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Move Yasser Arafat up — not out

THE ISRAELI Security Cabinet's decision to "remove" Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat is ominous. Though the stated justification for the decision is the assertion that Arafat is an obstacle to peace, it actually seems to be designed to ensure the failure of the peace process envisaged by the road map.

This is not a time for passivity, subtlety, or ambiguity in Washington's response. Vehement US opposition to such a project is essential to averting reckless actions that are likely, at the very least, to set back the Israeli-Palestinian peace process for a long time to come.

There is no Palestinian leader who would be able to negotiate a peace agreement in the wake of Arafat's expulsion. Worse yet, if the expulsion causes the death of Arafat and/or the deaths of Palestinians who gather to protect their leader, the likely result is a further escalation of violence, with disastrous consequences for both communities.

Washington, unfortunately, prepared the ground for this dangerous turn of events by framing the appointment of Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as another case of "regime change" in the Middle East — as the replacement of Arafat with Abu Mazen — and by shunning and seeking to isolate Arafat and pressuring European

officials to break all contacts with him.

This approach has compromised Abu Mazen's legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinian population and seriously undermined his position. He came to be seen by many as a tool and accomplice in US efforts to reorder the Middle East and Israeli efforts to perpetuate the occupation. It also encouraged a power struggle between Abu Mazen and Arafat, who had an incentive to block some of Abu Mazen's initiatives in order to maintain his personal control.

Defining Abu Mazen and now his designated successor, Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala), as replacements and rivals of Arafat, flies in the face of an important reality: Both men are long-term, close associates of Arafat and derive whatever domestic legitimacy they have and can potentially enhance from this association.

Furthermore, the political strategy pursued by these two men — and, indeed, by all of the Palestinian leaders who have been committed to negotiating a historic compromise with Israel, in the form of a two-state solution — is ultimately the strategy of Arafat.

Where Arafat's leadership

has gone awry is in his tactics: his continuing embrace of the bankrupt idea that violence can be used as a bargaining tool; his unwillingness to share control and credit.

The appeal of Abu Mazen and Abu Ala is that they are ready to advocate an end to violence and to engage in realistic negotiations in pursuit of the goal that Arafat has enunciated and persuaded the majority of the Pales-

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tinian population to accept: an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with its capital in Jerusalem, in peaceful co-existence with the State of Israel.

The irony of the situation is that, by the time of Abu Mazen's appointment as prime minister, there was growing dissatisfaction with Arafat's leadership — including, significantly, his inability to end the violence and advance the negotiations — within the Palestinian political elite and general population. The idea of appointing a prime minister was generated within the Palestinian community itself and represented a significant ac-

complishment under trying circumstances.

US pressure no doubt contributed to Arafat's decision to accept his Legislative Council's recommendation. But by defining the action as a US-sponsored regime change, we were in effect saying to the Palestinian leadership: "We will force you to appoint a new prime minister, even if you have independently decided to do so."

As a result, not only was the legitimacy of the new prime minister undermined, but Palestinians felt further humiliated because their elect-

ed president, the father of their nation, and the symbol of their collective identity was being denied the respect and dignity due to his status.

Not surprisingly, Arafat's popularity has increased — and will increase even further if he is forcibly removed.

With the designation of Abu Ala as the new prime minister, we have another chance to frame this political development constructively, in a way consistent with the intentions of the Palestinian reformers and the dignity of the Palestinian public. Far from removing Arafat or replacing him with the new prime minister, we should endorse a

redefinition of the role of the Palestinian president. Arafat, as president, would become the head-of-state, occupying a position that is essentially ceremonial and symbolic (similar to the position of the president of Israel), while the prime minister would be the head-of-government, responsible for conducting the internal and external affairs of the Palestinian Authority, including internal security and peace negotiations.

As head-of-state, Arafat would be treated with the full respect that is due to his office and would be recognized in his historical role as the symbol and father of the Palestinian people and its incipient state.

There is no guarantee that, under such an arrangement, Arafat would readily abandon his life-long habit of maintaining personal control. But his incentive to cooperate with his prime minister would be greatly enhanced. Above all, the prime minister would start out with the domestic legitimacy that he needs to function effectively and would have the opportunity to enhance his legitimacy by pursuing a meaningful peace process and achieving positive changes in the daily lives of his constituency.

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