Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas: A pragmatic politician or a regional puppet?

Mahmoud Abbas, also known by his Arabic kunya Abu Mazen, has been the president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) since 9 January 2005. Despite the end of his four-year term in 2009, he has refused to hold new presidential elections, and thus his leadership lacks democratic legitimacy.

The other main criticism directed at him relates to his policy of security coordination with Israel, which is one of the key aspects of the peace process. So, is Abbas a pragmatic politician who knows how to deal with the Israeli leadership, or is he little more than a regional puppet for Israel and America?

Early years

Abbas was born in the city of Safed in Galilee on 26 March 1935. After the establishment of Israel in 1948, his family emigrated to Jordan and then Syria. He obtained degrees in English language and literature and law from the University of Damascus. He subsequently studied history at the Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow and received his doctorate in 1982 from the Department of Israeli Politics. His dissertation was about the relationship between Zionism and Nazism. Prior to this, he worked as a teacher in Qatar and then as director of personnel in the emirate’s Ministry of Education until 1970, when he left to dedicate himself completely to Palestinian cause.
He is married to Amina Abbas and has three sons: Mazen, Yasser and Tariq. Mazen, the oldest, died unexpectedly of a heart attack in 2001 in Qatar, where he ran a real estate company. Yasser and Tariq run a group of large companies in the Palestinian territories, Jordan and Qatar.

**Political start**

Abbas became politically active in the 1960s. While in Qatar in 1961, he was recruited as a member of Fatah, a nationalist political party that was founded by Yasser Arafat and several other Palestinians in Kuwait in the late 1950s. Fatah is the largest faction in the multi-party Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

He rose through the ranks over the following decades, being appointed as a member of the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the PLO’s legislative body, in 1968 and as a member of the PLO’s Executive Committee in 1980. In 1996, he was selected as secretary of the Executive Committee, effectively making him the second in command in the Palestinian leadership.

He was among the first to introduce the idea of initiating talks with moderate Israelis, which he did in 1977 during a meeting with Israeli General Mattityahu Peled. The meeting led to a two-state solution that became the basis for the Principles of Peace. He also engaged in secret negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis through Dutch intermediaries in 1989 and coordinated negotiations during the Madrid Conference in 1991. He was described as the engineer of the Oslo I Accord, leading the negotiations and eventually signing the accord on behalf of the PLO on 13 September 1993. He signed the Oslo II Accord two years later. The secret negotiations he conducted with Israeli minister Yossi Beilin in 1995 resulted in the Beilin-Abu Mazen Document, an informal draft for an official peace treaty between the two parties, including the future of refugees, Jerusalem and Israeli settlements.

**Rise to power**

During Operation Defensive Shield, a large-scale military operation conducted by Israel between March and July 2002, the Israeli army stormed the West Bank and besieged Arafat’s office. Amid international pressure, the PA introduced the position of prime minister, which Abbas assumed on 19 March 2003. However, he resigned six months later following disagreements with Arafat over the prime minister’s powers.

After Arafat’s death on 11 November 2004, Abbas inherited the chairmanship of Fatah and the PLO’s Executive Committee. On 9 January 2005, he was elected president of the PA, winning 62 percent of the votes.

At the Sharm el-Sheikh summit in Egypt a month later, he met with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to discuss ways to end the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian violence, and they agreed to strengthen cooperation and security coordination. However, the 25 January 2006 legislative elections turned things upside down. Hamas, Fatah’s main rival, unexpectedly won the majority of seats in the Palestinian parliament. The win brought Abbas’ efforts to restart the peace process to a halt, as Israel insisted it would not deal with an authority including Hamas, which it deems a terror organization. On 14 July 2007, with the assistance of its military wing, Hamas gained control of the Gaza Strip and removed Fatah officials. The conflict resulted in the dissolution of the unity government and the de facto division of the Palestinian territories into two.

Abbas also faced widespread criticism from Palestinians for his condemnation of all forms of resistance, especially armed, and his repeated emphasis on security coordination with Israel.
Moreover, under the pressure of U.S. and Israel he requested the United Nations Human Rights Council withdraw the report of the Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict in 2008-2009. The report accused both the Israel Defense Forces and Palestinian militants of committing war crimes and possible crimes against humanity, but Palestinians were not expecting what they perceived as Abbas’ support for Israel.

One of the few things that helped Abbas gain some support was the 2012 vote by the United Nations General Assembly that granted Palestine non-member observer state status at the United Nations. The PA accordingly began using the logo of the State of Palestine on government documents and was authorized to join a large number of international organizations, including the International Criminal Court.

Abbas’ political stance remained unchanged during the 2012 war and the 2014 war, and he repeatedly blamed Hamas instead of Israel. Numerous attempts by Egypt to end the internal division between Fatah and Hamas failed because Abbas demanded that Hamas surrender instead of negotiating to hand over power to the Ramallah-based government.

In addition to Israel’s blockade of Gaza, Abbas has imposed a series of additional sanctions on the enclave since March 2017, notably stopping salary payments for civil servants and cutting the health and education budgets.

One of his most controversial decisions was to call for the dissolution of the Palestinian Legislative Council and for new elections within six months. The council was dissolved, putting Abbas in control of the judicial as well as the executive and legislative branches, but no new elections have yet been held.

**Divisions within Fatah**

Although Fatah’s 6th General Conference was held on Palestinian territory for the first time in 2009, cracks in the party were beginning to appear. On 12 June 2011, Abbas expelled Mohammed Dahlan, Fatah’s former security chief in Gaza, from the Central Committee, followed by several other members who criticized Abbas’ leadership or showed loyalty to Dahlan. The expulsion followed a public feud in which Abbas accused Dahlan of corruption and defamation. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates made several attempts to mend the rift, but Abbas refused to cooperate.

**Allegations of corruption**

Two years later, Abbas’ government itself faced allegations of corruption. Palestinian and Israeli media reported that the president’s office was draining huge sums from the annual budget, amounting to approximately $70 million per year or 13 percent of the budget, in addition to approximately $37 million spent by the office of the PA’s Ramallah compound, including on travel costs for the president and his staff.

Statistics show that Abbas spent more than one third of 2018 outside the Palestinian territories but has failed to achieve substantive political results. Several opinion polls indicate that confidence in Abbas does not exceed 20 percent, and that more than two thirds of respondents want him to resign.

Despite his fading popularity, Abbas insists on pursuing negotiation as a political tool and active diplomacy to apply pressure on others. For more than 14 years, he has maintained security coordination with Israel because he knows that he is the weakest party, that armed resistance has failed in the past and will fail in the future, and that he has no other option but dialogue to reach a peaceful solution.