

Palestinian Prime Minister Abbas' Visit to Washington

CSIS Middle East Program Fellow Haim Malka writes in a new CSIS Commentary that the crucial underlying issue behind Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas visit to Washington remains the role of Hamas within the Palestinian Authority.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas arrives in Washington trying to make himself relevant. With parliamentary elections looming and violence increasing, Abbas needs to prove to Palestinians and the international community he can deliver both stability and prevent the rise of Hamas as an alternative to the Palestinian Authority.

The Bush Administration continues to bet on Abbas, but it is disinclined to do much to improve his odds. In public, Abbas can expect a warm welcome, words of support, and a bit of cash. Away from the cameras, however, the message will be more direct: control the violence and clean up Fatah in order to make it a decent alternative to Hamas before the upcoming elections.

Abbas has heard all of this before, but he feels trapped. His Fatah party remains corrupt and ineffectual, and his control over the various Palestinian factions remains tenuous. Abbas will seek to put a good face on things, pointing to recent efforts to prevent public displays of weapons and strengthen the rule of law. He will also pledge to disarm the militias after parliamentary elections.

Herein lies part of his problem. He argues he will need much more firepower—both in terms of arms and patronage money—to win a showdown with Hamas, but Israelis complain that they have seen this act before. Arms and money flowed to the Palestinian Authority under Arafat, and they just deepened corruption and nurtured the corrupt status quo. Some of the weapons were even used for attacks against Israelis. In any event, the Israelis assert, there are enough weapons on the streets of Gaza to supply several armies.

The other part of Abbas's problem is that the Israeli government firmly opposes the core of his strategy, which is incorporating Hamas into politics prior to disarmament instead of after. Prime Minister Sharon has threatened to disrupt parliamentary elections in the West Bank should Hamas participate. Thwarting parliamentary elections would undermine the foundation of Abbas's political strategy and delegitimize the democratic process the Palestinian leader and the Bush Administration seek to enshrine. Abbas will ask President Bush to endorse his approach, but he is unlikely to come away with much. His bargain with militants, including Hamas, makes many in the Administration uncomfortable with the direction of Palestinian democracy.

The real fear on the minds of Palestinians is the threat of more Israeli unilateral actions, including a second withdrawal from West Bank land which could dash hopes for a contiguous Palestinian state. An increase in Palestinian violence in the West Bank, as some are predicting, will almost certainly strengthen the appeal of such a move within Israel. Given the futility of restarting serious Palestinian-Israeli negotiations in the near

future, Abbas is unlikely to come away from this week's meeting with more than a warm reception, words of support, talk of economic assistance, and a friendly slap on the back from Mr. Bush.