run for a second term was a “threat to peace” in the Middle East and “for us also.”

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Middle East envoy for the Quartet—the US, European Union, Russia and the United Nations—told Israel’s Army Radio that Abbas’s decision not to run for re-election was not a political stunt, but a result of “deep frustration.”

At a memorial rally in Tel Aviv marking the 14th anniversary of the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a right-wing zealot, Israeli President Shimon Peres urged the immediate initiation of peace negotiations in order to reverse Abbas’s decision. “Everyone upset Abbas, including Israel and the Americans,” he said. “It seems as though everyone unjustifiably ‘pelted Abbas with stones.’” He added, appealing directly to Abbas, “We both signed the Oslo Accord, and I am turning to you now as a colleague: Don’t give up!”

Yossi Beilin, formerly of Labour and then the left splinter Meretz Yachad, who was involved in the Oslo Accords, warned of the danger of a descent into armed conflict. He also stressed that “the PA is headed by two valuable leaders.” This was in reference to Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, formerly of the World Bank. As Finance Minister Fayyad imposed the free market agenda dictated by Washington and has now, “taken on the tasks of defense minister and managed to instill law and order in the West Bank.”

“If Abbas tells US President Barack Obama he is considering resigning, the American leader should not consider this an empty threat,” wrote Beilin. “It would constitute a blow to his administration’s regional policies, following long months of wasted time and empty maneuvers.”

Even with such international backing, however, Abbas’s threats barely met a response in Washington. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said of Abbas on Friday, “We have tremendous respect for him and we think he’s an important player in the process, a voice of moderation, and we look forward to continuing to work with him.”

But on Monday evening, Obama met with Netanyahu at the White House. Whatever was said privately, no word of censure was raised in public as the two reportedly concentrated on discussing ongoing hostilities against Iran. The need for Israel’s support in any possible military attack on Iran is one of the main reasons why

Obama will not conflict with Netanyahu’s government.

Prior to the White House talks, Netanyahu addressed the United Jewish Communities General Assembly in Washington at which he merely reiterated his call for immediate talks without the precondition of an end to settlement construction. He also expressed support for Obama’s action toward Tehran, insisting, “We must stop a nuclear Iran from achieving its ambitions.”

Obama diplomatically absented himself from the proceedings. One conference participant, commenting cynically on Obama’s failure to attend said, “Hillary had her wonderful experience in the Middle East in the last week, and maybe they felt they didn’t want to give a speech satisfying what people here want to hear from him and then have to roll it back the next day.”

Writing in *Ha’aretz* on Abbas’s resignation threat, Zvi Barel stated that, “Despite international calls for him to stay on...[t]he Palestinian president misread the diplomatic map in believing that the Americans would stick to their initial firm demands for a construction freeze. Abbas has portrayed himself as the only Palestinian partner for peace. He threw down the gauntlet to that effect on the White House lawn, but he could find himself paving the way for the opponents of peace while his gauntlet lies abandoned in Obama’s front yard.”

Speculation is rife over whether Abbas is serious about his threat to resign or merely grand-standing in an attempt to sway Washington. In the end, however, this hardly matters. Washington is not prepared to even throw a crumb of comfort his way. So he has nothing left with which to placate rising discontent with his regime and with an abortive “peace process” behind which Israel has merely consolidated its grip on East Jerusalem and much of the West Bank’s prime land.

This is a dangerous political situation, not just in the Occupied Territories but throughout the Middle East, and can blow up in Obama’s face.



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