Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh (center l) and PA leader Mahmoud Abbas in Gaza, 2006. Photo: Flash90/TNS/ABACA via Reuters Connect

Game of Thrones: The Struggle between Fatah and Hamas for Political Hegemony in the Palestinian Authority, 2011-2022

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The "Arab Spring" effected a substantial change in the balance of power in the Middle East between the state and its citizens. Yet despite the upheaval in the Arab world that prompted the public to demand a part in decision making within the national collective framework and toppled several regimes, the Arab Spring did not reach the Palestinian political sphere with any force. This article highlights the uniqueness of the political struggle for survival by Fatah and Hamas, two competing Palestinian political movements with different political, social, and cultural agendas that try to maintain their rule while attempting to gain political power in an ongoing struggle for governmental hegemony. The article also shows how the Palestinian Authority and Hamas work to create public legitimacy with the aim of ensuring governmental stability in a political system that is managed by virtue of emergency orders in the case of Fatah, and by force in the case of Hamas, and without legitimacy acquired through elections.

Keywords: Fatah, Hamas, Palestinian Authority, political legitimacy, Arab Spring

Introduction

The Palestinian regimes in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip represent two competing entities that enjoy political power alongside limited military capability, and a multifarious network of formal and informal connections that enable them to influence broader circles, including in the international arena. Since the beginning of the split in the Palestinian arena in 2007, the struggle between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas can be described as a struggle between a state entity and a non-state actor that controls territory and seeks to present a governmental alternative to the rival political power (Valensi, 2015, pp. 55-59; Josselin, 2011, pp. 3-5). The Palestinian Authority declared itself a state in November 2012 and receives extensive international recognition, even though it has not yet earned official status as a state in the United Nations. In contrast, the Hamas movement that controls the Gaza Strip presents itself as a governing movement that has been robbed of its governmental legitimacy, which led it to develop independent government institutions (Brenner, 2017, p. 51; Høigilt, 2013, p. 343).

The similarity between the conduct and management of the regimes in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip leads to an ongoing search by Fatah and Hamas for elements of support to ensure the survival of their respective control. When they feel that the stability of their rule is in danger, they act to undermine regional stability and security in Israel, and sometimes do so in order to channel outward the domestic rage at their failed economic performance and centralized nature.

An important component of the quest by Fatah and Hamas for political legitimacy is ancestral merit. Since its establishment in the middle of the 1990s, the Palestinian Authority based its political power on the history of armed struggle against Israel led by Fatah and on the charismatic image of Yasir Arafat, who was considered a national symbol, enjoyed broad legitimacy among his nation, and was seen as "the leader of the symbol" (*al-qaid al-ramz*). His leadership was pragmatic and provided him with an exalted standing—stature that his political rivals were unable to undermine (Steinberg, 2008, pp. 197-200). Arafat, who grew up in the Muslim Brotherhood, tended to use religious discourse to strengthen the legitimacy of his rule (Zelkovitz, 2012; Marzan, 2016), and did not allow Hamas to take over the leadership of the armed struggle against Israel. Arafat's twofold attitude toward the armed struggle was expressed with the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada on September 28, 2000, and the backing that he gave to Tanzim operatives to launch terrorist attacks against Israeli targets. Furthermore, Arafat tended to expand Fatah's power base by creating political alliances with the heads of large families in Palestinian society (Milstein, 2004, p. 57; Chorev, 2019; Zelkovitz, 2008, p. 22).

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Arafat's departure from the Palestinian political arena, and to a certain extent also that of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the founder and leader of Hamas, led to a change in the Palestinian political leadership. The Palestinian political system's entry into a new era, in which the founding fathers of the Fatah and Hamas movements no longer navigated the stormy waters, demanded that the movements adopt modes of operation that enable their political survival against the backdrop of the struggle within the Palestinian political sphere and the continuation of the political struggle against Israel. The disappearance of the founding fathers from the Palestinian political establishment and its ideological and geographic split required that Fatah and Hamas find ways to develop political legitimacy for their activity. Consequently, and without leaders who enjoyed personal

legitimacy that translated into public support, the two movements—Fatah, as the governing party of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and Hamas, since June 2007 the entity responsible for managing day-to-day life in the Gaza Strip—began to strengthen their standing through a centralized policy along with the operation of state institutions, and thereby enhance their effective control of the territory and the population.

This policy aimed to rebuff the influence of the political protests in the Arab world that the Palestinian public witnessed via social media and satellite communications starting in late 2010 and with greater intensity in 2011. While the Palestinian public was infused with the spirit of the protest, the fact that it had suffered many struggles led to public demonstrations characterized by calls to end the internal political split, and no popular movement arose to overthrow the regimes. For example, Ahmed Balousha, a political activist from the Gaza Strip identified with left wing circles, described the popular protest against the internal Palestinian split in the following manner: "What we truly wanted was to raise banners which read, 'Down with the regimes of the West Bank and Gaza,' and, 'The two governments are competing to achieve their own interests,' and 'Suppression of freedoms.' Yet we settled for raising banners demanding that the political system be reformed, not toppled, because this way no one could be accused of airing sentiments which reflect the objectives of the occupation" (al-Ghoul, 2013).

Fatah and Hamas learned the political lesson from the upheavals that struck the Arab world and did not ignore the voices on social media and in town squares. As a response to the demand for internal reconciliation, sounded at public rallies held at al-Manara Square in Ramallah and at the Square of the Unknown Soldier in the Gaza Strip on March 15, 2011, Fatah and Hamas launched a political dialogue to devise a formula that would enable unification of the fragmented Palestinian political system. This dialogue began with the understandings of the 2011 Cairo Agreement, signed with Egyptian mediation, which was meant to lay the foundations for holding general elections to the presidency, the PA parliament, and the PLO institutions (Brenner, 2017, pp. 51-52). However, the Cairo Agreement was never implemented, mainly due to Hamas's refusal to dismantle its military wing and subordinate it to a Palestinian national sovereign entity. Maintaining its military force and the prerogative to use it are critical for Hamas, which tends to use violence to pursue its political aims.

The Cairo document outlined the basis for dialogue between Fatah and Hamas, which continued until the middle of 2020 without results. The leaderships of the two movements see dialogue between them as a tool that buys the time necessary for consolidating their control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but the inability to reach agreement between them causes regional instability, and not only creates violence within Palestinian society but also encourages escalation toward Israel.

This article discusses the challenges facing Fatah and Hamas in the struggle for Palestinian hegemony and studies their ways of coping with the political crisis underway in the Palestinian system.

The Formation of the Palestinian Political System

In the 1920s, two state models began to emerge in the Arab world. One was a monarchical model, usually built on a royal dynasty with Islamic religious lineage, such as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the royal family in Morocco, or out of a dynasty that built a coalition with the religious establishment, such as the alliance that the Saud family in the Arabian Peninsula made with the Wahhabi clerics. The second model was a centralized republican model that places most of the governing powers in the hands of the state's president, as in Baathist Syria and Iraq and in the Arab Republic of Egypt.

The political development of the Palestinians is different from that of the Arab states, which built their institutions and shaped the main patterns of their rule during the period between the two World Wars. The destruction following the 1948 war, the refugee crisis, and the need to maintain a unique political identity in the Arab diaspora forced the Palestinians to develop political survival mechanisms based on containment and internal dialogue and aroused debate that aimed to maintain the integrity of the political community, while creating intellectual and cultural content (Sayigh, 1997).

Without a state, the Palestinians rebuilt their national movement on ethoses such as the right of return and the armed struggle, and based on these premises, the Fatah movement launched its struggle against the State of Israel, from Fatah's founding in 1959 until its first attack on Israel's national water carrier on January 1, 1965. This attack, which marks the beginning of the armed Palestinian struggle, is called *yom al-antalaka* ("breakout day") and serves as a prominent commemoration of the Fatah movement as the herald of the Palestinian uprising. The purpose of the armed Palestinian struggle in its early stages was to establish a Palestinian state on the entirety of the Land of Israel, rejecting the possibility of territorial compromise based on the various decisions of the UN Security Council. The armed struggle aroused recognition of the Palestinian problem but did not succeed in bringing about sustainable political solutions, even clashing with the desire to receive broad political legitimacy due to its violent nature (Steinberg, 2008; Sayigh, 1997).

The recognition of the PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people at the 1974 Rabat summit led to a change in policy in the organization, which began to look for a political option that would enable the establishment of a Palestinian state and would interface with international diplomatic language. A change in the PLO's overall strategy took place following the adoption of UN Security Council Decision 242 (on November 22, 1967), when on November 15, 1988, at the Palestinian National Council that convened in Tunis—and after Israel expressed a willingness to engage in dialogue on a political arrangement with a Palestinian leadership from the territories following the events of the first intifada—Arafat declared the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The significance of this decision was in effect recognizing the State of Israel's right to exist. This step led the PLO to accept the idea of establishing a Palestinian state based on negotiations that would define the political reference to the borders of June 4, 1967.

The establishment of the Palestinian Authority following the Oslo Accords and the institution of Palestinian self-government in 1994 were a significant challenge for the PLO leadership, which until then had operated in the diaspora and acted as a government-in-exile. The Islamic movements that arose in the Gaza Strip and West Bank in the 1980s were not included in the framework of the PLO. From the day it was established in December 1987, Hamas aspired to become a mass movement and posed a cultural-social challenge to the values and overall worldview that the PLO leadership, which had returned from many years in Lebanon and Tunisia, brought with it to the territories. Politically, Hamas rejected the possibility of a political solution to the conflict, despite various ceasefire proposals that it raised over the years as a tactical measure to buy time to make strategic calculations about its next steps (Hatina, 1999, p. 34; Litvak, 1998, pp. 153-154).

During the first years of its existence, the PA functioned under the almost complete hegemony of the PLO and Fatah leadership, which, following the signing of the Oslo Accords, took upon themselves the task of building the institutions of the future Palestinian state (Frisch, 1998). During this period Arafat weakened the standing of the PLO in favor of strengthening the PA. He conducted a political

process whose purpose was to change the elements of power in the Palestinian sphere, and wanted to balance between the younger generation raised in the territories and his loyalists who returned with him from Tunisia, in order not to create the complete dominance of the "inside" Fatah and PLO group from the West Bank and Gaza in the institutions of the nascent Palestinian Authority (Milstein, 2004; Steinberg, 2008, pp. 197-200).

Fatah's hegemony gained strength due to the official position of the Islamic streams, which blatantly rejected the possibility of the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. Waving the religious flag, the Islamic streams totally rejected the State of Israel's right to exist within any borders, which denied Hamas and Islamic Jihad the leeway necessary to enter the political framework of the PLO and the PA. And indeed, in the Palestinian parliamentary elections in 1996, the Islamic streams boycotted the elections and were not represented in the parliament elected according to party list, even though public figures identified with them ran in independent lists, led by the Islamic Loyalty and Reform Party (Eldar, 2012; Zelkovitz, 2012; Milstein, 2004).

Hamas on the Road to Government: The Search for Political Legitimacy

Since its establishment, the Hamas movement operated within opposing political tensions and sought the golden mean between the desire to change the existing order between it and the PLO and between it and Israel, and the desire to grow and become a governing movement. Yet at the same time that Hamas fought the existing political order, it aspired to be part of it and not to overturn it completely. Indeed, since its establishment, Hamas has challenged the PLO but has been eager to integrate within its institutions. Thus while as an ideological opposition movement at the outset of its journey Hamas chose to highlight the jihadist element, it looked for the middle path that would enable it to combine extremist rhetoric with intra-Palestinian political pragmatism (Mishal, 2003; Polka, 2017).

Hamas's entry into the Palestinian political arena was gradual. Along with building social infrastructure, the movement that aspired to be the successor of Fatah began building political infrastructure and raised a generation of young political leaders that grew up in Palestinian mosques and universities (Eldar, 2012; Mishal & Sela, 2006; Zelkovitz, 2015). Since the signing of the Oslo Accords, Hamas has refused to enter the PA political structure officially, and has opposed the Oslo process and the principle of mutual recognition with Israel. Hamas's entry into the "internal" political system occurred through participation in the local elections. Its success in the 2004-2005 local elections, when its candidates won the leadership of many cities and local councils in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, galvanized its leaders in advance of the PA parliamentary elections in 2006.

Hamas won those elections and received 42.9 percent of the votes, which gave it 76 seats in the 132-seat Palestinian legislature. Hamas's victory in the 2006 elections created a new and unfamiliar situation for the Hamas and PLO leaderships alike. The burden of responsibility that suddenly fell on the shoulders of Hamas found the movement unprepared, and Ismail Haniyeh, elected to head the government, had to cope with a centralized and hostile presidential regime in Ramallah, which only waited for the moment when Haniyeh would ask to return the keys of government to Fatah.

While it was an opposition movement, Hamas worked to consolidate its power and build a skilled military apparatus whose role was to take over the Gaza Strip by force. After it did not succeed in reaching understandings with Fatah on the division of political power, Hamas conducted a violent takeover of the Gaza Strip. This aggression, along with the Palestinians' inability to reach a compromise and devise a governmental formula that would enable the establishment of a single Palestinian government with broad governmental

legitimacy, indicates that as of now the idea of a democratic state has failed. Instead of leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state with a democratic character that would represent all the Palestinian streams, the encounter between the PLO and the Islamic streams following the Oslo Accords exposed the gaps between the movements in full force. The failure to establish a democratic Palestinian state and Fatah and Hamas's desire to raise the partisan flag rather than the national one correspond with Hisham Sharabi's criticism of the Arab political system, which he describes as neo-patriarchal, hard-pressed to integrate the values of tradition with the challenge of modernity (Sharabi, 1988).

Even though Hamas described its attitude toward the PLO as "that of a son to his father, a brother to his brother, and a relative to a relative" in its 1988 charter (Hamas, 1988, Article 27), in practice its behavior was blatantly un-familial. After its takeover of the Gaza Strip and even though it tried to explain its actions to the public with the publication of the "White Book" (Hamas, 2007), Hamas instituted an authoritarian regime in the Gaza Strip that was based on a monopoly of power. Hamas's buildup of independent military force led President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) on June 14, 2007 to declare a state of emergency in the Palestinian Authority, and to appoint an emergency government headed by Dr. Salam Fayyad, based in Ramallah. Thus ended the short era of a unified government headed by Hamas, which governed between March 2006 and June 2007, and had seven ministers from the Hamas movement, six of whom lived in the West Bank. And thus began the internal political and geographical split in the Palestinian Authority (Brenner, 2017, p. 41).

Since June 2007, the Hamas movement has gained governmental and military experience, and it does not intend to cede its political power and authority. The government ministries of the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip are now at the disposal of Hamas, staffed by its own people. Using the infrastructure of the state and the movement's civil society bodies it also worked to instill a more Islamic character into daily life. From the beginning, Hamas's leaders saw seizing the reins of government as a means to shape the social-cultural fabric of life and imbue it with an Islamic character. And indeed, in the first few years of consolidating its rule in the Gaza Strip, Hamas tried to bring about a process of Islamization in the public sphere by means of local legislation and instill the desired norms through controlled enforcement. For example, the movement prohibited women from going to cafés and smoking hookahs, ordered the police forces to check the family connections of couples walking together on city streets, and even tried to prevent men from cutting the hair of women (al-Akhbar, 2009; Ayyoub, 2013).

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The attempts to impose a more religious lifestyle in the Gaza Strip also led to internal disagreements within the Hamas leadership, as despite the desire to shape a public sphere with a prominent Islamic appearance, there were those who feared that imposing an Islamic lifestyle and creating a public sphere governed by *sharia* law would lead to political opposition to the movement's rule in the Gaza Strip. Khaled Mashal, who served as chairman of Hamas's politburo until May 2017, even declared that the various reports of Hamas attempts to Islamize the public sphere in the Gaza Strip were false, and that people should be persuaded to adopt a religious lifestyle and a regime based on religious law, but a religious lifestyle should not be imposed on them ("Mashal: Hamas does not Seek," 2009).

Even though socially and culturally the Gaza Strip is more conservative and traditional in

nature than the West Bank (Lyberger, 2012), Hamas understood that the imposition of *sharia* law and design of the Gaza Strip as a miniature theocratic Islamic state could harm its efforts to achieve legitimacy for its rule in the inter-Arab political sphere. This is especially true of Hamas's relationship with Egypt, after the defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood and the rise of General el-Sisi's rule. The fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government on July 3, 2013, and the Egyptian army's return to power forced Hamas to change its policy toward Egypt. During the Arab Spring riots, Hamas supported demonstrations against the regime and its operatives even participated in raids on prisons in Egypt, which led to the release of political prisoners from the Muslim Brotherhood, including Mohamed Morsi. Furthermore, Hamas's leadership cooperated with members of the Sinai Province of the Islamic State, which helped the network smuggling weapons to the Gaza Strip (Fishman, 2015). The fall of the Morsi regime was a serious blow to Hamas, whose military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, was declared a terrorist organization by Egypt in 2015.

Despite the hostility between the sides, Hamas understands there are shared interests with Egypt that can help alleviate the living conditions in Gaza. Furthermore, Hamas needs Egypt, which serves as a gateway to the world for the Gaza Strip, as a lifeline. Hamas's dependence on Egypt intensified after the rounds of violence against Israel between 2009 and 2022, due to the role that Egyptian intelligence plays in efforts to mediate ceasefires. Tightening ties with Egypt, despite the Egyptian government's consistent position against political Islam, is a strategic need for Hamas in its quest for political legitimacy, and it is also of existential importance to the survival of the Hamas regime, due to Egypt's control of the Rafah crossing, which is the Gaza Strip's gateway to the world (al-Jazeera, 2022).

Hamas's Political Document: The Institutionalization Process

Against this backdrop, Hamas published its new political document in May 2017. Hamas's need to update its political strategy stemmed from its transformation from an Islamic opposition movement into a governing party managing a state agenda in the Gaza Strip, and from the desire to reintegrate into the Palestinian Authority and the PLO while improving its legitimacy internally and externally. There is no leader at the head of the Hamas movement today who serves as a spiritual authority with standing in religious law such as the movement's founder, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. The lack of a weighty spiritual authority with hawkish positions enables Hamas to display more political pragmatism.

The change in Hamas's approach toward this reality is reflected in the political document (*al-wathiqa al-siyasiyya*) from May 2017 (Hamas, 2017). Conceptually, the document is a political program and does not constitute a new charter for Hamas. It aims to update and shape the movement's current policies on its way to becoming a legitimate political actor taking part in the regional decision making process. The purpose of the document is to foster a dialogue with the PLO in order to integrate in its institutions. However, Hamas's charter was not cancelled, and no changes were made in it. It was set aside due to the movement's need to update its policy in accordance with the circumstances that have changed.

In the document, Hamas adjusted its political rhetoric to the Palestinian political reality. Against the backdrop of the changes in the movement's leadership, in which the founding generation is almost entirely gone, and as part of the intergenerational struggle within Hamas and in Palestinian politics, the update is an attempt by the leadership of the intermediate generation led by Khaled Mashal to create a sphere of pragmatism that recognizes the negative impact of Islamist language on the movement's image in the West, alongside

the concerns that it arouses in the Palestinian sphere and in the inter-Arab political arena.

The clauses of the new document emphasize the historic and current importance of the PLO as the political body representing all Palestinians, but at the same time the document vilifies the Palestinian Authority, established as part of the political process between the PLO and the State of Israel. It claims that the PA needs to resume serving its nation, and thus it must stop the policy of security coordination with the State of Israel. This point underscores that no substantial change occurred in Hamas's conception of the nature of managing the conflict and makes clear the centrality of the attitude toward Israel in the intra-Palestinian political discourse. The lip service that Hamas is willing to pay to Fatah and the PLO in order to try to move closer to them lies in the statement that Hamas will recognize the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as its capital and the right of return, but without recognition of the State of Israel (Hamas, 2017, Article 21).

In retrospect, the Hamas movement today presents as at a similar point to where the PLO was at in 1974, when Abu Iyad launched the trial balloon of the ten-point plan ("the stages plan"), which for the first time called for the establishment of a Palestinian state on parts of historic Palestine and for adopting diplomacy as an additional means in the Palestinian toolkit alongside the armed struggle (Abu Iyad, 1979, pp. 194-200). In an interview after the publication of Hamas's policy document, Khaled Mashal tried to legitimize the circumstances that enabled the movement to forsake the path of jihad as the sole way to liberate Palestine and to adopt political measures alongside it. According to Mashal: "Hamas's Islamic, nationalist, jihadi, and political project was launched to end the Zionist occupation; to liberate the land and the holy places; to reclaim Palestinian rights; to secure the return the refugees to their nation, lands, and homes; and to reclaim Jerusalem. These are the national Palestinian objectives of Hamas" (Rabbani, 2008, pp. 73-74).

The 2017 document can evoke the feeling that the movement's leadership has accepted the idea of the possibility of establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, even if as an intermediate stage, and thus that it has in effect understood that the armed struggle alone cannot lead the Palestinian national movement to political achievements. Hamas thereby recognizes the political changes brought about by the Oslo Accords, but unlike the PLO it does not discuss political compromise and continues to deny the State of Israel's right to exist. In addition, Hamas is not abandoning the path of jihad and sees armed resistance as a legitimate tool to achieve its political objectives. Or in the words of Mashal: "What is needed today...is to have resistance in all forms, armed and public ones" (Saleh, 2011).

The new discourse created by the May 2017 political document aims to provide Hamas with the image of a legitimate political entity that can be a governmental alternative to Fatah in the Palestinian Authority. Hamas worked to consolidate its power through legislation and the creation of a cultural and legal sphere in the Gaza Strip. Over the past decade, the movement tried to strengthen its rule by means of dialogue with the Palestinian public and not by Islamizing the public sphere in the Gaza Strip by force. Out of a genuine belief that Islam is the solution, Hamas not only used the government ministries left behind by the Palestinian Authority but also established economic institutions, created an independent military system in which religious indoctrination is part of the essence of the training, and deepened its control over educational institutions in the Gaza Strip. Hamas began to institutionalize its rule by adopting state practices in order to improve its effective control over the population and the territory, but did not abandon the ethos of armed resistance. During the years of its rule in the Gaza Strip, Hamas has operated within the tension between the institutionalization process and the aspiration to lead the armed resistance, and it retains patterns of behavior of a non-state

actor that challenges the existing political order (Valensi, 2015; Michael & Dostri, 2018).

In its search for legitimacy from the Palestinian public, Hamas sought to raise awareness that it is coming to replace the corrupt Fatah government, put an end to phenomena such as nepotism and corruption, and impose order in the public sphere. These are also reflected in the name of the movement's parliamentary list, the Change and Reform list.[1] This is why Hamas chose to present its list as a call for change and to refrain from using the Hamas brand, which is identified with armed struggle and bloodshed.

The challenges facing the Palestinian Authority are complex and reflect the many problems in the Palestinian political sphere, the most central of which is the split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

In its search for political legitimacy, Hamas sees enforcing order in the public sphere as a central issue, as it is unable to improve the living conditions in the Gaza Strip, and its rule brought about a humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. The possibility of improving the living conditions in Gaza are limited by the reality of the Hamas government's official non-recognition and ideological hostility toward the State of Israel. In March 2019 large-scale protests against Hamas erupted, which in several locations in the Gaza Strip were of a violent nature. The background to the demonstrations was the severe economic situation in Gaza and Hamas's inability to redress the hardship of intense poverty given that most of the organization's budget is allocated to its political and military systems, and the Hamas movement is not engaged in developing the Gaza Strip or allocating resources to civilian projects. These riots were quickly and forcefully suppressed by Hamas (Abuheweila & Kershner, 2019).

Hamas continues to highlight the inherent tension between a dogmatic resistance movement and a political government committed to pragmatism—a tension that also exists within the Fatah movement (Milstein, 2004). Hamas has made the two elements into complementary opposites, and by continuing the struggle against Israel it provides an explanation to the Palestinian public of its weaknesses but continues to sketch a future vision in the form of the continuation of the struggle, which will end with the establishment of an Islamic Palestinian state.

The Palestinian Authority and the Sovereignty Challenge

The challenges facing the Palestinian Authority are complex and reflect the many problems in the Palestinian political sphere, the most central of which is the split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Understanding the intensity of President Abbas's struggle against Hamas requires returning to the struggle between Fatah and Hamas in 2006-2007, to the moment when the Fatah movement lost the Gaza Strip—first at the polls and then following Hamas's violent takeover. Since Mahmoud Abbas was elected as Chairman of the Palestinian Authority in 2005, he has not set foot in the Gaza Strip, and the loss of control there is part of his legacy. Unlike Yasir Arafat, with his Gaza roots and folksy language, Abbas, who was born in Safed and fled with his family to Syria, does not have any special emotional connection to the Gaza Strip. Since the beginning of his presidency, Abbas has tried to build his political image as someone advancing the project of building the institutions of the Palestinian state and strengthening the Palestinian economy in the West Bank. This policy completely contradicted the neo-patriarchal order instituted by Arafat, who worked to weaken the Palestinian Authority institutions.

Under the government of Salam Fayyad, the first Palestinian prime minister who served under President Mahmoud Abbas between 2007 and 2013, it seemed that the PA was succeeding in advancing the construction of the institutions

of government and even expanding the circles of recognition and international support for its measures. Once it became clear to Abbas and to the senior leaders of Fatah that Fayyad's measures were reaching the point of seriously addressing corruption and nepotism, and when they understood that they might lose their standing and their wealth, they worked to remove him. Abbas focused his political and economic efforts on the West Bank and left the Gaza Strip behind, in effect abandoning its citizens to Hamas and the economic benevolence of the international community and the Gulf countries, which he relied on and believed that through their contributions it would be possible to temporarily cope with the economic problems of the Gaza Strip. The role of economic mainstay was eventually filled by Qatar, which provides an economic and ideological umbrella for the Muslim Brotherhood factions in the Middle East. The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who committed to work toward the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, was the first and only Arab leader who visited the Gaza Strip (on October 23, 2012) ("Qatari Emir," 2012). Qatar has operated in the Gaza Strip since 2012 with the knowledge and encouragement of Israel through a special envoy—Mohammad al-Emadi. Since the end of Operation Protective Edge on August 26, 2014, Qatar has invested directly about $800 million in the Gaza Strip (Guzansky & Michael, 2018).

The financial involvement of Qatar and other donors, which maintains Hamas's rule, also serves the policy of the Palestinian Authority. After Abbas left the Gaza Strip behind, he placed an emphasis on making the PA in the West Bank an independent political entity functioning as a sovereign state. As part of the project of building the state, President Abbas carried out a far-reaching reform of the PA's security apparatuses and worked to bring the operatives of Fatah's military branches under this umbrella, in order to control the street and end the state of anarchy that characterized the days of the second intifada (Zelkovitz, 2012, p. 130). But although he left the path of armed struggle, Abbas chose not to respond to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's 2008 proposal to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, Abbas consistently takes a contrarian approach to American mediation attempts. The PA rejected John Kerry's initiative during the administration of President Obama, and subsequently rejected President Trump's initiative and opposed the signing of the Abraham Accords. This policy led to a serious rift between the PA and the Trump administration, which in response chose to cut the American aid money to the PA and to UNRWA (Michael & Milstein, 2021, p. 363).

On its path to becoming a state, the PA tried to build functioning institutions and prove to the world that it was capable of maintaining an independent and functioning economy. It inherited the civil-economic infrastructure of civil society organizations, universities, and education system, as well as the Palestinian press that developed under Israeli rule between 1969 and 1993 (Frisch, 1998). The establishment of the PA brought about Fatah's consolidation as a ruling party, and it used civilian and governmental assets to protect and solidify its political power (Milstein, 2004), while adopting false pluralism that aimed to address international needs. This was possible until the 2006 elections, since Hamas chose not to officially take part in Palestinian politics. As a liberation movement that had not yet reached the stage of exercising national sovereignty, Fatah earned a high level of legitimacy among the public, and its control of national resources was accepted with understanding.

Palestinian state building in the West Bank did not stop even after the intra-Palestinian split in June 2007. A significant portion of ministerial staff in the Gaza Strip were initially filled by Palestinian Authority figures, until Hamas people who joined the management of the civilian framework of the Gaza Strip began to enter the government ministries. even after some stopped filling their roles at the order of

the Hamas government (Michael & Guzansky, 2016, p. 84).

As part of its struggle for independence, the PA worked to expand the national and security institutions. The enterprise of building the Palestinian Authority as a state was top-down, which made it difficult for the population to identify with the institutions of government. This was described well by the PA's former Jerusalem Affairs Minister, Ziad AbuZayyad: "A state that has been dictated from above will not succeed in reaching citizens and addressing their basic needs and rights, chiefly the rights to life, security and livelihood" (AbuZayyad, 2019).

Despite the increasing erosion of Mahmoud Abbas's governmental legitimacy, the period of his rule was characterized not only by strengthening and building the institutions of the Palestinian state but also by developing a neoliberal economy and developing the private market, even as the PA worked to expand the civil service. Creating a broad layer of the middle class receiving a salary from the state enabled the PLO and the PA to deepen the population's dependence on them and their services (Khalidi, 2019). This policy made the Palestinian Authority an entity spending a lot of money on wages and transfer payments (Michael & Guzansky, 2016), and the PA's national deficit has increased because of this policy. Furthermore, the PA has failed to develop productive sources of income outside of the public sector.

The inflated bureaucracy and unproductive public sector is one of the pillars of the Palestinian economy, alongside a private sector that relies mainly on services, agriculture, traditional crafts, and limited industry. As part of the struggle for Palestinian public opinion, the PA uses its resources to strengthen its standing and emphasizes the performance of the institutions in the West Bank and its economic strengths in contrast with the dead end that Hamas offers to residents of the Gaza Strip. As of 2019, according to Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics figures, the unemployment rate in the Gaza Strip was 46.7 percent. In comparison, the unemployment rate in the West Bank at the end of 2019 was 13.7 percent ("Increase in Gaza's Unemployment Rate," 2020).

The strengthening of the public sector coincided with the ongoing damage and weakening of Palestinian civil society since the start of the Oslo process, although a strong civil society is essential for supporting a state-building process. The PA's prevention of the development of the economy and denied consolidation of civil society in turn intensified the political criticism, and led to a significant erosion of its legitimacy.

Ironically, the continued funding of salaries and the flow of money to government officials, which provided the PA with a continued albeit precarious political foothold in the Gaza Strip, enabled the survival of Hamas's government in Gaza from June 2007 until today. Moreover, even after completing the military coup in the Gaza Strip in 2007, the Hamas leadership understood that it needed the Palestinian Authority to enable countries and international organizations to transfer donation money to fund civilian projects. Most of the countries that contribute to the Gaza Strip recognize the Palestinian Authority as sovereign, and some even see Hamas as a terrorist organization.

After more than a decade of separation and loss of control, the PA leadership decided to change its policy. In April 2017, Mahmoud Abbas began to formulate and implement his disengagement plan from the Gaza Strip, which includes severing economic connections, cutting and stopping the salaries to government officials (including Fatah members), and stopping the funding of fuel for the main power plant. These actions aimed to pressure Hamas with the ultimate goal of quashing the organization and returning the management of the Gaza Strip to the hands of the Palestinian Authority, without conditions and without preliminary elections. The leadership of the Palestinian Authority conveyed a clear message to Hamas: if Hamas wants to rule, it must take on the burden of sovereignty fully and take

care of the population's basic needs. Abbas's pressure on the Hamas government first of all harms the civilian and economic agenda of the Gaza Strip and aims to push the Hamas government to the brink of collapse.

Hamas's survival today is made possible mainly thanks to the Qatari aid money, which enables the poor population of Gaza to hover above the level of a humanitarian crisis. Alongside the aid money, Hamas maintains an alternative smuggling economy and collects money from the smugglers. At the same time, Hamas's military wing relies on money from Iran. Furthermore, the State of Israel has not implemented any long-term strategy regarding the Gaza Strip, and it prefers the continued rule of a weakened Hamas over changing the reality through military means. The supporters of the Palestinian Authority even claim that today the coordination between Hamas and Israel is better than ever, after Israel chose a tactic of "quiet for economy" (Salah, 2022). This fragile formula encourages the sense of uncertainty created by the political stagnation of the intra-Palestinian dialogue (Chorev, 2022).

The Palestinian Authority's Survival Challenge: The Political Structure

The political and constitutional structure is one of the most important tools for the Palestinian Authority in its survival efforts. The PA was designed according to a republican presidential model that is reminiscent of Arab states such as Egypt and Syria. In this political framework, the president, elected in direct elections and not in a parliamentary framework, holds many powers, and it is he who appoints the government. The prime minister in this model is the head of the largest of the parties that ran for parliament, which is usually the party of the president. The role of the government is to implement the policy of the ruling party, but the president can limit its activity through presidential decrees and the use of emergency regulations. Such a political structure does not provide a democratic sphere in which the public takes a considerable part in decision making regarding its future, and it guarantees significant political power for the systems of government created in this centralized governmental framework.

This political structure helped Yasir Arafat establish centralized governance after he took over the PLO in 1969. With Abbas's rise to power in 2005, after he was first elected to the position within the internal circles of the political elite that belongs to the PLO-Fatah, without putting himself up for election by the public, he was forced to cope with a different political reality than what existed in the Arafat era. After Abbas won the mandate in general elections (January 2005), he inherited a PA that was battered both politically and physically. Much infrastructure built with the aid of donor countries had been damaged in the second intifada, along with the PA's standing and international image, following the armed struggled that Fatah waged alongside the Islamic resistance organizations and with the participation of the PA security apparatuses.

In addition to the damage from the intifada, Abbas encountered a significant domestic political challenge. Hamas's entry into the political arena and its victory in the 2006 elections created, for the first time in the history of the Palestinian Authority, a situation of an oppositional government led by a party outside of the PLO's establishment. The struggle with Hamas led, soon after Abbas's rise to power, to a military confrontation and a short but bloody civil war, which ended with the Palestinian Authority's loss of control over the Gaza Strip.

When Mahmoud Abbas was elected president of the Palestinian Authority in 2005 after years of managing and leading the political department of the PLO, the hope was that the statesman who replaced the man of war would enable and encourage pluralism in the Palestinian Authority, but this is not what unfolded. The loss of control over Gaza, the need to stabilize the PA, and the comprehensive reform of the Palestinian security apparatuses that Abbas carried out led him to adopt centralized leadership norms (Leech, 2015, pp. 1011-1014).

During 2005-2021, the PA under Abbas focused on the attempt to establish political and security stability in the West Bank.

Toward the End of the Abbas Era: Internal Instability and the Question of Succession

The Palestinian national movement has been characterized by a centralized form of government since Arafat took control of the PLO's institutions in 1969 and led a line of political containment combined with a heavy hand against his opponents. Abbas inherited three hats from his predecessor: Chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO, President of the Palestinian Authority, and Chairman of the Fatah movement, which in effect is the party ruling the PLO's institutions and the political backbone of the Palestinian Authority. Abbas, who is in the final stretch of his term, wants to create a legacy, define policies, and choose his successor. This latter question stands to ignite internal wars within the Fatah movement. Among the most prominent people who see themselves as candidates to succeed President Abbas is Jibril Rajoub, Fatah's secretary-general, who enjoys a "security image" as the first commander of the Palestinian preventive security apparatus in the West Bank, and who has attained the public's support through extensive sports-related political activity as the Chairman of the Palestinian Football Association and the Chairman of the Palestine Olympic Committee.

Against Rajoub are the current commander of Palestinian intelligence, Majid Faraj, who is considered a close associate of Abbas, and current Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Shtayyeh, an economist with international connections. Shtayyeh was personally appointed by Abbas in 2019, and the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 strengthened his standing among the Palestinian public. Mahmoud Aloul, whom Abbas appointed as his deputy in the Fatah movement, also sees himself as a legitimate candidate for the presidency. Another candidate who is highly valued by Mahmoud Abbas and maybe even appears to be his preferred candidate to replace him is Hussein al-Sheikh, the Minister for Civil Affairs in the Palestinian Authority. At the last conference of the PLO leadership al-Sheikh was appointed a member of the organization's Executive Committee, and on May 26, 2022, was promoted by Mahmoud Abbas to the position of Secretary of the Executive Committee in place of Saeb Erekat, who died of COVID-19 (Khoury, 2022). Al-Sheikh's political power stems from the centralization of knowledge and the management of civilian and political connections with Israel. He is considered an establishment figure and a large portion of the public in the West Bank see him as illegitimate, given his personal conduct and due to his image as doing Israel's bidding.

Despite the internal disagreements in Fatah, the consensus within the movement is that everything must be done so that the position of Palestinian president not be lost in a democratic process or in some other way and fall into the hands of the Hamas movement (Rumley, 2015). Indeed, the postponement of the elections to the Palestinian parliament, which were scheduled for May 22, 2021, and the most recent appointments by the PLO at the meeting of the Palestinian National Council on February 6, 2022, show that ending the split between the West Bank and Gaza and reaching national agreement with Hamas are not the top political priority of the Fatah movement, which is preoccupied with internal power struggles.

During 2005-2021, the PA under Abbas focused on the attempt to establish political and security stability in the West Bank. Despite four rounds of violence between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip between 2011 and 2021 and unrest in the refugee camps in Jenin and Nablus, and alongside outbreaks of violence in the Hebron district against the backdrop of clan conflicts (Chorev, 2022), Abbas's rule has maintained its stability, notwithstanding the increasing erosion of support. According

to a public opinion poll in September 2021, 78 percent of respondents wanted to see Abbas resign, and no more than 24 percent of respondents expressed satisfaction with the performance of the President of the Palestinian Authority ("Press Release," 2021). Yet despite the erosion of his electoral strength, he succeeded in establishing governmental stability and tightened his rule surrounding political alliances within the PLO establishment and the loyalty of the Palestinian security forces. The latter is particularly important, given the unrest in the northern and southern periphery of the West Bank, which is of a tribal and clan nature, in face of the central government in Ramallah.

In addition, the Abbas years have seen emergency presidential orders and direct control of appointed prime ministers and of the judicial system, along with the complete paralysis of the parliamentary system. For example, on June 24, 2017, the PA passed a law on the prevention of electronic crime. This is a complementary measure to the old censorship laws that restricted the freedom of operation of traditional media, including print journalism and political literature. This law suits the current period, in which webpages replace the town square and social media posts are sometimes more influential than headlines in the institutional media—particularly as in 2019 the number of internet users in the West Bank and East Jerusalem was estimated at 1.7 million (Chorev, 2019, p. 1287).

The current situation of the split in the Palestinian political system between Fatah and Hamas, the longing for elections, and the younger Palestinian generation's desire to take part in shaping its fate demanded that Hamas produce quiet around the Gaza Strip as part of creating conditions that support holding elections. The postponement of the elections in April 2021 led to the collapse of the Palestinian dialogue, and Hamas's rocket fire on Jerusalem in May 2021 was intended to embarrass the Palestinian Authority and present it as being unable to protect Palestinian interests. In addition, it aimed to depict Hamas as a political body that protects the honor of the Palestinians and the holy places of Islam in Jerusalem. Hamas even used the media outlets at its disposal then to provoke riots within the State of Israel (Chorev, 2022).

The two sides' inability to reach a solution that would end the split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has evoked much criticism toward the Palestinian Authority and Hamas in the public sphere, but more severe is that it endangers regional stability. Hamas does not hesitate to use force against Israel in response to PA activity that could undermine the stability of its rule in the Gaza Strip or harm its political interests, such as cancelling the elections to the Palestinian parliament and to the PLO's institutions.

Summary and Conclusions

The split in the Palestinian political system, existing since June 2007, has in effect created two competing political entities: the Palestinian Authority, which aspires to receive recognition as a sovereign state, and the Hamas state in the Gaza Strip, which challenges the legality of President Abbas's leadership and sees itself as worthy of being the governing party of the Palestinian Authority and assuming the historical role of the Fatah movement. Both of the competing political entities seek to present themselves as the basis of the future Palestinian state, and this constitutes a source of instability in the Middle East. Their inability to reach a compromise has created a situation in which since June 2007 the Palestinians have lived in effect without a functioning parliamentary system, where two different governments that are sustained by competing ideologies undermine one another's legality. Historically, the split in the Palestinian political system is reminiscent of the power struggles of the 1930s, which led to the civil war and the Nakba of 1948 (Kayyali, 2021).

The complexity of the Palestinian issue has grown in the past decade in part due to

the severe crisis of confidence and the lack of negotiation between the PLO leadership and the Israeli government. These are compounded by the desire of the Hamas movement to become an actor that integrates in the regional political system, and the Abraham Accords, which made clear to the Palestinians that the Arab world is no longer willing to wait for them on its path to normalization with Israel.

The current reality of two separate systems also makes it difficult for the Palestinian public to create a shared national-political agenda.

Despite Hamas's attempts to present a more refined appearance, especially toward Egypt and the Arab world, Hamas cannot retract its basic radical stances that validate its ideological existence. The renewal of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the possibility of the PLO leadership attaining political achievements are considered by Hamas to be a threat to its attempts to achieve hegemony within the Palestinian political system. In order to cope with this tension between ideology and the need to govern while being flexible with the conditions of reality, Hamas has adapted the use of a middle strategy that is based on its leaders' understanding that they must achieve as much as possible for their movement without needing to make a clear decision (Mishal & Sela, 2006). This conduct intentionally creates a realm of ambiguity for Hamas in the state and political decision making process.

In the past decade Hamas has gained not only military experience but also political experience. The burden of leadership and management of daily life in the Gaza Strip have led to a situation where Hamas is very careful not to be seen by the Palestinian public as responsible for the failure of reconciliation efforts, and it sees public legitimacy as an essential tool for consolidating its rule in the Gaza Strip. Against this backdrop, as early as the 2011 Cairo Agreement Hamas made a decision in principle to accept as a compromise the idea of putting together a government of technocrats as a temporary solution, with the purpose of stabilizing the Palestinian political system until the holding of comprehensive democratic elections to the parliament, the PLO's institutions, and the presidency.

The dialogue between the movements aims to cover up their weaknesses and helps them maintain the stability of their regimes and appease Palestinian public opinion. Yet Fatah and Hamas are certainly not interested in putting their political power to the test of public support. The two movements are aware that they have not succeeded in answering their people's demand for unity, and are aware of their responsibility for the size of the crisis that the Palestinian political system confronts. The fact that there is no democratic tradition in the Palestinian Authority strengthens the continued split between Fatah and Hamas. Both are aware of the depth of disappointment in the public sphere and especially among the members of the younger generation, and attempt to channel the criticism of the internal state of the Palestinian political system outwards, by pointing the finger at Israel as responsible for the fate of the Palestinians.

The current reality of two separate systems also makes it difficult for the Palestinian public to create a shared national-political agenda. In his speech at the UN General Assembly on September 23, 2011, when the Arab world was weathering waves of revolutions, Mahmoud Abbas declared that while the Arab masses were searching for their path toward democracy, the Palestinians insist on their independence (Abbas, 2011). Ironically, while Abbas was speaking about the Arab Spring as a historical event that is meant to promote and instill democratic values in Arab society, under his rule the PA took a series of steps that strengthened the centralized nature of the regime and strengthened the powers of its security apparatuses (Leech, 2015, p. 1020).

In retrospect, it seems that the Arab Spring created a climate of political instability in the Arab world. This instability was used as a tool by the leaderships of Fatah and Hamas, which sought to maintain their rule and reject the calls that strove to end the Palestinian split. In order to explain their measures to local public opinion, Fatah and Hamas claimed that the political instability in the Middle East, along with the continued struggle against Israel and the stagnation of the negotiations with it, do not make it possible to reach an agreement between the two movements. Fatah and Hamas continue to maintain and to justify the split, in part by relying on external threats. Likewise the Palestinian opposition to the Trump plan, which was unveiled at the White House on January 28, 2020 and threatened the Palestinians with the possibility of unilateral annexation in the West Bank by Israel, did not succeed in bringing about the creation of a substantive unified front between the hawks. The continued struggle between the movements leads to a situation where today many Palestinians choose not to publicly identify with either of the movements (Chorev, 2022).

The political distrust between Fatah and Hamas adds to the historical and cognitive atmosphere of ongoing struggle that has engulfed Palestinian society since 1948—a sense that unites the politically and geographically divided Palestinian public around a shared narrative and an ethos of resistance, which makes it difficult for the political leadership to build an independent state in a reality that demands that it reach a political compromise.

Alongside failure at intra-Palestinian reconciliation, the PA's failure as a political entity makes it difficult to make progress on the political process with Israel. This is very prominent in the West Bank, whose economic systems are connected to those in Israel; 140,000 residents are employed in Israel or in settlements and it relies to a large extent on generous foreign aid to survive. The Fatah-led PA has not completed the transition from a revolutionary national liberation movement to a process of state-building, and has failed to build a democratic political system that encompasses all the Palestinian streams. Furthermore, the PA has concentrated most of its efforts on building the governmental center in Ramallah and has abandoned the social and geographical periphery of the West Bank. This has led to the strengthening of political and traditional power centers, which sometimes work together with the PA but are also able to challenge it (Lavie, 2009, pp. 306-309; Michael & Milstein, 2021, p. 373; Chorev, 2019, pp. 229-233). In the face of the indecisiveness of the Palestinian Authority, Hamas's sub-state entity has developed in the Gaza Strip, fed by its ability to cause regional instability. It ultimately sustains the Gaza Strip and brings foreign aid money into the Strip, and indirectly to the movement's institutions and its members' welfare. The Hamas movement, which challenges the rule of Fatah and seeks to replace it, also benefits from the fact that Israel is choosing not to pay the military and political price involved in overthrowing the terrorist government that Hamas has built in the Gaza Strip.

Since the Hamas leadership entered the Palestinian political system in 2006, it has challenged the PA's legitimacy. A change can be seen in Hamas's pattern of behavior toward the Palestinian Authority since Operation Guardian of the Walls in 2021, in which Hamas initiated violent events toward Israel—not only as a response to Israeli policy but also as a response to the cancellation of the elections planned for May 2021. Hamas chose to position itself as a political alternative and worked to implant its image as the defender of Jerusalem and the holy places of Islam. Furthermore, for the first time during this operation, which the movement called the Sword of Jerusalem War, Hamas encouraged violence among Israel's Arab citizens, in the hope that they would not only harm the mobility of Israeli forces but also

lead to civil disobedience. This underscores that the tension between Fatah and Hamas not only impacts the Palestinian system, but is also an element that destabilizes the regional order between Israel and its neighbors, as well as within Israel.

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Note

1 For more details, see the list's platform.