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July 21, 2002

THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY AND THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE: A GROWING GAP

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The Palestinian Authority's eroding international stature signals a major setback to the institutional existence of the PLO, the historic leadership of the Palestinian national movement.

Since the outbreak of the *intifada* in late 2000, and particularly in the last few months, there is growing evidence that the PLO's greatest accomplishment – the virtual identification of the organization with the national aspirations of the Palestinians – is under threat. Over the years, the PLO, led by Fatah and Yasir Arafat, struggled for international recognition of its status as sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians almost as much as it struggled for recognition of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. Ultimate confirmation of that status came with Israeli and American acknowledgement of the PLO as negotiating partner in the September 1993 Declaration of Principles. The Oslo Agreement was the basis for the establishment of the PA, which was essentially an organizational extension of the PLO.

In his June speech on the Middle East, President Bush endorsed an independent Palestinian state. This did not break new ground with respect to American policy, which had long viewed a Palestinian state as essential to the resolution of

the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflicts. Indeed, it reinforced the Palestinian aspiration to independence, particularly at a time when the path to statehood seemed totally blocked. What was new in the Bush speech was the dismissive approach to the PA. A central element of that speech was Bush's call on the Palestinian people to choose a new leadership worthy of taking part in a political process and able to take decisions designed to move the process forward.

In doing so, Bush aligned American policy with the position of the Israeli Government. Israel's attitude to the PA and its leader emerged in the early weeks of the *intifada* and found expression in former Prime Minister Ehud Barak's pronouncement that Arafat was no longer a partner for peace. This approach was fully embraced by the Likud-led National Unity Government. Although the Government currently has no intention of working towards the establishment of a Palestinian state, it has not formally retreated from its principled willingness to accept Palestinian statehood. But it has clearly distinguished between the Palestinian right to independence and the right of the PA to take part in the process leading to independence. More to the point, it holds the PA responsible for the inability to renew Israeli-Palestinian

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
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dialogue. In both Washington and Jerusalem, the PA is now seen as the main obstacle to progress toward the goal for which it was ostensibly founded.

The erosion of the PA's status is also seen in the criticism voiced in Arab capitals. True, Arab and European persistence in viewing the PA, i.e., Arafat, as the sole legitimate spokesman of the Palestinians somewhat mitigates the difficulty of his situation. But this is small consolation, since Europe has little influence on Israel or on American policy *vis-à-vis* the conflict.

More to the point, the PA's status is being undermined on the domestic front. Since the outbreak of the *intifada*, its organizational integrity has crumbled. Israel's forceful response to Palestinian violence, especially to the rapidly escalating terror attacks, disrupted PA control on the ground. Israeli policy also fed popular Palestinian support for a violent struggle and provided organized elements with a pretext to escalate. This process, which was partly encouraged by the PA and partly precipitated by its loss of operational control, strengthened local security organs institutionally related to the PA. Other organizations linked to Fatah, such as the Tanzim and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, gained greater institutional and operational autonomy as the struggle against Israel intensified. And still other bodies linked to the Islamist camp continued to prosper as alternatives to the national leadership that have gradually evolved since the 1980s.

The PA's crumbling control was expressed in the growing alienation of the local population. The PA's loss of credibility was linked to its unbalanced distribution of resources, its corruption and its uncontrolled use of donor contributions. Socio-economic protest resulting from declining living standards simply

compounded the loss of confidence in its ability to fulfill its political promise, namely, to force Israel to stop settlement activities and to transfer further territory to full Palestinian control according to agreed timetables. In fact, tighter Israel control in the territories accelerated the loss of PA control. Thus, internal as well as external factors accelerated the decline in the PA's status as an advanced embodiment of the PLO, hence, as symbol of the national struggle.

American and Israeli demands for far-reaching reforms in the PA actually echo similar calls of long standing from within the territories. But the direct clash with Israel overshadowed domestic pressure to implement good governance and inform the struggle with some clear strategy. So while outside pressure forced Arafat to undertake some visible steps, it also gave him the pretext to do things actually designed to fortify his position. For example, he dismissed some of the security chiefs who had built up independent power bases and replaced them with personal loyalists more dependent on him. At the same time, the organized resistance to these changes served as signals of the PA's domestic weakness.

The PA's diminished international status in recent months effectively reflects its growing internal frailty. To restore the convergence or identity of its own legitimacy and that of Palestinian national aspirations, the PA will undoubtedly try to improve its public image and rehabilitate its institutional authority. If it succeeds, and particularly if that results in a de-escalation of terrorist attacks against Israel, it will be in a better position to resist demands for the kind of far-reaching reforms that threaten its hold on power and perhaps its very existence. If not, it will no longer be able to claim, as it did in all previous crises, that non-recognition of the PA/PLO is tantamount to non-recognition of Palestinian national rights.