

Mahmoud Abbas Wants to – Kinda, Sorta – Hold Elections

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Mahmoud Abbas is the “democratically elected” president of the Palestinian Authority. The first democratic election he took part in was in 2005, when he was elected to a four-year term as President. It was also, unfortunately, the last democratic election he took part in, for in January 2009, when his four-year term ran out, he simply stayed in office for the next ten years, happily enjoying his opportunity to accumulate fortunes for himself and his sons. So far he’s amassed \$100 million for himself, while his two sons Yasser and Tarek have accumulated a business empire worth \$300 million, thanks to their doting father’s influence.

But this year, Mahmoud Abbas has repeatedly spoken of finally holding those overdue elections. He spoke of it first in late September, addressing the U.N. General Assembly. And in mid-

December, at a conference in Ramallah on ways to curb corruption (!) – who would know better than Mahmoud Abbas? – he again announced his intention to hold elections, both for the Presidency, and for a new Palestinian National Council.

Abbas can now present himself as the true-blue democrat he always meant to be, but was sidetracked for a decade with other, more pressing business. And he has made the terms of the election such that he may never have to hold it in any case, but can still get credit for having wanted to do so. For Abbas insists that the Arabs in East Jerusalem be allowed to vote, and in East Jerusalem. The Israelis, understandably, want the Palestinians in East Jerusalem to take part in these Palestinian elections ideally not at all, but if they do vote, Israel insists that they do so outside the city, somewhere in the West Bank. The Israelis don't want their own claim to East Jerusalem to be undermined by its Arab inhabitants taking part, and voting in the city itself, in a Palestinian election. But Mahmoud Abbas will have it no other way. When Israel suggested that the Arabs in East Jerusalem could vote in the elections if they did so in territory controlled by the PA, Abbas rejected that Solomonic suggestion. For him it is all, or nothing at all. He has threatened to call off the elections unless the Arabs in East Jerusalem cast their votes in East Jerusalem.

No doubt the election will in the end be jettisoned. The Israelis will not give in, and Abbas will sadly report to the world – to the U.N. first of all – that no matter how hard he tried to hold, despite every conceivable difficulty, a free and fair election, the colonial-settler-Zionist state would not accord the Palestinians in East Jerusalem the right to vote in their own city, and this “attempt to dictate to the Palestinian people” could not be accepted. Hence the cancellation of the elections until such time as the infinitely cruel Zionists finally allow the Palestinians in “Jerusalem, the capital of our future state,” to take part, in

exactly the way they want to, in the Palestinian elections.

And what would Abbas have then accomplished? A very great deal. He would have proven to the world that he is no despot, but a democrat, who was only waiting for the right occasion – a time of relative calm, when there was no hot war involving Israel and the Arabs, as in 2008 and 2014 – to hold the election he claims he has always wanted. His seeming attempt at holding an election may win back some support from the Palestinians themselves, who have shown increasing signs of anger with Abbas, for his having held onto power for so long without elections, and for the massive corruption that his long tenure in office has made possible, as he and his family have amassed hundreds of millions of dollars.

Israel would be painted as the villain of the piece by Abbas. Here is the oppressive Zionist state, boasting about being “the only truly democratic state in the Middle East,” but denying the Palestinians their own right to a democratic election. By preventing the Palestinians in East Jerusalem from taking part in the PA elections unless they agree to vote from stations in the West Bank, Israel has put the Palestinians in a bind: does Abbas accept Israel’s terms, in which case the claim of the Palestinian Arabs to Jerusalem will, he fears, be weakened, or does he reject those terms, and not hold the election after all?

Or maybe Israel’s demand does not put Abbas in a bind, but gives him exactly what he wanted. For that demand allows him to flaunt his supposedly “democratic” inclinations while insuring that the elections do not take place, for which he is now able to blame Israel. The fact that he has consistently put off elections for ten years suggests that he is aware that from 2005 on, his massive corruption has not gone unnoticed, and his popularity has been on a steady downward slide. His re-election is far from given. With those Israeli conditions placed on the Arab voters in East Jerusalem, Abbas can reject the attempted “humiliation by the Zionists” and can depict the

cancelling of the PA's elections as an act of national defiance rather than of despotism.

Why remain in office at the age of 83? Mahmoud Abbas is still interested in insuring the well-being of his two sons, and their continued amassing of wealth. As long as he holds power, he will be able to act as the promoter and protector of their business empire. After he leaves office, their fate is unclear. Perhaps Yasser and Tareq have already been moving some assets abroad, and buying up foreign real estate in case the political and business climate in the PA turns unfriendly. Abbas knows that his Hamas rivals Mousa abu Marzook and Khaled Meshal each went into exile – the first now lives in Egypt, the second in Qatar – with at least \$2.5 billion apiece. Mahmoud Abbas and his sons have only managed to accumulate \$400 million. It doesn't seem fair. Abbas needs more time in office to see if he can come close to Marzouk and Meshal. Why begrudge him a billion more?

It's fine to talk about elections, much less fine – if you are Mahmoud Abbas – to actually hold them. In the last public opinion poll, taken last spring, 60% of Palestinians wanted Mahmoud Abbas to resign. So give him credit for claiming to want to hold elections – he tried so hard! – and give him more credit for canceling them instead of yielding to Israel's demands. He needs just a few more – let's round it off to five – years in office. That should be enough time for the family – Mahmoud and his two sons – to further swell their bank account, maybe not to the impressive levels of Marzook and Meshal, but at least to something respectable. Then Mahmoud Abbas can promise he will hold those elections. And this time he will really mean it.

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