



Moderate Mahmoud? Don't Ask the Impossible of the New Palestinian Leader - Demand the Possible Instead

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Americans, Europeans, Israelis, diplomats, reporters, editorialists -- just about everybody wants Mahmoud Abbas, the newly elected president of the Palestinian Authority, to be a moderate. So they keep saying that he is a moderate as if, by wizardry, repeating the word will make it true.

But Abbas is not a moderate. And that's OK. Because, paradoxically, a moderate could not, at this moment, facilitate a breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Abbas can, if he wants to. Think this through with me.

Abbas (A.K.A. Abu Mazen) was educated in Syria and the Soviet Union. His doctorate was on what he called a "secret relationship" between Nazis and Zionists. Essentially, he blamed the Jews for the Holocaust which he also argued has been greatly exaggerated. In other words, he is a conspiracy theorist and a Holocaust denier - nothing moderate about that.

He was a close associate of PLO leader and terrorist pioneer Yasser Arafat. Abu Daoud, who plotted the massacre of 11 Israeli athletes during the 1972 Munich Olympics, wrote that Abbas provided

the funds for that atrocity. Not exactly something a moderate would do, is it? Has Abbas changed his views in recent years? Is he now, as the Washington Post recently stated, "a strong and courageous opponent of violence against Israel and a strong supporter of Palestinian compromises to move toward a two-state solution"? No evidence suggests that. Abbas has never voiced opposition to terrorism -- not even to the intentional slaughter of children. Instead, he has praised suicide bombers as "martyrs" and allowed terrorists to carry him on their shoulders.

What he has said is that such tactics are now harming, rather than helping, the Palestinian cause. "This is not the time for this kind of act," he admonished Hamas terrorists earlier this month. Nor has Abbas ever told Palestinians that painful compromises will be necessary. Indeed, in this campaign, he said the opposite. He called Israel the "Zionist enemy" and insisted on the "right to return" - the demand that, while Israelis must leave all "Palestinian territories," all of Israel must be opened to settlement by Palestinian "refugees," their families and their descendants - more than 4 million people. That would mean the destruction of the Jewish state, a condition no Israeli leader can accept.

But, again, these facts are not necessarily cause for pessimism. On the contrary, if Abbas were really a moderate, he would not have won this election; indeed, it is doubtful he would have survived it. If Abbas is not a moderate, what is he? Perhaps - and here's the hope -- he is a

pragmatist, someone willing to say that it is not realistic, at least at this point in history, to pursue the dream of destroying Israel, of killing the Jews or driving them out once and for all, as they long ago were driven out of Iraq, Egypt, Libya and many other lands where they had lived since long before those places were conquered by Arabs.

A pragmatist would say that the Jewish state is a reality, and that serious people accommodate reality. Abbas has said that the "intifada," the terrorist war launched against Israel in 2000 after Arafat rejected the Israeli offer of statehood at Camp David, has become counter-productive for Palestinians. He could add that if the birth of a Palestinian state must await Israeli acceptance of a "right" of Palestinians to dominate them within their own borders, there will never be such a state - and that is too high a price for Palestinians to pay.

Finally, he could point to the unprecedented opportunity now within the Palestinians' grasp: Despite opposition from his own Likud party, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has decided to remove Israeli villages from Gaza and turn the area over to the Palestinian Authority. All Sharon is asking in return is that Gaza not be a terrorist haven.

Abbas could acknowledge that this is a good deal for Palestinians. He could insist that the PA keep its part of the bargain - not because he opposes killing Israelis (a moderate position) but because if the P.A. does not, he is sure Sharon will unleash harsh reprisals

against the killers and those who harbor them (a pragmatic position). The U.S., Europe and, yes, even the U.N. could help by saying to the Palestinians: "Keep the peace and we'll provide aid, we'll invest, we'll do whatever we can. But keep up the terrorism and the unrealistic demands of Israel and you're on your own."

Arab leaders who claim they want to resolve this conflict should be called upon to prove it. They, too, needn't pose as moderates. They need only urge Abbas - strongly and publicly -- to take the pragmatic course.

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