While there is no shortage of books on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the peace process, very few deal directly with the issues of Palestinian politics and American-Palestinian relations. The newest addition to the literature, Grant Rumley and Amir Tibon’s *The Last Palestinian: The Rise and Reign of Mahmoud Abbas*, is a welcome and timely contribution to an understudied subject. The book has garnered a fair amount of publicity and praise since its release this summer, including endorsements by a number of former American negotiators. As one who has observed Palestinian politics from both the inside and the outside for many years, however, I offer a somewhat different take on *The Last Palestinian*. Despite its many strengths, the book offers an incomplete and ultimately confused portrait of the enigmatic Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas. He remains as much of a mystery at the end of the book as he does at the start.

The book traces Abbas’ life and political career from his early childhood in British Mandate Palestine to his unlikely rise in the Palestinian national movement. Abbas was among the founders of Fatah, the largest and oldest Palestinian political faction that has dominated the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) for the last half-century. But he was best known for his role as one of the principal architects of the 1993 Oslo “Declaration of Principles,” which laid the foundation for the present peace process. The soft-spoken and unassuming Abbas spent years as the PLO’s number two, perpetually in the shadow of Yasir Arafat, before finally succeeding the iconic Palestinian leader following his death in late 2004.

Abbas came to power in January 2005 focused on two goals which had long eluded his predecessor: to unify Palestine’s unruly political factions under his leadership and to secure a peace deal that would end Israel’s occupation and finally establish an independent Palestinian state. After a dozen years in power, however, Abbas’ hopes of statehood and national unity have been all but buried by the relentless expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem coupled with a
debilitating internal split between the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, the once reform-minded Abbas has since replicated Arafat’s authoritarian regime—albeit without his predecessor’s charisma and broad popular appeal.

Grumley and Tibon paint Abbas as largely ill-suited to the demands of leadership, a “lifelong bureaucrat” who ultimately proved too weak to conclude a conflict-ending peace deal with Israel while squandering critical opportunities along the way. As they put it, “the arc of Mahmoud Abbas’ career bends toward that of a missed opportunity.” Moreover, as the last of the founding generation of Palestinian leaders, Abbas' eventual departure raises the question of “whether Palestinian nationalism can flourish again after he’s gone, or whether he will be remembered as the last Palestinian leader.” The book includes an impressive 75 interviews and offers a number of insightful anecdotes that are not available elsewhere. Yet, while the book tells a compelling story, it is largely incomplete.

While few would deny Abbas' lack of charisma, vision, and courage, his weakness also owes much to the policies of Israel and the United States. Abbas’s political decline began almost as soon as he took office with the failure of the U.S.-brokered Agreement on Movement and Access following Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, resulting in the closure of its borders and setting the stage for periodic bouts of war. Then came Hamas’ surprise election victory over his Fatah party in January 2006, triggering a U.S.-led boycott of the PA. The fatal blow came in June 2007 when Hamas forcibly took control of the Gaza Strip and expelled Abbas' PA forces. Months later, the U.S.-sponsored Annapolis peace negotiations collapsed in the face of Israel’s military offensive in Gaza in December 2008.

The authors make little attempt to get inside the mind of Abbas or shed light on the complexities of Palestinian politics, which they often misread, while omitting relevant facts and events from the narrative. Thus, the authors decry Abbas’s campaign to seek U.N. recognition of a Palestinian state in 2011 and 2012 as an “attempt at subverting the traditional peace process while placating his people,” but make no attempt to explain the reasons behind his controversial (though ultimately benign) decision. In reality, Abbas had little interest in overturning peace negotiations, which remained his first and last option, but sought instead to acquire some badly needed political leverage in future negotiations. Even then, Abbas managed to tease the process out for two years to not overly annoy the Israelis and his American patrons. Similarly, we are told repeatedly of the Palestinians’ frustration with the peace process, but with no real attempt to explore how or why Palestinians lost faith in the Oslo process. Issues like Israel's ever-expanding settlement enterprise in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the ongoing siege and repeated wars on Gaza, or the U.S.-Israeli role in maintaining political division between the PA and Hamas are mentioned but seem to have little bearing on Palestinian perceptions of the peace process much less on its success or failure.

More crucially, the basic narrative of the book is somewhat confused, with the authors seemingly unable to decide whether Abbas is a victim of his negative circumstances or the architect of them. Even as they describe Abbas’ chronic weakness and declining domestic legitimacy in great detail, the authors are determined portray him as merely the latest Palestinian leader to squander historic opportunities for peace:

Ever since Arafat rejected Clinton’s parameters in 2000 (which Israel accepted) ... the Palestinians had been viewed as rejectionists. When Abbas ignored
Olmert’s offer in 2008, he reinforced that image. So, with Obama’s offer, Abbas had a rare opportunity to say yes to a document that Netanyahu would have most likely rejected. Even if the talks then collapsed, such a scenario would have given Abbas a chance to change the international perception that the Palestinians were not ready for peace.

The authors explicitly assure us that Abbas was not solely to blame for the repeated failures in the peace process, but then proceed to blame him anyway for failing to accept what they regard as historic peace offers.

According to Rumley and Tibon, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s 2008 peace proposal would have put Abbas “on the verge of fulfilling the collective dream of his people” which Abbas nevertheless “ignored.” (The book curiously does not mention Abbas’ May 2008 peace proposal to Olmert.) While Olmert’s proposal was significant, weakness of both leaders doomed the talks from the start. Olmert was facing imminent indictment over charges of corruption (for which he was later imprisoned) and was clearly on his way out. Moreover, Abbas had just lost both a civil war and a major election, and was in no position to make concessions even if he wanted to. As the authors themselves point out, “The man who lost Gaza will find it almost impossible to sign a historic compromise on Jerusalem.”

The authors are equally critical of Abbas’ failure to accept Secretary of State John Kerry’s proposed “framework,” a set of American-defined principles designed to serve as a basis for future negotiations. They describe Kerry’s 2014 initiative as “the best peace offer the Palestinians had received in more than a decade”—a reference to the “parameters” put forth by Bill Clinton in 2000—and Abbas’ nonacceptance as “the death blow” to the peace process. However, this characterization of Kerry’s proposal is widely disputed. In the book’s foreword, former U.S. negotiator Aaron David Miller describes the Clinton parameters as “a much better deal than what Obama was offering” in 2014.

Other inconsistencies plague the book as well. While Grumley and Tibon rightly question Abbas’ growing autocratic tendencies, they are equally critical of his attempts at appeasing his domestic constituency. The authors are particularly disparaging of his pursuit of international recognition and reconciliation with Hamas in defiance of Israel and the United States, which they consider the two cardinal sins of Abbas’ reign.

Such inconsistencies are not incidental, but rather stem from a particular understanding of the role of Palestinian leaders and of the peace process in general. As Rumley and Tibon write in their introductory chapter, the “tragedy of Abbas, and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general, is in what he doesn’t bring to the table. He is not a charismatic leader and thus could not convince his people to modify their version of the national narrative.” [emphasis added] In other words, the proper role of a Palestinian leader is not to represent the sentiments and aspirations of his people—as would, say, an Israeli or any other national leader—but to change them.

In other words, the authors’ real gripe is not with Abbas—but with his people. “The irony for Abbas,” they write, “was that when he did what he had spent his entire life advocating (peace negotiations) he was punished in the public sphere, but when he changed to a new course (reconciliation and internationalization) he was cheered.” The authors are keenly aware of the growing tension between the demands of the U.S.-led peace process and Abbas’ domestic legitimacy. Yet they seem to believe that the solution lies in transforming Palestinian politics and public opinion rather than in fixing a faulty peace process.
The notion that Palestinian domestic politics and public opinion (rather than, say, Israel’s military occupation) are the primary obstacles to peace, while prevalent in Israel and parts of the Washington establishment, is not one that most Palestinians share. While the authors fault Abbas for being overindulgent of his public opinion and domestic opposition, most Palestinians would claim precisely the opposite: Abbas has grown increasingly unpopular precisely because of his continued commitment to a failed peace process that has produced few benefits and a great many losses.

This paradox encapsulates the basic contradiction of the book. The authors highlight the importance of Palestinian political leaders’ legitimacy to the success of the peace process, only to question the very legitimacy of Palestinian politics. For this and other reasons, The Last Palestinian is likely to leave readers with more questions than it answers.

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