

The Last Palestinian: The Rise and Reign of Mahmoud Abbas  
*A conversation with Aaron David Miller, Grant Rumley, and Amir Tibon,*  
*moderated by Susan Glasser*

MAY: Good afternoon, everyone. Let me welcome you. I'm Cliff May. I'm FDD's founder and president. Thank you all for coming. We're pleased to feature today Amir Tibon and FDD's own Grant Rumley, the authors of a new book, *The Last Palestinian: The Rise and Reign of Mahmoud Abbas*. I just want to mention one thing to you, and that is, for quite a few years here at FDD, an important aspect of our scholarship, really pioneered by Jon Schanzer, senior vice president for research, has been less on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict than on internal Palestinian politics, on the various rivalries and internal struggles among Palestinian movements, Palestinian groups, Palestinian factions. We believe such research is useful, not least for diplomats and all those who would like to see a conclusion to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, not that we think that is imminent.

In the lobby, a complimentary copy of the book is available for each invited guest. Today's event will be livestreamed, and I encourage guests here and online, as well, to join in today's conversation. On Twitter, that's @FDD. Please do silence your cell phones. I'd appreciate that. With that, I'm pleased to hand over the conversation to today's moderator, Susan Glasser, who, as you know, is chief international affairs columnist at Politico. Susan, thank you very much.

GLASSER: Thank you so much. All right. Hello? Okay, I hear it. Thank you so much, Cliff, and thank you to all of you for sharing your lunch hour with us. Of course, we want to congratulate Amir and Grant on the publication of the book. They don't need any further introduction. They're joined in this conversation today by Aaron David Miller, whom many of you know. He's not only a distinguished scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center, but also vice president for new initiatives. We can have a separate conversation trying to find out what that means, but more importantly in this context, he spent two decades at the Department of State as an advisor to both Democratic and Republican Secretaries of State on the subject in this book. He has been a firsthand participant in some of the stories recounted here, and I think will be a useful reality check and fellow interlocutor today, so thank you, Aaron. It's the story you can't escape. You can look to new initiatives, but we'll keep pulling you back to the question of Middle East peace.

MILLER: Always good to know, Susan. Thank you.

GLASSER: No, but really I'm just absolutely delighted to be having this conversation today. As always, it ends up being ridiculously timely. You plan a book, you work on it for several years, and then you can pretty much be guaranteed that something will be happening on the subject of what is going on between Israel and the Palestinians and the United States on the day that you launch the book. That is, in fact, exactly what's happening. As we're sitting down, the new U.S. ambassador from the Trump administration to Israel is having a meeting, along with Trump's envoy for Mideast peace in Jerusalem, I gather, with a senior Palestinian official and chief lieutenant to the subject of this book, Mahmoud Abbas.

We might as well start out with current events and then we can jump into the book itself. Amir, you have just moved to Washington after a very distinguished run as a fantastic reporter in Israel and really telling us inside what's going on with something like this. Should we even be paying attention to this latest round of talks between the Trump administration and the Israelis and the Palestinians? Is anything going to come out of this that matters?

TIBON: We on the stage should be paying attention, but I'm not—

GLASSER: Because it's your job.

TIBON: —I'm not sure if so many people outside of the small universe of people who deal professionally with this issue should really be stopping their breath right now. We're seeing another attempt to restart negotiations, some kind of not too intense but ongoing shuttle diplomacy with Jason Greenblatt, the envoy, flying in and out and holding these meetings, and Mahmoud Abbas doing his own diplomatic work going to Cairo and to Amman and to Saudi Arabia and trying to create some kind of support on the Arab level. With all this talk about meetings and discussions and formulas, we don't really have any substance so far. We haven't actually seen a plan being put out by either side, by the way, not the American side, not the Israeli side.

The Palestinians will say, well, we have the Arab Peace Initiative; we've been supporting it ever since 2002. But even that one, in a way, it's been sitting on the shelf and we haven't seen any new ideas on how to maybe make it more relevant, more timely. So I will say that, at least for our business, it's always good that there are talks and negotiations; there is something to write about. Some people will argue—and it's not my place to judge—some people will argue that it's good in general to have negotiations because it helps kind of put down some tension and create some kind of very, very, very little sense of hope and optimism, but to say that so far out of these negotiations we have seen something dramatic, very serious that is promising, I don't think that's true.

GLASSER: Grant, do you agree?

RUMLEY: Yeah. I mean, I've learned it's a pretty good rule of thumb to just agree with Amir in all things.

GLASSER: You can see this is a successful collaboration on their book.

RUMLEY: When you do track changes mode across English and Hebrew versions of Microsoft Word, you establish a pretty good working relationship. I mean, I will say that I think they'll find it very hard to get Abbas and the Palestinians to make concessions on issues if it's not clear where the vehicle is heading. You'll notice that this administration hasn't talked about Palestinian statehood the way the Bush administration and the Obama administrations did, and I think it's going to be hard for Abbas to reform things like payments to prisoners, as he's under pressure to do so, to quash down on incitement, to undertake all these things that are very sort of emotive within the Palestinian body politic if there's not a sort of guarantee that this ends where previous administrations envisioned it ending.

I think initially they were happy, especially with Jason Greenblatt coming and meeting with them, and going to the Arab League and listening to them, and meeting with the Palestinians in Jalazone refugee camp, and meeting with Palestinian businessmen in the old city of Jerusalem, but I think that goodwill is expiring. I think they're more and more under pressure, and if there's not some type of assurances, I think Abbas is going to be hard-pressed to do what they want him to do.

GLASSER: So that brings me to the book. You called the book *The Last Palestinian: The Rise and Reign of Mahmoud Abbas*. The “Last Palestinian” referred to in the title, is that because there is going to be no peace deal? What did you two have in mind with this sort of great but kind of mysterious title?

RUMLEY: Yeah, well, I think it works on several levels. One is that our publisher told us to get a better title, so there were some pressures there. One is that he's sort of likely the last leader who can embody the modern Palestinian national narrative. He was born in Safed before Israel existed. He experienced 1948 when he was 13. He was a refugee abroad. He was with the PLO abroad. He built the PA with Arafat, with the others, and he came back. That's the arc of modern Palestinian nationalism.

It works in another sense because he's also become sort of the last Palestinian standing, in a sense. If you look at since he became president, he loses an election and he loses Gaza, so his mandate goes from Gaza and the West Bank to just the West Bank. Then he starts pushing out technocrats, Salam Fayyad, for instance, and he becomes sort of surrounded by largely sycophants. He's sort of the last one standing in that room. Everyone knows who his advisors are, and they've been the same advisors for much of his 12 years in office. For us, it works on several levels, and it also made the publisher happy.

TIBON: I'll add just an interesting note about this that came way after we chose the headline. I recently wrote an interview with the PLO chief of mission, as they call him, the ambassador, here in Washington, Husam Zomlot, a very interesting guy who is new in town. He was the head of President Abbas's meeting with President Trump in the White House, and the message that the Palestinian side wanted to bring in that interview—and I guess they probably said something close to that in the meeting—is that Abbas, at least in the way they described it, is kind of like I wouldn't say the last, but the best chance, the way they describe it, to get a peace deal because his biography really tells the story of the entire Palestinian people because he has this kind of legitimacy.

There was a sense of warning that it's not clear you're going to get a better chance if you don't do it with this guy. Are you going to have another leader who has that sort of legitimacy, that sort of narrative installed into his biography? It was interesting. Again, the interview took place a long time after we chose the headline, but when I was hearing those words, it kept kind of coming up in my head that maybe we were not so far from things that would be said on the PA level as well.

GLASSER: I want to bring Aaron in here for a second before we go back to this very kind of provocative question that's inherent in this title, which is what comes after. First, Aaron,

you've watched the full arc of the Abbas career, certainly in public politics. Do you believe that he is someone who is still a peacemaker, or has he left that by the wayside in this decade-plus of trying and not really succeeding at governing the Palestinians?

MILLER: First of all, it's great to be here with you, and congrats to the two of you. Nothing like promoting, however shamelessly, a new book. It's really phenomenal, and it's an honor to be here.

GLASSER: By the way, book promotion cookies out there. Props to FDD for that.

MILLER: Your question represents the 30% of an iceberg that's above the waterline. I think the more important question is what lies below the waterline. On this one, I agree with Marx, not Groucho, but Karl, who argued—and he was writing in the 19th century—that men—he was writing in the 19th century, so forgive me—men make history, but rarely as they please. I think that application of what is required for even a leader who has motivation capacity and presumes greatness has to confront the realities and the circumstances of the world in which he and she live.

I would argue to you, and I become pretty much a determinist on this issue—and most of my analysis since leaving government 14 years ago has been—and my words here—annoyingly negative, not because I've lost faith or hope in the possibility, but because life, when it comes to Arab-Israeli peace, is not about possibility, it's about probability, and those probabilities are intimately related to the environment in which leaders seek to lead. Peace is possible, however imperfectly—Sadat and Begin, King Hussein and Rabin—sustainable, marketable to some degree, but on this one, the idiosyncratic problem, the crown jewels of the Arab-Israeli peace process, the issue is leadership, but it's also a question of whether or not the leader on both sides. And it's never one hand clapping. This may be the last Palestinian, but it also raises the question of whether or not the same leadership crisis that confronts the putative state of Palestine also confronts the very functional and quite remarkable, however imperfect, state of Israel.

The reality is not so much Abbas and the risks he refused or was willing to take. We saw this with a much more legitimate Palestinian leader at Camp David. This issue is the issues and whether or not any Israeli and Palestinian leader are prepared to make definitive decisions on the six core issues that drive the conflict, border security, refugees, Jerusalem, recognition of Israel as the nation-state of the Jews, and end of claims and conflict. The answer has been, to date, no. I see nothing in the current, or making a prognosis, certainly on the Palestinian side, that suggests that any Palestinian leader, certainly Abbas and those who will follow him, are ready to make those sorts of choices, but neither are the Israelis.

GLASSER: All right, so let's go back to the subject of our biography right now. Why did you guys write the book, and what did you learn that surprised you? What did you learn that Aaron David Miller and our other professional peace processors didn't know in doing this book?

RUMLEY: Well, I think we chose to write it simply because of the window. The Obama administration's efforts had collapsed by 2014. Amir and I wrote an article for Foreign Affairs magazine in 2015 called The Death and Life of the Two-State Solution. Then we really got

together near his kibbutz and we said, "All right, now we get to write a book that expands our thoughts on the two-state solution in general." I said, "Yeah, okay, we're going to have to rely on a biography of Abbas if we go forward," and then we couldn't find one, so we said, "All right, we'll write this book and then we get to write our grand program for the two-state solution."

TIBON: We'll invite you to that, as well. Don't worry.

RUMLEY: Yeah, of course. I mean, I think what I learned in writing this; I certainly grew in admiration for aspects of Abbas's life. I learned a lot about who he was before he became president. There were moments where I think Amir and I both grew to really respect some of the risks he took. Two that I think of: one is in the early '80s when the PLO is in Lebanon and then it's in Tunisia, and members of the PLO who are calling for recognition of Israel, the two-state solution, or negotiations, are under physical threat. One of them, Issam Sartawi, is assassinated by rival members of another PLO organization.

You talk with people around Abbas at the time, and he was well aware that his life was in danger for what he was advocating. That takes a level of courage. It speaks a little bit, I think, to his functionality within the group, that he wasn't really seen as a big player in those days, and that by the time they had gotten to Oslo, he was then sort of on the stage, but it wasn't something that he could enact sooner. That sort of repeats itself, to me, during the Second Intifada, when that happens and the entire street is up in arms and the entire Palestinian political leadership is basically oriented towards committing terror attacks.

And Abbas goes into the local councils in Gaza and just admonishes members of his own party, members of other groups, and says you're destroying everything we've built. He was against what he called the militarization of the Intifada. Those are two moments where it takes an incredible amount of political courage and conviction to do so. I think that's where I grew to really sort of come to some admiration of him, and that's I think what also makes the latter years of his presidency so tragic.

GLASSER: What did you learn in doing this, Amir?

TIBON: First of all, I do want to say something about the first question of why do this book and why now. One thing that, as an Israeli but also as someone who has been coming in and out of this city and now stationed here for a while, one thing that a lot of times I find a bit frustrating is that it seems there is a lot of discussion about internal Israeli politics. Many people in this town can explain to me what are the coalition and risks and what should be the alternative coalition, and who can bring the Labor Party back to power, or why Yair Lapid is the best hope, or why under these specific circumstances Bibi will actually be revealed to be a peacenik, but there is much less discussion of the internal Palestinian politics, which are also very important to achieving anything.

That was one of the motivations when we decided to write this book. I think even if you look at the biography areas of the bookshelves, speaking of Netanyahu, there's a new biography coming out by Ben Caspit, and another one next year by Anshel Pfeffer, and another one came

out two years ago. I mean, Mahmoud Abbas, nobody's done it. That was one of the motivations, to come and kind of put a spotlight on that aspect, and I hope that we did it the right way.

I will say what I've learned. One thing that for me was very interesting and new—and Aaron maybe will laugh about it—but it was Abbas's conduct at the Camp David Summit. Even though I've written about it and read about it and talked about it for long, long hours with different participants, mostly when people talk about Camp David, the focus is on Arafat and then, to some extent, on Barak, right? The narrative you usually hear, Arafat was basically not willing to cooperate and Barak did a lot of miscalculations, and put the pressure in the wrong place, and tried to rush it too much, and wasn't willing to do all kinds of things.

When we went to write about Camp David, we said, "Well, I mean, so much has been written about this event from when we were writing the book 16 years ago, now 17 this summer, but when you actually go and look into it, there is very little about Mahmoud Abbas's role in that summit." It was a fascinating kind of journalistic journey to dig into that and to go back to the participants and say, all right, well, but we've heard the Arafat story, the Barak story, the Clinton story, but where was Mahmoud Abbas? What was his contribution or, as some people describe it, not so much of a contribution? For me, that just showed that if you choose to tell a story, a history, through a person, events that you think you already know everything about, you actually know very little about.

RUMLEY: If I can tell one story while we're swapping stories, one of my favorite anecdotes from doing the book was there was an internal election within Fatah in the late '80s. Nabil Shaath, one of Arafat's deputies, had a couple of kids who were in computer camp in Cairo, and he came to Arafat and he said, "When we do the votes for the leadership body, we should use this thing called a computer." Arafat turned to him and he said, "What's a computer?" He said, "No, no, no, we should use it." They did the vote, and in the final tally, Abbas had been voted off the Central Committee. Arafat saw the results and he said, "Your computer is broken," and he crossed out the name and put Abbas back in. It was doing the book, some of these stories that came up during it, that really sort of fleshed him out.

GLASSER: Aaron, when did you first meet Abbas? As he came up through the ranks in the PLO, or the possibility of making peace brought someone with his skillset, arguably, into the mix in a way he hadn't been before, tell us a little bit about the evolution of American thinking about him in the late '80s and the '90s, and how does it square with the leader that we know today?

MILLER: Well, by and large, we deal in our own illusions. Not only do we hold them about ourselves, we hold them about Israelis and Palestinians too. I think it's fair to say that Mahmoud Abbas will probably be in many respects the best partner Israel will never have with respect to a negotiation. Abbas's demeanor, his image, his intellect, was such at the antipode of our view of Arafat. Abbas was viewed as serious. Abbas was viewed as a man who would not endorse the arms struggle, even though there's all kinds of controversy that swirls around him in this regard. He wasn't so much the symbol, which is what Arafat was, but he demonstrated a humanity and a degree of accessibility, even though he was very detached, and willfully so, but he was very much behind the scenes.

I refer to three personal interactions with Abbas. The first was the famous Kaddish that I did, which was a risk in breaking up a negotiation, because it was nearing midnight and my mother had died six months earlier. The Israelis and American delegations had enough for 10, for a minyan, which is in itself an interesting story. Abbas and Dahlan respectfully stood against the wall and watched as Israelis and Americans took a break to say a five-minute prayer for the departed mother of one of the negotiators. Abbas's reaction to this was, I think, instructive. It was moving and meaningful to him that anybody would ever interrupt a negotiation and bring religion—this was not my motive—but to bring religion into this. That was one. He took unbelievably good care of my daughter, Jen, during the very turbulent time when she was working on her book *Inheriting the Holy Land*. She was in Gaza with Dahlan. She interviewed everyone. He was very kind to her.

In many respects, our view of Abbas was as a presumptive leader without the street cred probably necessary to make a negotiation, let alone to rule Palestine. He was the leader that I think stereotypically we sort of envisioned or imagined. It's a testament and a credit to these two that they've tapped into the notion of persona and personality with Abbas because it worked for him, in many respects, but it actually worked against him because he was not and never was, no matter what people say about him, he couldn't fake or fabricate the notion that he was the *munadil*. He was the struggler.

I remember visiting Arafat with Tony Zinni in March in his headquarters, and there was Arafat in a darkened room, boards shuttering the windows, fear of Israeli snipers, no electricity. Power had been cut off, and there was Arafat by candlelight with his black machine pistol on the table talking about—and he said the same thing to Powell three weeks later—talking about willingness to die for Palestine. That was not this man. If there was a figure who could somehow make the transition from the generations that Amir and Grant describe in their book to the role of a statesman, it would have been Abbas, but many things, as we know, got in the way of that.

GLASSER: Well, that's right. You're using the past tense. I think, Grant, you highlighted that in your remarks, this tension that we all see, anyone who reads this book. Really, it is a good and fast read. Anyone who reads this book sees immediately that the dilemma of the book, the dilemma of the subject, is how do we reconcile the first part of Abbas's career as a peace negotiator, as an advocate, coming out of an unlikely organization to advocate for peace, with his last dozen years as sort of the increasingly authoritarian and isolated leader of the Palestinian Authority.

RUMLEY: Well, I mean, simply the—

GLASSER: Did he change, or did history change?

RUMLEY: No, the skillset doesn't transfer, I think, put simply. When Arafat dies, Abbas is in a second tier of leadership. In the internal debates within the PLO, within Fatah, there is a sense that this is a guy who had charted his own course. He had stood up to Arafat. He had feuded with him when he was prime minister. There was a sense he'd be good with the Americans and good with the Israelis. That was all very appealing at that time. He was something different.

He's not a campaigner until he's 69 years old, and his first campaign stop is the picture on the cover of the book. It's why we chose it. He's in Jenin on the shoulders of Zakaria Zubeidi, who's the head of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade there, and he looks uncomfortable. It's his first-ever campaign stop. Up to that point, he hadn't given big rousing speeches. When he comes to power, his first year in office, in 2005, he's very good at reorienting the PA. He's got Salam Fayyad. The PA had been oriented towards the Intifada, and he shifted it back, or he was working towards that way, and he called it the year of elections.

This is where his deficiencies come through. The center of gravity within his party, within Fatah, had shifted on him. Ten years prior when they had parliamentary elections, the candidates were teachers, professors, lawyers, doctors, the sort of landed elite of Palestinian society. After the Intifada, the center of gravity had shifted towards the street fighters, and Abbas couldn't speak to them. He didn't want to speak with them, and he couldn't keep his party from fracturing. Everything in 2006, and then a civil war in 2007, everything since is him grappling with not having the sort of personal touch, the retail politics that Arafat was so good at, that he never really developed.

GLASSER: Does that mean that he doesn't have legitimacy to make any deal, Amir?

TIBON: That's a big question. I think at least when it comes to Gaza, obviously, the fact that basically the PA can't go into Gaza and doesn't really have any kind of influence except for exerting pressure from the outside makes it a big part of the problem. Now, I mean, legitimacy, I don't think it's something that you either have or you don't have and that's it. I think it's something that can be found and lost, created and destroyed. I think at the current moment, obviously, that's a big challenge for him because of Gaza, also because of the situation in the West Bank, and because after being president for 12 years, there's really nothing concrete that he can show to his people that he delivered.

Now, I also want to say something about the authoritarian part. I think that one of the reasons—it's like a question of what we like to, in Hebrew, we like to say the hen and the egg. Let's say he had managed to get a peace agreement with Israel. Maybe his authoritarian way of ruling in the Palestinian Authority would've seemed less of a problem to people, would've created less attention. It's not like Anwar Sadat was such a great democratic leader or King Hussein. Then the fact that there is no peace agreement in a way makes it more necessary for him to rule in this way because there's no real achievement to show to his people. There is no real progress on the peace front or on the road to independence. Then you cling to power because that's what you have, so the two things kind of feed each other.

MILLER: Let me just add one thing. I don't think there's a precedent in modern history for a people negotiating its way out of an occupation as well as building resilient and functional institutions. There may be one. I can't think of one. For Abbas to manage that, on top of the inherently negative circumstances in which he operated, a divided Palestinian National Movement I've said that looks more like Noah's Ark: there are basically two of everything, two constitutions, two statelets, two visions of where Palestine is and what it should be—a certain amount of risk aversion on the Israeli side.

I mean, Abbas was not fortunate enough to have an Israeli partner that was prepared. Now, we could argue all day long about Olmert, and you two should weigh in on his "two missed opportunities" to actually negotiate a way out of this, which was Olmert and then Obama. I have mixed feelings on this, as I think back on our own illusion-related notions of how 17 years ago this July, in another week or so actually, we looked at this extraordinary opportunity which was ill-advised, ill-timed, and—Tony Verstandig is here—and ill-planned. I think I look at this—

GLASSER: But other than that, it was—

MILLER: Right. I look at this—

GLASSER: —a good shot.

MILLER: I look at the notion of opportunities for Palestinians. I mean, if Arafat couldn't deal with either Camp David or the Clinton parameters—and Arafat did not have a divided Palestinian National Movement. Arafat had not only electoral legitimacy; he had moral authority. He had historic legitimacy, which Abbas lacked. What were the odds that this man—and I'm not here to write a brief for him. What were the odds that this man could have delivered? I think I'm comfortable with the answer, and it's okay to say it was just too hard to do, which I think frankly is the honest answer, once you get beyond the Israeli and very often American narratives, which tend to remind us all about Abba Eban's notion of missing opportunities to miss opportunities.

GLASSER: Well, a couple things. First of all, we're going to bring in the audience for questions. I'm sure all of you have lots of good questions, so get them ready. I know there should be microphones here, and please, when we go there, do make them questions and let us know, also, who you are. I'll exercise my prerogative while we're getting ready for the questions and ask each of you—we're talking about Abbas in a way, and at least this opportunity for peace, in this past tense.

We haven't really talked about this issue of the succession. It's implied in the title of the book, *The Last Palestinian*. He's in his 80s. What did you find out in terms of how precarious is his health right now? Is there a succession, or is that part of the rap against him at this point is that he's done everything in his power not to set up someone else to follow?

RUMLEY: Well, since I've written a succession article once a month for the past couple of years, I think I'll take a first stab at it. There are several competing scenarios for what happens if Abbas were to not wake up tomorrow. What happened when Arafat passed was power went to the speaker of the PA's parliament for 60 days while elections were prepared. That's what Palestinian Basic Law says is supposed to happen. The problem with that now is that Hamas won the 2006 elections, so the speaker of Parliament is a member of Hamas. It's unlikely in any scenario that the Fatah-dominated PA is going to give power, even temporarily, to a member of Hamas.

Then there's a question of, within the PLO, power going to the secretary general, who right now is Saeb Erekat. Saeb Erekat is not the most popular candidate for president within the West Bank and Gaza. Then there's the idea of the party, Fatah. The beating heart of Palestinian

politics in the West Bank is Fatah. It wasn't until February that they had a vice president or a deputy, and his name is Mahmoud al-Aloul. He's I think a moderately popular figure, you could say, who was with Fatah in Lebanon and has been part of mobilization efforts.

Really, that's all an academic experience. What it comes down to is actual personalities, and to my mind right now, it's a competing race between two figures. There's Marwan Barghouti, in prison, who just got done with his prisoner strike, and then there's Jibril Rajoub, who's in the Central Committee, who's head of the athletic division, and who's someone who hails from the security apparatuses. Those are two figures who both see the presidency as theirs. Marwan actually ran in 2004, 2005, and then withheld his name at sort of the last minute and rallied behind Abbas. I think what this means is there's competing cases and competing claims to the presidency, and all it's set up for is a clash of personalities whenever he does go.

GLASSER: You guys agree that those are the candidates?

MILLER: Again, I'm less interested in the persona and more the requirements of power. In the end, who's got the guns, who's got the money, who has the best capacity to retain and maintain them, and finally, even though the Americans may be less relevant, who's got the capacity to deal with the one party that, in essence, holds any number of keys to determine, even however indirectly, what the future of the putative, however divided, state of Palestine is, and that is the Israelis. I don't know who it's going to be, but any sustained successor has got to have access to those things. Otherwise, you're looking at a situation that we have not experienced before, which is a degree of division, instability. The "Arab Spring," such as it is or was, has never come to Palestine, and I suspect that if it's going to come, it will come in the wake of a succession in which no one can assert himself in a position of power and control.

TIBON: Because this has been such an optimistic discussion, I will end it with a joke that was going around I think last year or maybe year and a half. I think the original credit goes to Saeb Erekat, of course, the ultimate and eternal Palestinian negotiator, who at some point was talking about steps that the Netanyahu government was taking in the West Bank and how they were weakening the Palestinian Authority. He said, "Well, you know, who is going to succeed Abu Mazen? It will be General Poli Mordechai," the Israeli coordinator of the government policy in the occupied territories in the West Bank.

It was a joke, but they say that in every joke there's a bit of humor. There is this kind of— for some people, it's fear. For other people, mainly on some factions of the Israeli right wing, maybe it's hope, that after Abbas there will be this big mess that Aaron is describing. I don't think General Mordechai wants to succeed Abbas. I don't think he wants to be in charge, but Israel has the guns and has the money and has the ability to work with the Israelis. We talk about the last Palestinian, but when we talk about the end of the Abbas era or the idea that maybe there is not going to be a central figure after this, that also carries huge risks for Israel because we already had an American president say just a few months ago two states—

GLASSER: One state.

TIBON: —one state, whatever they want; it's good for me. I'm not sure the current government in Israel, despite a few elements, actually really truly wants to get on the road to the one-state solution. It's not an easy one.

MILLER: Neither of you guys mentioned Mohammed Dahlan, who is out there circulating, incredibly capable and charismatic. Relations with Hamas not great, but he's very close to the current military leader of Hamas, he and Mohammed Deif. Deif is younger, but I think they grew up in the same neighborhood. The Egyptians are very much in Dahlan's corner, and that's why they're angry at Abbas. I suspect that's why he's going to Cairo, one last chance to try to break this thing up. That's an intriguing—and I'm sure you have any number of people in Shin Bet now thinking about this particular issue. The notion that the Israelis will let Marwan Barghouti out of prison, which this goes back a long way, to emerge as the pragmatic leader with whom they can—there's now a putative challenger, and he's not in jail.

GLASSER: All right, let's bring in the audience. Do we have microphones as well? We'll start here.

HUMPHREY: I'm Peter Humphrey. I'm an intelligence analyst, a broadcaster, and a former diplomat. Of the names you've mentioned or names you haven't mentioned, who would be a favorite for the United States? Who would be a favorite for Israel? Who would be a favorite for Hamas? Who would be a favorite for the Saudis? I ask that because, openly or quietly, that could affect the funding.

RUMLEY: That's a great question, and a very tough one to answer. The easiest answer is from the Israeli angle, and I think it's Majid Faraj. I think probably, in an ideal scenario, the one to emerge. He's the head of the PA's intelligence. He's the person in charge of security coordination, which is still thriving today.

GLASSER: The person meeting Greenblatt and Ambassador Friedman today.

RUMLEY: Exactly. He was so much a negotiator in the last round of talks, as well, which was almost traditionally outside of the purview, but Abbas trusts him completely. I don't think he has a real feasible claim to it. From the American perspective, I'll pass on that because it depends on what we want out of the peace process, out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If we want the status quo, then Faraj is probably great for that. If we want a reformer, then Fayyad would be someone who we would dream of.

I'll say one thing. I'll actually kind of go back to the Dahlan thing. The reason I'm bearish on Dahlan is I attended the Fatah congress in November in Ramallah, and that was the defining point of fracture within Fatah. Abbas held a conference, internal elections in 2009. There were 2,300 delegates. In the time since 2009 to 2016, he had kicked out Dahlan and exiled him to the UAE. He had whittled down the Dahlanists and those that had disagreed with him so that the total delegates in November was around 1,400. Dahlan tried to have competing congresses. He went to Egypt. He tried to galvanize his own sort of splinter Fatah. He's fractured away from the group.

I'm a little bearish on Dahlan simply because he's not in Ramallah, and if Abbas were to not wake up tomorrow, it's going to also be a question of logistics, of who has the ability to get to the Muqata'a and say I've got everyone; I've got the bastions of power here, the semblances of power and what not. Dahlan is someone who's courted regional favor with the Egyptians, with, obviously, the Emiratis, with the Jordanians. I think each one of these guys appeals differently to the varying actors that are trying to have some type of play.

GLASSER: Amir, do you have anything to say?

TIBON: This is more Grant's department, but I will say we like to talk about the Israeli—now I've heard that the new head of the Labor Party is the Israeli Macron, and before that, Tzipi Livni was the Israeli Angela Merkel. We haven't had an Israeli Obama yet, but maybe, or an Israeli Trump. Maybe it's someone that we're not even thinking about, but I think that the scenario that, at least from the point of view of the Israelis and I think also many of the regional players, is most disturbing is the one that Aaron described, which is faction war, no one clearly emerges, *fouda*, as we say. It doesn't have the kind of political maneuvering appeal, but that's I think the big risk down the road.

GLASSER: Okay.

RAVIV: Hi. Dan Raviv, a correspondent with i24News and author of some books. I'd like to know, especially from the two authors—sorry, Aaron—from the two authors, what do you think it is that the Palestinian people who are interested in politics and care who the leader is, etc., what is it they really want? I mean, it's a question the world asks. Are they absolutely firm they should have an independent state? Is it okay if it's demilitarized? Is it still kind of a revolutionary movement, as the way Arafat seemed to style it? What seems to be the goal and please clarify if we're only talking about the West Bank? Is Gaza just a different universe right now?

GLASSER: Nice short question, right?

RUMLEY: Yeah.

GLASSER: Two minutes.

RUMLEY: In general, I try to never presume to speak for what Palestinians want.

MILLER: Very wise.

RUMLEY: I am an American from Michigan. I can't speak for what Palestinians want, what they envision their state to be. I can analyze trends and polls and base it off my own experiences living in the West Bank, and I will say that I think a majority of Palestinians want two-state solution. I think they're just skeptical that it can come about. I think Palestinians have an incredible resiliency in the face of the status quo, in the face of subpar living conditions—I'm thinking about Gaza right now—to sort of follow a leadership forward and trust in a path.

I think ultimately with whomever becomes the leader, Palestinians want someone who can speak to them, who can come and address their concerns. I mean, this was something that in doing the book on Abbas, you couldn't help but have people wax poetic about Arafat and about how he would meet with everyone and you could always go and see him. Abbas spends more days of the year outside of the West Bank. He doesn't really leave his compound. They call him the Mayor of Ramallah, and that's probably more accurate for what he is right now. I think Palestinians are willing to follow a leader towards a destination. They obviously want statehood. They want to be able to make their own decisions. It's a question of which leader can take them there.

As far as Gaza goes, that, to Amir and I, in a nutshell, is the crux of our book and why we wrote it. A Palestinian leader that doesn't speak for Gaza, doesn't control Gaza, doesn't have a legitimate claim to Gaza, is one that will be handicapped in negotiations and one that ultimately will have his legitimacy constantly under assault. A big part of this book for us was looking at, okay, why does Abbas walk away from offers or why does Abbas do X. It's largely because he's cognizant that he doesn't claim Gaza and he doesn't rule Gaza, and that is just a festering wound for him.

TIBON: Just one small thing I will say. I agree with what Grant said in the beginning. I'm not the right person maybe to really say even what the Israelis want. I mean, it's different parts of societies. One thing you do see in public opinion polls, and also I've personally witnessed just from my work and from friendships and connections, is that among people more of our age, younger-generation Palestinians, and especially people with a university education, a lot of people have given up on the two-state solution. We address this a bit in the book. Even there's the famous quote by Abbas's own son, who basically said, "Okay, we understand the Israelis don't want to take down the settlements. They don't want to end the occupation. They don't want us to have a state. Okay, let's give up on that, and let's ask for voting rights. This is not a temporary situation; this is permanent." That is one thing that when you talk about what Palestinians want, I think you should—I mean, one of the questions—and it's true, also, for Israelis. Is there a difference between maybe what the current leadership wants and what is the existing trend, and then what younger people and the future generation is interested in? That creates a challenge of its own.

GLASSER: Yes, sir?

NIR: Hi, I'm Ori Nir with Americans for Peace Now. When you do a profile or a biography of a person, one of the questions, or the main question, you ask yourself is how does he or she view himself or herself. How does Abbas view himself? How does he view his role in history, and how has that changed over the years? I'm sure that he came in with a certain ethos, with a certain sense of mission. How has that eroded? Does he see himself as a tragic figure today?

RUMLEY: Well, I will say there are two basic competing theories as to how he became the president or why he adopted the positions he did. One of them is that he understood that all conflicts end in negotiations at a certain point, and that if he positioned himself as the negotiator early on, he'd be in sort of the driver's seat to be the leader of the movement one day. That's a

rather cynical view of why someone would advocate for negotiations, but nevertheless, it's a view. Then there's also that he just abhorred violence in general, didn't see any merit to it as a tactic, and so thus became the one who would study up on Zionism and who would study up on Israel and become the negotiator. That's how he became president.

Your question about how he views himself, I mean, I don't know. I won't presume to speak for him, but I think he sees himself as sort of the bulwark of a school of thought. I think this goes off Amir's point. He's the reason, in large part, why Palestinians are negotiating today. He was a driving factor behind Oslo. He was a driving factor in that school of thought. The two-state solution negotiations, that's a big part of his legacy.

I think perhaps one of the reasons why he hasn't thought about transition or thought about stepping down may be, in part, paranoia about his rivals coming after him, about sort of an insecurity of where he'd be in the political realm, but also that the next person might not honor his school of thought, might not place as much premium on going back to negotiations, might fire Saeb Erekat really quickly. All these things, I think, weigh on him. I think that's how I'd answer your question.

GLASSER: Aaron, a sort of version of that is also did he accept that narrative about him that we Americans adopted, that Israelis to a certain extent adopted, which was that he was the best partner they never had, as you put it. Was that also Abbas's narrative of Abbas? What was his game when you knew him?

MILLER: Well, remember, when I knew him and when we dealt with him, he was very much a backroom figure overshadowed and completely outmaneuvered by Mr. Arafat, who loomed large over everything. I always got the sense from him, though, that he was a, despite charges of cronyism and corruption and his desire to live the good life, as opposed to Arafat, who, I mean, was an aesthete, I suppose, that he very much worried at one point, should he ever get to be the leader of this movement, that history would judge him and that he didn't want to end up like the only Palestinian leader who—and there haven't been many—who is remembered very negatively by Palestinians and by history.

The notion—and it's always intrigued me—the theory that Abbas is simply going to disappear voluntarily, go to the Emirates or Cairo or Amman, never was very compelling. I think there is a seriousness about him, a desire to be remembered. I think Grant is absolutely right; I think he does embody that negotiating style, and he has no intention, I think, of ending up like Ahmad Shukeiri ended up, unfavorably viewed in the history of the Palestinian narrative. He will, in his own way, proverbially, go down with the ship. A different kind of exit than Arafat had, but I think he's a keeper and he will be the last Palestinian, in that respect, still in the putative state of Palestine when the end finally comes.

Again, life is very strange. I mean, you could be traveling down the highway, and you get off on an exit ramp and you take a wrong turn, and all of a sudden you're faced with a completely different set of circumstances. We're seven months into a highly idiosyncratic, unpredictable, to say the least, presidency. I met Mr. Kushner for the first time a month or so, and I said to him

that I wish my father-in-law had as much confidence in me as his father-in-law appears to have in him, because he's given him mission impossible.

GLASSER: What did he reply to that?

MILLER: He said yes, it was hard, and then changed the subject. I think I am not so jaded and bereft of any sense of possibility that, I mean, life is funny and it's uncertain. I think the odds are very small, but it is interesting. We're talking about Mr. Abbas as if he were dead.

GLASSER: Well, no, the past tense aspect of this conversation is interesting.

MILLER: It is. It's almost like a living obit. The fact is I'm not sure that's entirely wise or appropriate. Just a thought.

GLASSER: Well, I'm struck by the fact that the book's opening anecdote actually sort of I think underscores Grant's point here, which is that he is a keeper of his own narrative at this point. This is about basically the dilemma that he faced in whether to attend the funeral last fall of Shimon Peres, his partner in the Oslo peace process, at a time when he's barely really not on speaking terms with the Israeli leadership. He hasn't met Netanyahu face-to-face in years, and almost didn't come basically until a last-minute entreaty directly from the Peres family, which is recounted in the book's opening pages.

Why would you decide to do something like that? It suggests that you're looking toward history; you're looking toward not blowing up entirely your own legacy, even if it's sort of on life support, at best, whether there can be anything that comes out of this peace process. I think that that is a powerful moment. I was glad you started the book with it.

TIBON: I want to add something about that anecdote. In the peace process, there are fashions. Aaron can school us about the previous ones, but the fashion right now is outside-in. You don't need the Palestinians.

GLASSER: Yes.

MILLER: Right.

TIBON: Just work with the Arabs. The fact is the only Arab leader who came to Shimon Peres's funeral was Mahmoud Abbas.

GLASSER: That's right.

TIBON: There are Arab leaders who are much more powerful, who have much more internal legitimacy, who face a much smaller risk by taking this kind of humane, personal step of showing respect to really a great historical figure. Even those who have strong or at least stable peace agreements with Israel didn't take the step that he did, the small guy from Ramallah, the guy who, as the Israelis like to say, we are keeping him with our own army, etc. He's the only one who actually took the risk and came over, so that's another thought to incorporate when

people talk about, oh, we'll just work the Arabs, and the Palestinians don't even need to be a part of it.

GLASSER: I think that's an important data point. All right, we probably have time for one or two more questions here. Here you go. Right here.

HERF: I'm Jeffrey Herf. I'm a professor of history at the University of Maryland. I want to return attention to the book. I know the book is about Mahmoud Abbas, but I haven't heard the two of you tell us what your basic argument is or what the key themes of the book are. We've been here for a while, and it's not clear to me what you're trying to do with the book, so I hope you'll take this opportunity to do that. The second is what are the sources. Is this book primarily based on interviews, public documents? Are there any archives?

RUMLEY: Yeah. Well, I'll say the question of what we hope to accomplish with the book and what we were doing with the book was one my Ma asked me every day I was writing the book. I think for us it's a long view at Abbas, and it starts with a basic premise, and that is that he's a tragic, failed leader, in a sense. This was a guy who advocated a position for much of his adult life, who gets flushed out of a Syrian military academy when he's 18 because the instructors tell him he's not built for that line of work. It's a guy who dedicates himself to negotiations, to study, to producing less-than-reputable work—his Holocaust dissertation being one of them—that nevertheless becomes the leader at a certain point and then fails to enact the policies that he'd advocated.

I mean, two serious moments for us is the Beilin-Abu Mazen agreement in the '90s that is basically his own peace agreement with Israel that he has to distance himself from right away. It becomes a point of controversy. That's him in a vacuum negotiating when there are no political repercussions. Then he becomes president and there become political repercussions, and he cannot deal with that. He cannot navigate that period, and he ultimately cannot deliver.

I think, for us, you want, on both the Israeli and the Palestinian side, leaders who have both the willingness to sign an agreement and the capability to deliver an agreement. If Arafat had the willingness, as Aaron says, or the ability to deliver an agreement, I don't think he could ever envision himself as anything but the revolutionary to do it. Abbas is almost the opposite, in a sense. Abbas, to us at least, wanted to sign at some point, came to power, and couldn't. As far as sources, Amir and I talked with over a hundred people, primary sources, memoirs, Arabic, Hebrew, English. I spent over six weeks in the West Bank. Amir is so well-sourced up that he knows more people in this town than I do, and he knows all the actors in Israel. I think we both felt pretty confident that we had gotten a broad range of opinions.

GLASSER: What did they tell you when you tried to get an interview with Abbas for the book?

RUMLEY: Yeah, we tried early on at the very start and then later on, and they demanded to see what we were writing ahead of time. That was sort of—It was a polite exchange, but to get access, they wanted to see what we were writing, and that was sort of a bridge too far, so it's an unauthorized biography.

GLASSER: The best kind. Here we go.

SCHAM: I'm Paul Scham. I am a professor of the Israel Studies at the University of Maryland. For many years since before Abbas was president, when you talked to Palestinians about him, the word corruption inevitably came up, not unique to him, but it was often said. Do you agree, and if so, what does that mean? How is his corruption any different from Palestinian society? What is the role of so-called corruption that Palestinians always bring it up?

RUMLEY: No, you go ahead.

TIBON: Well, we touch on this issue in the book. Many stories were published over the years, many complaints raised by his political opponents. I think that, without putting a clear judgment on it, it's one of the reasons why Hamas gained more popularity and more power in the parliamentary elections, and maybe—this is a suggestion—but maybe it's also one of the reasons Abbas hasn't been very enthusiastic about doing another round of presidential elections. When we write about Hamas's, I would say, two victories: first, the election victory, and then the victory with the guns in Gaza, that's a major issue that comes up.

When you have a leader who some would characterize as paranoid and who wants to cling to power, so a lot of times there is kind of a blurred line between what is kind of like enriching corruption, like I want to take care of myself and my kids, and what some people would define as survival corruption: I'm using the power that I have to create conditions that ensure my own political survival. It's not a unique question to the Palestinians in our region, but it's definitely part of his life story, at least the last 12 years.

GLASSER: Well, it sounds like, Aaron, this was a factor that American negotiators looked at, as well, in trying to understand the PLO in its early stage and what was—

MILLER: It was.

GLASSER: —the difference between Arafat and his lieutenants.

MILLER: And we overlooked—in terms of the state-building capacity—we overlooked so many bad forms of behavior in the maybe well-intentioned pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian peace—corruption, authoritarian behavior, incitement—largely because the Israelis, however annoyed and disturbed they were by these trends, were also prepared to subordinate them to the overall goal and objective, and you see the consequences now. Same issues are there. The last thing the Middle East needs—and I don't mean to make an editorial comment with four Arab states in the process of some kind of fragmentation and decentralization, and several more facing political and economic problems that they cannot resolve—the last thing the Middle East needs now—and Palestinians deserve a functional state for many reasons—is a broken, failed one.

GLASSER: All right, last question. On that cheery note, who's got a last question here? All right, we've answered everything. Guys, I have a last question. It's a little bit on a detour, but all things Russia are on the mind of us here in Washington these days. There's been a lot of questions about Mahmoud Abbas's Russia connections. You alluded to his Holocaust thesis. He

went to the Soviet Union, he studied. There have been reports that he was even considered, at one point in time, a KGB asset. That was surfaced in a document. I don't know if you turned up any evidence around that, one way or the other, but just in general, I'm curious, do you see him and his Russia ties as being relevant? Do you see Russia as potentially playing a bigger role in Middle East peace in the future if America is going to be moving out of the historic role that it had played there?

TIBON: Well, obviously, they hacked the parliamentary election in 2006.

GLASSER: Yeah. Well, are they going to hack the next election?

RUMLEY: I felt a little bit bad for him when the story broke that he had worked with the KGB. His code name was Krotov, I believe, which in Russian means 'mole' for being a mole. He couldn't even get a really cool name. Yeah, I feel for him.

I think there was one moment that came about in 1982 during the Siege of Beirut and talking with some of the guys who had been with him. Abbas was always based in Damascus. He was not with the PLO leadership there. He had requested an emergency meeting with the Soviets, and so he flew to Moscow with Farouk Qaddumi, another leader within the party. There he interrupted a meeting to ask the Soviet Union if they would sponsor the PLO as they purchased a Greek isle, and the Soviets laughed him out of the room. The people in the meeting at the time basically looked at him and said, "What are you doing here? What is the point? You're not in Beirut with us. You're in Damascus. Who are you to sort of propose this crazy idea?"

I think that kind of underscored who he was in the PLO at the time and where his style of governance derives from. He is not the leader in the camps. He is not the *munadil*, as Aaron said. He runs it like a politburo, like a Soviet-style politician. He's the master of palace politics, of court intrigue, of playing rivals off each other, and that's in large part why he's still in power today with dwindling popularity on the street, but still all the corridors of power answer to him.

GLASSER: Well, and not only that, you mentioned the Fatah conference that you attended. I mean, that party is run much more like a Soviet-era Communist Party than almost any other still extant political organization any of us is familiar with. But did you turn up any evidence? Why did you leave this question out of the book?

TIBON: Well, we touch on it, but not in a lot of detail. Maybe we just didn't find the smoking gun, the email about the collusion, but I think something that came up—and actually it came up from a number of Israeli intelligence sources—was this explanation that said having a code name, being considered some kind of informant, doesn't necessarily mean you are an agent. I don't know. Maybe Grant and I also have code names in certain places, people watching us right now.

I mean, that's a big question that I agree we left unanswered because we dug up on it and the more we tried to find the line that would prove it, we actually got in more and more of these kinds of answers like, well, look, so he was studying over there; a lot of Arab students were

studying in Russia in those years. There was some kind of attempt to manipulate them into it, maybe with their knowledge, maybe without their knowledge. At the end of the day, we came to the conclusion that we want to focus on the issues that really are more relevant to his political career, to his reign as president and as a negotiator, but maybe in the second edition.

GLASSER: Aaron, was this ever anything that came up in your dealings with him?

MILLER: No, only in what I would call the other Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the one that was fought here. Abbas really wasn't a target until he assumed power, and then he did, in fact. All these things come up, the dissertation, the Russian connection, the association with violence. I mean, he wore a suit, but the nock on Abbas is that he acquiesced, as well, which is probably right. It's one of the things that we foolishly never understood about Arafat. He never gave up the gun from the beginning, and that's one of the reasons that Abbas may well remain the best political partner Israel will never have.

GLASSER: All right. Well, I want to thank everybody here for a fantastic conversation. Of course, I want to thank our host, FDD, and all of you for sharing your lunchtime with us, and to congratulate Grant and Amir on the publication of their book today.