

Quiet in the Palestinian Arena: The Eye of the Storm

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In recent months, governmental crises, revolutionary fervor, and popular protests have spread like wildfire from one Arab state to another. In the midst of the incendiary Middle East, however, the Palestinian Authority (PA) represents an island of relative calm. This phenomenon seems at odds with the gloomy forecasts that regularly affirm the weakness of the current PA government and its limited viability. The contrast is even starker in the wake of the al-Jazeera leaks, which were used by the network and others to fuel virulent attacks on the PA following the exposure of Palestinian documents on the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the PA's relations with the international community. The purpose of this essay is to examine what underlies the relative calm in the Palestinian arena, and to infer relevant conclusions for the Israeli-Palestinian political process.

The Presumed Weakness of the PA

Assessments about the PA's weakness are grounded principally on four factors. The first factor is the political split between Fatah and the Fatah-allied camp ruling the West Bank and the Hamas camp ruling the Gaza Strip, and various assessments regarding Hamas' relative strength over Fatah.

The second factor concerns the legitimacy of the Palestinian government. Although President Mahmoud Abbas was elected in free democratic elections, his term in office ended in January 2009, and the PA has not held new presidential or parliamentary elections because of the split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Hamas won a majority

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in the last parliamentary elections (2006), but due to the split in the PA the Palestinian Legislative Council has ceased to function. There is thus some basis to the claim that the current government in the PA was not democratically elected and is rather a dictatorship based on the security services, as is the situation in other Arab states experiencing popular uprisings.

The third factor is the status of Fatah. Despite reliable surveys taken in the PA indicating that Fatah enjoys much greater support than Hamas¹ and that the trend is of growing support for Fatah at the expense of support for Hamas, the party is suffering from internal rivalries and lack of organization. Last year Abbas decided to hold municipal elections in an attempt to restore regime legitimacy, but the elections were canceled due to Fatah's fears that despite its public support it would be defeated given its internal problems and lack of organization.

The fourth factor is the deadlocked political process. Since the start of the Oslo process, the Fatah movement, which controls the West Bank, is linked in the minds of the Palestinian population to the political process with Israel. A deadlocked process robs this camp of its agenda and jeopardizes public support for Fatah. If the Palestinian public concludes that the political process has exhausted itself and the alternative is a renewal of the armed struggle, then Hamas stands to supplant Fatah in popular support, since in Palestinian eyes it is more successful at violence than Fatah.

Given this constellation of factors, the common assessment among the Israeli and Western media was that the al-Jazeera leaks would have

a significant negative political impact on the PA. However, this did not occur. In the Palestinian media there were a few attacks on the PA because of what were deemed "its far-reaching concessions" in the negotiations, but these did not exceed the usual attacks by the usual suspects. The Palestinian street was not particularly riled, and attempts to organize demonstrations around this issue failed. On the contrary, Fatah succeeded in organizing demonstrations against al-Jazeera and

the network's anti-PA spin. The public's limited response to the leaks may be explained by the fact that what was published revealed nothing

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new of significance. They merely added a little color to information that was already widely known to any Palestinians with political awareness paying attention to the media. Still, it may be that precisely this limited response should have challenged claims regarding the PA's overriding political weakness.

The Calm in the West Bank

Thus far, then, attempts to foment protests in the PA using social media internet networks, similar to the organized upheavals elsewhere in the Arab world, have not borne fruit. Responses in the Palestinian street have been quite moderate, despite public opinion polls indicating widespread Palestinian support for revolutionary streams in the Arab world.² Both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip there have been attempts to organize demonstrations against, respectively, the PA and Hamas governments, but they have largely not succeeded. To date, there have been a few sparsely attended demonstrations in both areas that failed to gather momentum. The failure to instigate anti-government fervor was particularly apparent in the West Bank in light of the PA's response to the events in the Arab world. Support by the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Saudi regimes has always been critical to the PA; therefore, it could do little more than express support for the current regimes. It could not play the old game of identifying with the Arab masses and their desire for democracy based on the hope that this would help it ride the waves of protest. Although this behavior ostensibly had the potential to enrage the Palestinian street, this did not happen.

Several reasons can help explain this non-activism. First, despite the claims that the PA is undemocratic and uses its security apparatus as a means of oppression, the atmosphere in the West Bank is still more open than in most of the Arab world. People are usually not persecuted for expressing opinions or for organizing politically. The only exception is Hamas, which could complain of political repression and victimization by the security apparatus. However, Hamas cannot legitimately make this claim, as it uses the very same methods against Fatah in the Gaza Strip.

Second, the political storm in the Arab world is partly the result of difficult socioeconomic conditions: severe economic problems, increased inequality in the distribution of income, and rampant corruption and

cronyism reflected in outrageous patronage. Even where there has been impressive growth in the GDP, as in Egypt in recent years, it has not trickled down to the public at large and thus most of the population has not benefited. Rather, most of the population remains mired in unemployment and a poor standard of living. There has been no sense of improvement or auspicious prospects on the horizon. The common belief was that the regime and its institutions serve only the interests of a small, corrupt ruling elite. By contrast, the PA has recently witnessed significant improvements in its economic situation, and these extend to wider segments of the population, especially in the drop in unemployment rates.³ The economic growth spurt resulted from a more stable security situation and fewer limitations by the IDF on freedom of movement in the West Bank. During the intifada economic activity dropped sharply; once the Palestinian economy returned to more normal functioning it was possible to achieve impressive growth in a short period of time.

Third, recent years have seen steady improvements in Palestinian governance. Under the direction of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and the leadership of President Abbas, the government is undertaking an ambitious state and institution building enterprise. The level of corruption has decreased dramatically, there is more transparency, and there is a greater sense that the government is serving the citizens, not just the interests of the ruling elite.

The area in which the institution building project has seen most success is security. With the help of key international (the United States and the EU) and regional (especially Jordan, and to a certain extent, Egypt) actors, the PA has succeeded in executing comprehensive reforms in the security organizations and constructing solid security capabilities. Anarchy in the streets has given way to law and order, and the Palestinian police are far more attuned than in the past to their goal of serving the citizenry. These capabilities and the cooperation with Israel have made it possible to eliminate Hamas' military infrastructure in the West Bank almost completely. Hamas' civilian and political infrastructures have been severely damaged, as has the organization's ability to rise up against the ruling power in the West Bank.

Moreover, generally speaking the Palestinian public is not open to initiatives that will interfere with its normal routine. After many long years of the second intifada in which it was impossible to live a normal life

and the Palestinian reality was one of ongoing hardship, the Palestinians have lost much of their appetite for violence, anarchy, and grinding poverty. At the same time, in the eyes of the Palestinian public, the reality is that they are living under occupation. The real enemy is Israel and not their own government, and therefore there is little point in venting at the government, which can at most be accused of cooperating with the enemy, Israel. In turn, the Palestinian government could easily divert the rage and refute these claims by displaying aggressive policies towards Israel, which is not hard to do given the political deadlock.

For its part, Hamas is hard pressed to take advantage of the uprisings in the Arab world in order to incite the Palestinian public against the PA, in part because it finds itself in a similar situation. The government in the Gaza Strip is a Hamas government. It too has a problem of legitimacy because new elections have not been held; its rule of the Gaza Strip is also dictatorial and relies on its security apparatus. Hamas is apparently heeding the adage that people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

Complementing these strategic reasons is the PA's tactical competence in weathering various crises that threaten its government. The first crisis is the deadlock in the political process. In managing this crisis, several factors have worked in the Palestinian leadership's favor. First, from the outset the Palestinians were under no illusions and did not believe that a political process with the Netanyahu government would lead to any positive outcomes. When there are no expectations there is less frustration stemming from disappointment. Second, most Palestinians do not want to return to a reality filled with violence and therefore reject armed struggle as the preferred operating method vis-à-vis Israel. The Palestinian leadership has succeeded in taking advantage of this situation by adopting alternative, non-violent methods, such as action in the international arena. The hope is that success here will compensate for the inability to make progress directly with Israel. So, for example, the Palestinians are making an effort to achieve widespread international recognition of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and are considering turning to international institutions such as the UN Security Council regarding issues such as the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. This policy aims to exert pressure on Israel, but is also a function of internal considerations and the need to demonstrate that

the PA is not stagnant and that its activity bears fruit. Another method is non-violent public struggle against the occupation, such as the protests against the security barrier or against Jewish settlement in Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods. This method has had only limited success because of the reluctance of the public at large to upset its normal routine. On the other hand, it is a good outlet for anyone who wants to participate and rally against the Israeli occupation.

The second crisis is the al-Jazeera leaks. Here too the PA managed the crisis well and did not succumb to pressure, nor did officials apologize for their seeming "concessions." Instead, they conducted an effective counterattack against al-Jazeera, with Fatah showing not inconsiderable organizational capability in fomenting anti-al-Jazeera protests that overshadowed the failed attempts to organize anti-PA demonstrations. Another step was ostensibly taken when Saeb Erekat, the head of the Palestinian negotiating team, took responsibility for his department's role in the leaks and announced his resignation, though there was much play-acting in this too, as Erekat continues to fulfill the same functions as before, albeit under a different job description.

The third and most severe crisis is the storm that erupted in the Arab world and is still underway. The outcome is as yet unknown, though the storm has the potential to generate deep strategic changes. In this case, likewise in a reflection of its improved organizational skills, the Palestinian leadership was able to channel public frustrations in different directions. The PA allowed protests but made sure that Fatah would be in control and divert them to other grievances. Some of the protests focused on the occupation and Israeli measures. For example, the large demonstration

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that took place on Friday, February 25 was supposed to have been part of the attempt to mark "a day of rage" against the PA; in practice, it turned into a protest in Hebron against the restrictions on Palestinians' freedom of movement in the H-2 area of the city. Other demonstrations protested the American veto of the Security Council resolution condemning the Jewish settlements in the West

Bank. The PA also used the support among the Palestinian public for reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas to turn some of the protests into a show of support for such rapprochement. Thus the protests on March

15 focused on the split between Fatah and Hamas, and in actuality, the protest in Gaza was bigger and forcibly dispersed by Hamas security forces. The ensuing image of popular defiance against Hamas, which is deemed the main culprit in the split, provides positive propaganda for the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank.

PA leaders, naturally concerned about possible waves of protests that could weaken them, took a number of additional steps to stave off the danger. Abbas preempted the call for democratization by setting a new date for municipal elections and declaring his intention to call for presidential and parliamentary election by this September. However, once the leadership saw that the situation was less severe than anticipated, the tone changed. In his most recent statements, Abbas has made the elections contingent on certain conditions, whose practical effect is that the elections will almost certainly not take place. He announced that presidential and parliamentary elections were contingent on their being held in Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip; he can presumably rely on both Israel and Hamas to make sure this condition is not met. By contrast, Salam Fayyad, aware of the appeal of the idea of unification, proposed a plan for renewed unification of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip under a joint government, though each political entity would continue to control the area it currently controls. In the wake of the March 15 demonstrations, Abbas also announced that he is prepared to travel to Gaza to discuss the end of the rift. These plans, however, stand little practical chance of success given the response by Hamas, which rejected Fayyad's plan outright. From Hamas' perspective, developments in the Arab world are playing into Hamas' hands, and in such a situation, the movement is not interested in rapprochement with Fatah. For its part, Fatah is not prepared to give Hamas a real foothold in the PLO.

Implications for the Political Process

The stability of the PA and its continued performance under crisis conditions should encourage discussions in Israel about negotiations with the current Palestinian leadership to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Conventional Israeli thinking says that it was impossible to arrive at a settlement with Yasir Arafat, who harbored malicious intentions and did not really want a settlement, and it is impossible to arrive at a settlement with his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, because Abbas lacks the necessary

political clout and is too weak. The recent crises have proven the strength of the PA and the capabilities of its leadership, notwithstanding the factors presented above that weaken the PA.

One might claim that the stability of the current Palestinian government depends on the absence of the political process, as the government does not have to tackle questions on which there is no consensus among the Palestinians. This claim is problematic for several reasons, first because the Palestinian leadership is under political attack primarily because of both its failure to attain a settlement with Israel and its avoidance of the alternative of armed struggle. Second, it is doubtful that the Palestinian leadership need fear Hamas' ability to exploit progress towards a settlement for incitement against Fatah at a time when Hamas is weak in the West Bank. Indeed, this claim holds little water when considering that Abbas, when negotiating with the Olmert government, presented positions seen by the Palestinian opposition as near treasonous and that he was apparently prepared to do the same with the Netanyahu government. Indeed, he submitted a document detailing the Palestinian positions on the basis of the negotiations with Olmert and asked to open the negotiations with the Netanyahu government with a similar presentation of Israel's positions. This proposal was rejected by Israel.

This claim also ignores the fact that the intent to have a state declared by September 2011 entails many risks to the Palestinian leadership. The

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date was picked because it marks the end of Salam Fayyad's state building program and also the end of the two-year period after which, according to declarations by the American administration, the Palestinian state is supposed to be established. Even if the UN General Assembly, by a large majority, adopts a resolution supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state, reality on the ground will in all likelihood not change. This may trigger severe disappointment within the Palestinian public, which could be directed

towards Abbas and others. In this sense, the threat represented by the Palestinian efforts in the international arena helps the Palestinian leadership because it exerts pressure on Israel to change its policy and

challenges the current government. But if the threat materializes without Israel changing its policy, the situation is liable to become worse than a zero-sum game and cause both sides to lose.

A completely different question is, given the current situation, to what degree is the Israeli government motivated to conduct effective negotiations that would conclude a permanent settlement with the Palestinians. Even before the current deadlock, there were serious doubts about the Netanyahu government's genuine interest in such negotiations. Perhaps some of its reluctance stemmed from assessments having to do with the other side's presumed weakness, but it seems that this reluctance stemmed primarily from two other reasons. The first involved internal political considerations, i.e., the desire to maintain the integrity of the coalition. The second was the assessment by Israel's decision makers that a settlement that would meet the requirements of the current government is impossible because no Palestinian side would accede to its demands. The various initiatives on negotiations over a new interim settlement are manifestations of the Israeli government's reluctance to enter into negotiations over a permanent settlement.

Now, after the outbreak of the crisis in the Arab world, Israel will likely harden its demands, especially in the realm of security, due to the sense that developments in the Arab world worsen Israel's security and increase the possibility of dire scenarios. Under such circumstances, a settlement with the Palestinians must, according to this view, include tighter security arrangements that provide strong security guarantees. This may, for example, affect Israel's security demands in the Jordan Valley area. Because of these considerations, there might also be a clear preference for a wait-and-see policy on the Palestinian track. It is possible that Israel may feel that given the developments in the region and beyond, there should be some Israeli initiative in the political process designed to decrease the pressure on Israel. Yet even if such thinking occurs, it may well encourage a tendency to prefer the Syrian track over the Palestinian because it is less complex.

Israel finds itself in a situation in which the recent developments should strengthen Israel's understanding that it has a credible partner on the Palestinian side for conducting negotiations and arriving at a settlement. However, the circumstances make it difficult to translate this understanding into operative conclusions.

Notes

- 1 The most recent (December 2010) poll taken in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip by the Ramallah-based PSPR, directed by Khalil Shikaki, asked, "Were parliamentary elections in the PA held today, for whom would you vote?" Forty-four percent of respondents answered Fatah; 25 percent said Hamas; and 11 percent said they would vote for other, smaller parties with a secular national platform similar to Fatah's. See <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2010/p38e.html#domestic>.
- 2 A poll taken by an-Najah University revealed that 80.1 percent of respondents supported the revolutions in the Arab world, according to an IMRA report published on February 28, 2011.
- 3 The September 2010 report of the World Bank stated, "In the West Bank, unemployment fell from 15.9 percent in the second quarter of 2009 to 15.2 percent in the second quarter of 2010." See <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWESTBANKGAZA/Resources/WorldBankSep2010AHLReport.pdf>, p. 9. The September 2010 report of the International Monetary Fund stated, "By 2009, the WBG's [West Bank and Gaza] real GDP per capita had fully recovered to its 1994 level... The West Bank's real GDP per capita has grown steadily since 2007 and is projected to be about 60 percent above its 1994 level by 2013." While this may seem unimpressive, this is very significant in light of the destruction of the Palestinian economy during the years of the intifada. See <http://www.imf.org/external/np/country/notes/wbg.htm>.