

## **A Turning Point?**

### The National Dialogue between Fatah and Hamas

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The Palestinian political arena has recently experienced substantive shockwaves. The joint announcement on the meeting of the Palestinian factions in Cairo in March was the first of its kind, indicating a new balance of forces in Palestinian politics. The results of these shockwaves are expected to be reflected in the July elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), the parliament of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Will Fatah continue to control the PLO and the Palestinian territories, or will it lose a significant part of its power to Hamas?

Any change in the internal Palestinian scene will have major influence on negotiations with Israel and the chances of achieving a political settlement. Palestinian public opinion polls indicate that the majority of the population in the territories prefers a political program based on two states for two nations, or in other words, the approach of Fatah. However, senior Fatah officials and veteran activists in the movement are perceived in the West Bank and Gaza as power hungry and corrupt. It seems that the Palestinian public prefers Hamas activists, who are regarded as modest and upright, not because of their religious and political stances but despite them.

#### **Intra-Palestinian Dialogue**

The idea of a political discussion among the various Palestinian factions, such as that held recently in Cairo, generally assumes twelve or sometimes even fourteen factions. Most of them are small leftist organizations and fronts established more than thirty years ago in the period following the Six Day War, and were for many years members of the Palestinian political umbrella, the PLO. Today, however, most of these organizations have no political weight. In the last two decades they have lost the major or minimal public support they once enjoyed. All that remains of them is a small band of party officials who try to survive by means of the financial support they receive from the PLO or various Arab bodies. Even an organization like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, at one time second only to Fatah in size in the PLO, is currently no more than a fairly small group of activists

who can barely maintain their central headquarters in Damascus and their local branches in the West Bank and Gaza. Every time elections have been held in recent years in the territories for the student councils, labor unions, or workers committees, the Popular Front candidates received only a few votes. The same applies to the other Palestinian factions.

Consequently during the last ten years the debate between the Palestinian factions is in fact a dialogue between two groups: Fatah and the Islamic resistance movement Hamas. Since the 1990s these are the two largest and most important movements in the Palestinian public. They are both surrounded by satellites, smaller movements that to a certain degree may be regarded as appendages. For instance, Fatah is supported by the Fida movement of dissidents from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Dr. Samir Ghusha's Popular Struggle Front, and the Communist People's Party; Hamas has a partner in the Islamic Jihad. Thus, even the recent conference hosted by the Egyptians in Cairo was in fact a dialogue between Fatah and Hamas, with the other factions virtually remaining observers from the sidelines.

However, before attempting to analyze the results of this meeting it is important to define the participants more precisely. Was this a dialogue between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, as has been suggested in several reports, or negotiations between Fatah and Hamas, as maintained by others? The representatives of the parties are the same people, but there is importance to their titles in the context of the negotiations. Mahomud Abbas (Abu Mazen) is the chairman of the Palestinian Authority, as well as the head of the PLO and the leader of the Fatah movement. (Farouq Qaddumi is officially the chairman of the Fatah Central Committee, but clearly Abu Mazen is the principal figure in the movement.) However, there is a difference if Abu Mazen participates in a dialogue of this sort as head of Fatah or as chairman of the PA. The reason for this is obvious: a dialogue between factions, or between Fatah and Hamas, is legitimate even when held under the auspices of a foreign country. However, a dialogue between the PA, or in other words, the Palestinian regime in the territories, and a political group or groups from the territories – under the auspices of a foreign country – is something totally different. It can be regarded as an embarrassment to the Palestinian government, and in fact quite a few of the reporters who covered the meeting in Cairo considered it a humiliation for Fatah.

The meeting in Cairo was the result of more than ten years of negotiations between Fatah and Hamas. While Fatah is a veteran organization and has in fact been the ruling party of Palestinian nationalism for almost forty years, Hamas is a relatively young player. Hamas defined itself as a political movement only in the early months of the first intifada, at the beginning of 1988, when it published its ideological platform. It called this platform the Islamic Covenant, as a counterweight to the famous National Covenant of the PLO. Hamas was founded as an Islamic religious organization, in opposition to the PLO that is cast as a secular nationalist group. "On the day that the PLO adopts Islam as a way of life, we shall be its soldiers," Hamas declared when it was founded.

Although Hamas leaders have avoided any explicit affirmation, from their earliest activities they have acted as though they intend to form an alternative leadership to the PLO. In the first intifada (1987-91) they refused to take part in the united headquarters set up by the organizations associated with the PLO. They presented a different political agenda that was totally opposed to the decisions taken by the PLO in the summer of 1988, whose main thrust was the acceptance of UN decisions and de facto recognition of Israel's right to exist.

The refusal by Hamas to recognize the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people did not prevent it from engaging in a dialogue with the PLO. One of the first and most interesting meetings between Hamas and Fatah representatives was in January 1993 in Khartoum, Sudan, during the interim period of the diplomatic process, between the Madrid Conference (November 1991) and the Oslo agreement (September 1993). In this dialogue Hamas expressed willingness to join the PLO under two major conditions. The first was that the PLO retract its recognition of UN Resolution 242, or in other words, change its policy of striving for a political settlement with Israel. The second was that Hamas would receive a representation of 40 percent in all PLO institutions. Yasir Arafat responded angrily, saying: "I didn't come to Sudan in order to sell you the PLO." The Hamas representative, Ibrahim Ghusha, replied: "We have expressed willingness to enter the PLO and not become an alternative to it."

The differences of opinion between Hamas and Fatah regarding Israel were, and to a certain extent have remained, ones of principle. Hamas stands for the liberation of all Palestine, which according to its covenant is "the land of the Islamic Wakf for generations of Muslims until Judgment Day," which consequently

precludes ceding any part of it. In contrast, Fatah officially supports the principle of a two state solution, provided that the problem of the refugees is solved based on their right of return. Hamas declares that the sole operational method is jihad and armed struggle, while Fatah (and the PLO) have taken decisions opposed to violence and terrorism.

Deep social differences also exist between Fatah and Hamas. While the initial Fatah breeding ground was in the secular-leftist atmosphere of the 1960s and was nurtured over the years outside historic Palestine, especially in Beirut and Tunis, Hamas is a local organization, originating in the Gaza refugee camps and fed by a traditional religious atmosphere that was inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Fatah leaders have an image among the Palestinian public of people hungry for authority and power and tainted by personal corruption, while the public image of Hamas activists is of modesty and integrity.

Just as more than ten years ago the first dialogue in Sudan between Hamas and Fatah failed, so did the subsequent dialogues of the 1990s. The peak of the dispute between Hamas and Fatah (or specifically the Palestinian Authority) was during the years 1996-2000, when the Palestinian security organizations arrested hundreds of Hamas operatives in the West Bank and Gaza and attempted to block the activities of the movement.

The al-Aqsa intifada, which erupted in September 2000, changed the picture. The Israeli-Palestinian violence and the accompanying political circumstances brought Hamas and Fatah together and permitted a resumption of the dialogue between them. The failure of the political process with Israel restored the violent option to the Palestinian agenda, and Fatah activists returned to the methods of armed struggle and terrorist attacks under the banner of a new organization called the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. They even adopted the method of suicide bombers, previously employed solely by Hamas and other Islamic extremists. In other words, in the last four and a half years Fatah activists have retreated to a large extent from their previous positions and have adopted a stance similar to that of Hamas. Furthermore, public support for Hamas has increased considerably, as has Palestinian public opinion in favor of terrorist attacks against Israel.

The renewal of contacts between Hamas and Fatah during the intifada, and their intensification in 2003 under Egypt's auspices, occurred against a background of increasing Hamas prestige and power. In the Cairo dialogue of early 2002, Hamas

representatives refused to agree to a joint document prepared by the Egyptians regarding a one-year suspension of armed activities. Abu Mazen, appointed as the first Palestinian prime minister in the summer of 2003, adamantly opposed Hamas activities but attempted to persuade Hamas leaders and others that the terrorist attacks and acts of violence or, in his words, the armed intifada, did not help the Palestinians but rather caused them serious harm.

Abu Mazen's efforts to achieve rapprochement and an understanding with Hamas about cessation of the terrorist attacks, in addition to the IDF policy of targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders in Gaza, produced a certain change in Hamas positions. Indeed, an understanding was reached in the summer of 2003 regarding a *hudna*, a temporary ceasefire, for which Hamas presented clear conditions, including: Israel would stop killing Palestinian citizens, halt its penetration of Palestinian territories, and release prisoners. Abu Mazen's *hudna* of the summer of 2003 was short-lived, as was his government. The dialogue between the sides was renewed with any measure only after Arafat's death and Abu Mazen's election as chairman of the Palestinian Authority. At this point the atmosphere during the dialogue was different, as was the result in Cairo in March 2005 that led to a ceasefire and to agreement about the joint document.

### **The Current Opportunity**

What caused this change in atmosphere between Hamas and the PLO? Was it Arafat's death? Or was it perhaps the elimination of three out of five senior Hamas people in Gaza? (Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Dr. Abed al-Aziz al-Rantisi, and Ismail Abu Shenev, were assassinated. The two surviving senior officials are Dr. Mahmoud al-Zahar, who escaped an attempted assassination and was subsequently elected to be head of the movement in Gaza, and Sheikh Ismail Hania.) Certainly the changed atmosphere was due at least in part to national and regional circumstances: Islamic terrorism, which has become a grave threat to many countries of the world; the war in Iraq; and the American/Western demand for the establishment of democracy and the implementation of reform in the Arab world. It is very likely that the events in Lebanon and Syria also exerted much influence on the Hamas leadership, based in Damascus.

All these factors probably prompted Hamas to modify its rigid positions, but it is important to add an additional one: Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement

plan. As far as most Palestinians are concerned, and certainly from the Hamas viewpoint, the Sharon government drafted the disengagement plan solely because of the Palestinian violent struggle. They regard it as a tremendous Palestinian victory. All the opinion polls in the territories testify to this sentiment, which is strengthened by the growing opposition in Israel to the disengagement plan. The spokespersons of the Israeli Right, which is struggling against the plan, and the Palestinian spokespeople share the view that this is an Israeli retreat, and the uprooting of settlements represents an Israeli national humiliation and a violence-induced surrender. The sense of victory and Hamas strength allows the heads of the movement in the territories and abroad to adopt more flexible positions from a feeling that the possibility now exists to assume control of the Palestinian national movement and perhaps the governing authority of the West Bank and Gaza. If in Sudan in 1993 Hamas was mocked by Arafat for demanding a change in Palestinian policy and the control of 40 percent of all PLO institutions, it now has a chance of achieving this.

These feelings on the possibility of attaining power are reinforced by the fact that the opponents in the PLO have lost Arafat, the leader and symbol whom none could dislodge. Meantime, support for Hamas is increasing, in part due to the disgust by the public in the territories with the corruption of the Fatah and PA leadership. The internal disputes in Fatah between the older veterans of Tunis, who control the movement's central committee, and the younger veterans of Israeli jails and the first intifada encourage Hamas activists to believe that their aim lies within their grasp. This background also includes the recent electoral campaigns for some municipalities and local councils in the West Bank and Gaza, which further strengthened Hamas hopes. The success of the Hamas candidates in these elections (held in several stages) was impressive. This is therefore the appropriate time for the Hamas leadership and movement activists to gradually turn into a political party, having good chances of becoming a decisive factor in Palestinian politics.

Consequently, the important development was not the ceasefire agreement achieved recently in Cairo, but the preparations by Hamas to participate in the PLC elections scheduled for July. Hamas (and the other opposition movements) refused to participate in the elections held in 1996, because they were held on a basis of the Oslo agreement that they rejected out of hand. Hamas also refused to participate in the recent elections for PA chairman, in which Abu Mazen was elected.

Now the situation is different. Following the dialogue between Hamas and Fatah and the Cairo understandings, changes will take place in the procedures for the July elections. They will not be held only on a regional basis, which gives an advantage to the large party, but apparently as a combination of two methods: half the members of the council will be elected as regional representatives, and half on a national basis. Fatah representatives are trying to bargain with Hamas regarding the specifics, but no decision has yet been made. Abu Mazen recently proposed adopting a method of elections similar to the Israeli one, perhaps thinking that since most of the Palestinian public is not fervently religious and therefore won't support the Hamas political position, it will prefer the Fatah political platform and will forgive its activists for their arbitrary and corrupt behavior.

One way or another, however, it is very likely that the strife-torn and divided Fatah will sustain a real blow in the elections. Understanding exists between the sides that the results of these elections will also form the key to the new distribution of representatives in the various PLO institutions. This means that success by Hamas in the elections will enable it to gain triumphant access to the PLO institutions. If this forecast comes true we shall shortly witness a real turning point in the Palestinian political scene. In the weeks remaining until July it is doubtful if Israeli policy can significantly influence the results of the elections and prevent Hamas from becoming an official partner in the Palestinian regime. In that case, we may witness a more antagonistic and violent Israeli–Palestinian confrontation than we have known thus far.