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## ***Column: Abbas must unite Palestinians first***

**By: Will Dempster**

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The most important lesson any student of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict can learn is to avoid being optimistic. It is precisely at the moment when circumstances appear ripe for substantial change in the status quo, that things always sour the quickest. Rabin's assassination in the wake of the Oslo Accords and the launch of the Second Intifada after Camp David in 2000 both buttress this axiom. Recent Palestinian attacks and Israeli retaliations dictate that I should have been more skeptical of the prospects for peace in the wake of Yassir Arafat's death and the subsequent election of Mahmoud Abbas as Chairman of the Palestinian Authority.

Arafat's death caused a massive earthquake in Middle East geopolitics. While serving as the only recognizable world face of Palestinian nationalism, Arafat was a corrupt despot. To many in the west, the enormity of his transgressions covered only his unwillingness - at best - or full-fledged support for suicide bombings. The harm he caused Palestinian society was equally bad. Instead of fostering widespread support for the construction of transparent democratic institutions consulting of the Oslo Accords, Arafat systematically built a police state that subverted the rule of law in favor of what some term the "law of rule." His widespread corruption allowed radical Islamist organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad to entrench themselves in poverty ridden communities around a message of anti-corruption. Such a reality leaves Abu Mazen in a precarious position on how to proceed.

Abu Mazen represents the moderate wing of Palestinian politics. Shortly after the Second Intifada began, Abbas condemned the violence it brought. In his short tenure as Palestinian Prime Minister he signed onto the Road Map and negotiated a temporary cease-fire with Palestinian militants. While his efforts to implement the Road Map were stunted by both Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Abbas established himself as a moderate in Palestinian political discourse. What many pundits - eager to be the first to proclaim peace breaking out - failed to recognize is before Abu Mazen can make peace with Israel, he must first forge a consensus among disparate Palestinian factions.

Palestinian militants wasted no time in challenging Abu Mazen's political standing. On the evening before his inauguration as PA president, militants from Hamas and Fatah's own Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade launched a brutal suicide bombing at the Karni Crossing between Gaza and Israel. A news analysis piece in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz correctly postulated the attack represented a power struggle within Palestinian society between militants and the incoming moderate Abbas administration. Militants asserted with the terrorist attack that despite Abbas' impressive electoral majority, he could not control the actions of the radical fringe - the very individuals with the concentrated power to destroy any nascent peace initiative. In response to the attack, Sharon announced he cut all ties with the PA until it cracked down on militants. Coming from an obstructionist like Sharon, such a declaration seems like yet another obstacle to peace. The declaration, however, might be the best thing for Palestinian society in the long term.

Palestinian society desperately needs to develop a broad consensus on a course of action toward its own state. Abbas correctly understands that no Palestinian state awaits at the end of an armed uprising aimed at inflicting death upon Israeli civilians. Abu Mazen must articulate his own vision about improving the economic situation in the Territories and how he is to deal with difficult nationalist issues such as Jerusalem and refugees. After doing so, he must enlist the Palestinian street behind him, by negotiations

if possible and by force if necessary. Israel found itself in a similar position in 1948. Mainstream Hagganah forces led by David Ben Gurion learned of an illegal arms shipment purchased by right-wing militants in the Irgun. While the arms were needed desperately, Ben Gurion recognized that for Israel to exist, they needed to fight under one banner. Ben Gurion ordered the boat sunk in the harbor of Haifa.

Reaching out to nationalists alone cannot forge such a consensus; Abbas must develop a way to integrate and co-opt Islamists - who control anywhere between 20 and 30 percent of public support - in his plans. Developing such a national consensus would enable him to enter peace negotiations with Israel with the strength necessary to make the painful concessions necessary for peace.

Abu Mazen has the opportunity to become the Abraham Lincoln of his people. Through a proper course of action, Abu Mazen has a chance to instill democracy in Palestine, heal deep national wounds and succeed where his predecessor failed - delivering an independent Palestinian state. While my training conditions me against optimism, current times could represent the last opportunity for a two-state solution. Let's hope it isn't squandered.

*-The writer, a junior majoring in international affairs, is The Hatchet's opinions editor.*

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