

# The PA: An Authority without Authority

Ephraim Lavie

The ongoing decline in the internal unity of the Palestinian National Authority (PA), reflected in the absence of an effective central government, the deep split between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and the violent internal Palestinian struggles, has given rise to a debate on questions concerning the PA's stability and survivability. In the wake of the ongoing lack of progress towards a permanent Israel-Palestinian settlement, calls by parties in the nationalist faction in favor of a one-state solution have lent these issues new urgency. In turn, the PA's *raison d'être* and viability are naturally coming into question.

In their struggle for control, Hamas and Fatah have contributed to the internal destruction of the PA, but at the same time they have not discarded the idea of its existence. Fatah's leadership regards the establishment of the PA on the national homeland as its chief historic achievement. Even though the absence of a political settlement is liable to generate a bi-national reality, the statements by Fatah leaders in support of dismantling the PA and a one-state solution are likely designed to pressure Israel into softening its positions and move the diplomatic process forward. The Hamas leadership also regards the PA's existence as in its interest, as it rose legitimately to power through the PA in democratic elections and aspires to assume control of the PLO and the Palestinian national institutions in the same way.

In the current, fundamentally static situation, two processes are underway in the Palestinian arena: an ongoing process of weakening of the PA and the nationalist current, notwithstanding their support by Israel and the international community, and a parallel process of

---

Ephraim Lavie, director of the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research at Tel Aviv University

strengthening of radical Islamic elements that enjoy the support of Iran and Hizbollah. These processes are influenced by developments in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, but are also part of the decline of secular nationalism and the rise of the Islamic religious movements in the Middle East as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

The weakening of the PA's institutions and the slackening of public support for it do not indicate a decline in Palestinian national territorial identity (*al-wattaniya*). Yet while the PA as a quasi-state framework (*al-doula*) embodies the national identity, the Palestinian public regards it as an unsuccessful governing apparatus. The Hamas leadership, which embraces Islamic universalism, also endorses territorial nationalism but promises more successful management of the PA than that provided by Fatah, which has already lost its exclusive leadership of the Palestinian people. The main change in Palestinian public opinion regarding Hamas is that it is no longer regarded solely as a last resort in the wake of Fatah's failure to manage the PA. Especially since the Hamas victory in the January 2006 elections, the public has gradually come to see the Hamas movement as a desirable option in its own right because it preserves national identity and promises to realize, in its particular way, the people's aspirations for freedom and political independence.

Interest in the PA's continued existence is also common to the policies of Israel, the Arab countries, and the international community. In effect, the PA has become a receptacle that each party wishes to fill with its own content, whether to establish its control through it or to exercise its influence on it. The official end of Abu Mazen's term as president in January 2009,<sup>2</sup> which until now has appeared to be devoid of internal and external achievements, and forthcoming political changes in Israel and the United States, are likely to spawn various scenarios that influence the level of stability and future character of the PA but do not challenge its very existence.

### Hamas

Fatah and the Palestinian public regard the "calm" agreed to by Israel as an achievement of the Hamas leadership and a slap in the face to the PA and the pragmatic political option pursued by Fatah. The agreement is still maintained by the Palestinian factions – and for the moment is preventing any large scale military operation by Israel in the Gaza Strip

– even if Hamas has not yet realized its immediate goals: complete removal of the economic embargo, opening of the Rafiah border crossing,<sup>3</sup> and the release of prisoners. Hamas has partially but steadily circumvented the embargo, established its status as a legitimate ruling party, and tightened its control over the Gaza Strip. Although Hamas has not yet gained recognition from the international community as a legitimate negotiating partner, the negotiations taking place between it and Israel through Egyptian mediation, the renewal of contacts with Hamas initiated by King Abdullah of Jordan almost a decade after the leadership was exiled from Jordan, and the contacts of various European parties with Hamas indicate that the movement is gradually emerging from its isolation. So far, then, Hamas has succeeded in using the calm to achieve at least some of its goals.

The violent confrontation with the Hilles and Durmush clans in the Gaza Strip and the force used to suppress the strikes in the education and health sectors reflect the belligerent policy prevalent in Gaza, dictated by Hamas military arm. These events have exposed the internal tension between the two faces of the Hamas leadership. On the one hand, it wishes to appear as allowing democratic activity, while on the other, it is driven by its hostility to Fatah and in order to consolidate its rule, aims to debunk its main rival and take over the power centers and institutions in the Gaza Strip, such as the energy and water authorities. As far as the armed elements in Hamas are concerned, after “the first victory” (the June 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip) the Fatah movement in the Gaza Strip, which to a large extent was represented by the Hilles clan, was considered a potential threat. Consequently Hamas used great force to undermine the Hilles clan and declared it “the second military victory” (*al-hasam al-askri a-t’ani*). At the same time, however, Hamas was careful to portray the operations against the Hilles and Durmush clans as measures designed to quell a threat to law and order in the Gaza Strip, rather than as a settling of accounts with Fatah or any other political element. Hamas thereby sought to clarify that it did not rule out the

Hamas wishes to appear as allowing democratic activity, yet driven by its hostility to Fatah and in order to consolidate its rule, it aims to debunk its main rival and take over the power centers and institutions in the Gaza Strip.

existence of an opposition faction – as long as it acted in accordance with the rules of Hamas.

Hamas' leadership strives to demonstrate to the public that its management of the PA's institutions is effective and responsible, while portraying Fatah in the West Bank as a faltering group whose control of the PA is characterized by anarchy (*pucha*) and corruption (*pasad*). However, its public image was tarnished by the force it used against the striking teachers and physicians in Gaza who presented specific sector-related demands. Hamas, which emphasized that it viewed the strikes as Fatah political actions, was quick to fire striking teachers and physicians, shut down clinics, disband the teachers' union, and organize protests at the striking doctors' homes. In addition, and to counter the arrests of Hamas members in the West Bank carried out by the PA security agencies, the Hamas leadership arrested leading Fatah figures in the Gaza Strip, including Zakhari al-Ayia, Ibrahim Abu a-Lanja, and Ahmed Nasser. The Fatah leaders were released after a few days, and Hamas succeeded in establishing a deterrence whereby the arrest of its agents in the West Bank would lead to the arrest of Fatah agents in the Gaza Strip equation. Yet public opinion deemed this episode as an example of the force Hamas resorts to in order to consolidate its rule, similar to the force the PA exercises to impose its power in the West Bank, even as its popular legitimacy declines.

The lack of a high caliber Fatah leader capable of uniting the nationalist camp and leading it even in the absence of a clear national plan is a critical matter.

Hamas portrays itself as a movement with a Palestinian nationalist-territorial identity, which is therefore a legitimate political option for ruling and managing the PA. It declares its intention to renew the national dialogue and restore national unity, and respects Abu Mazen's legitimacy as an elected president of the PA, at least until the end of his term in January 2009. Hamas wants Fatah to similarly respect its legitimacy as the elected majority in the Legislative Council. Even though the Hamas leadership is likely to accept an extension of Abu Mazen's term by an additional year (it is not preparing for presidential elections), from a tactical political standpoint, it declares that it will not recognize an extension of his term, and will demand that

the chairman of the Legislative Council, a Hamas member, assume the presidency until elections are held.

Thus far Hamas has been able to use the current lull in the Gaza Strip to realize some of its objectives. The PA's continued existence is in its interest and enables it to avoid appearing as a non-democratic military junta. Paradoxically, Hamas is thereby contributing to the preservation of stability in the PA and its institutions.

### **Fatah**

The difficulties encountered by the Hamas leadership in realizing its goal to consolidate its political standing and expand its influence to the West Bank do not conceal the fact that the light of the Fatah leadership is fading. In Hamas, ideology, belief in the righteousness of the cause, and expectation of a promising future compensate for the absence of a prominent charismatic leader. In Fatah, however, the lack of a high caliber leader capable of uniting the nationalist camp and leading it even in the absence of a clear and adequate national plan is a critical matter. The intermediate generation of Fatah has waited for years for the Sixth Fatah Congress to be convened in order to hold internal elections that will facilitate the rise of the next generation of leaders. However, most leaders of Fatah's intermediate generation, such as Ahmed al-Dich, Fouad al-Shubachi, and Diab al-Luach, have left the region and are currently representing the PLO and the PA overseas. Leaders of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, such as Jamal Abu Rub (dubbed "Hitler" because of his past deeds) and Zacharia Zbeidi in Jenin, are not politically ready to fill the leadership gap. The same is true of the younger Fatah leaders, whose success in the student council elections last year in the West Bank was limited.

Abu Mazen has continued to express interest in convening the Sixth Fatah Congress, but there is no guarantee that this congress, if and when it takes place, will lead to the renewal of the movement and the rebuilding of its crumbling institutions. It will be difficult to turn such a meeting into a pragmatic political event rekindling the torch of the national idea and capable of spearheading a political settlement with Israel. The old guard of the nationalist faction, consisting of leaders like Nasser Yusuf and Azzam al-Ahmed, is cut off from the masses, who in turn are alienated from the movement. It has exposed its limitations

in understanding the dimension of the challenge facing it, and is incapable of uniting to deal with it. The weaknesses of ideology and leadership place Fatah on a slippery slope that will end in the loss of the public's trust and the legitimacy of its rule. At the same time, the Hamas leadership is proving to be a focused and forceful political factor, sensitive to the public's feelings and needs, with a low level of internal rivalry that it manages to downplay – notwithstanding its increasingly belligerent policies dictated by the movement's military arm.

The promise by the Fatah leadership a year ago to create a new reality of proper rule and a resurgent economy in the West Bank as a model alternative to the regime imposed by Hamas in the Gaza Strip has not been kept. Many leaders feel that they have been excluded from the decision making process, and do not support Salam Fayyad's government. They dismiss it as a "government of salaries" (*hahumat al ma'ashet*), whose role is restricted to payment of wages. Implementation of the Fayyad government's three-year (2008-2011) Palestinian Reform and Development Program (PRDP) has met with many difficulties, budget and otherwise, and its beginning has been anything but smooth. The external aid is indeed being used mostly for payment of salaries.

The process of rehabilitating the security apparatus will take a long time. In the absence of operational capability and commanding spirit, these organs are not operating effectively and persistently to enforce order and governmental authority. Under these conditions, Israel is in no hurry to change its military-security policy, and is not removing roadblocks and easing restrictions on movement in order to restore normalcy to daily life on the West Bank. The attempt to make Jenin a model for rapid economic development, with Israel removing administrative and physical barriers in order to facilitate movement and access of people and goods, and international parties investing in projects yielding results within a short time has been copied hesitantly in other areas at a disappointingly slow rate.

Dread of Hamas on the part of the leaders of the Palestinian security apparatuses has neutralized their ability to block the Islamic movement's strengthening in the West Bank. Israel's efforts to damage Hamas' organizational infrastructure in the area have also not been effective. The Hamas leadership is scoring propaganda points among the Palestinian public by portraying the operations against its members

and institutions in the West Bank cities, which are considered enclaves of Palestinian sovereignty, as a joint coordinated effort by Israel and Fatah.

The Fatah movement retains its hold in the West Bank, thanks to the hopes pinned on Israel's willingness for positive gestures in the framework of the dialogue with Abu Mazen, such as the release of prisoners, and the power "loaned" it by virtue of Israel's presence in the area. Many in the Palestinian public regard the PA and the elements in Fatah in the West Bank as doing Israel's bidding. They see no benefit in rule under Israeli auspices when the idea of two states for two peoples has gone nowhere. The Palestinian public interprets the gaps in the positions of the two sides on the core issues, which make it impossible to reach a political settlement, and the continued construction of settlements in the West Bank as evidence of failure of Fatah's political agenda.

Thus, although potential for change ostensibly exists (the younger educated generation in Fatah has shown signs of recovery by restoring to itself control of several student councils over the past year), the credit given by the public to Fatah as the leader of the Palestinian people is dissipating with the passage of time. Fatah is perceived as unable to achieve its vision.

The Fatah leadership is unwilling to admit the failure of the PA enterprise, since this would be tantamount to recognition that its path has proven an abysmal failure. At the same time, there is increasing commotion within the pragmatic nationalist camp given the sense that the two-state solution is a fading political option. Leaders in the national camp (e.g., Abu Ala, Sari Nusseibeh, Dr. Ali Jerbavi, and Hani al-Matzri) have spoken about the abandonment of negotiations for a two-state solution and return of responsibility for the territories to Israel. Yet their statements are primarily designed to pressure Israel into making progress in the diplomatic process and do not imply a program that genuinely interests the Fatah-led PLO. Some of these figures are exploring the idea of redirecting the PA from cooperation with Israel to pressure on Israel and the United States for more flexible

There is increasing commotion within the pragmatic nationalist camp given the sense that the two-state solution is a fading political option.

Israeli positions. Thus when the Sixth Fatah Congress is convened, it will presumably adopt a platform that includes the path of resistance (*al-muqawama*) combined with the political struggle, as recently proposed by Marwan Barghouti from his prison cell in Israel, not the liquidation of the PA and promotion of the idea of a single state.

### **Survival of the PA and the Struggle for its Soul**

The situation described above does not advance the strategic goals of any of the parties involved. At the same time, it does not obligate them to act, which would require concessions by each party on matters concerning narrow special interests in favor of achieving long term strategic goals. The increasing signs of disappointment among the pragmatic national faction and its supporters over a political settlement based on the principle of two states for two peoples render it unnecessary for the Hamas leadership to make its positions more flexible and prove the validity of its political course. Fatah leaders continue to maintain the PA in the West Bank under Israeli auspices in the hope of achieving political gains in the negotiations, but show no ability to reinvigorate their movement. They recognize that without internal support and legitimacy, its days are numbered, since it is increasingly regarded as an interest group that is collaborating with Israel and enforcing its control on the public through Israel, or at least with Israel's assistance. Their frustration with the diplomatic process has prompted the idea of complementing the political process with the struggle (*al-muqawama*). Israel is evading decisive international decisions required by the negotiating process and for the end of the occupation as long as the core issues have not been settled and while the PA continues to demonstrate its functional weakness.

In the current stagnation, the PA remains standing but is weak and steadily declining. The expiration of Abu Mazen's official term as elected president, the end of the agreed six-month lull, and the changes in administrations in Israel and the US are likely to leave their imprint on the PA's level of stability and future character, but not on its existence. Various scenarios in this context are possible, beginning with the result of deliberate action by one or more of the parties, perhaps in combination with an external influence, that are likely to serve the



interests of Israel, Hamas, or Fatah, or constitute some combination of respective interests.

For example, a renewal of the dialogue between Fatah and Hamas and agreement on a unity government and/or general elections in January 2010 are likely to bring about a single government in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Such a dialogue is likely to take place with Hamas holding a position of strength. It will enable Hamas to dictate its conditions to Fatah and lead to relative stability in the PA, but will not lead to agreement on pragmatic fundamental political positions. These conditions will not be easy for Israel or conducive to promotion of the political process. In another scenario, a transition from a lull to a stable ceasefire between Israel and Hamas and the other Palestinian factions is possible, leading to gradual normalization of daily life in the West Bank. If this is accompanied by a freeze on construction in Jewish settlements as a confidence building measure by Israel, the new conditions will be suitable for continued negotiations for a permanent settlement. A firm policy towards Israel and the Palestinians on the part of the new US administration that will require the two sides to anchor matters agreed between them during negotiations in a declaration of principles towards a permanent solution is likely to contribute to this scenario. This scenario runs contrary to Hamas' interest, given the prospect of progress in the diplomatic process and the abandonment of the struggle, and Hamas will therefore try to thwart it.

Another scenario envisions Israel taking over the Gaza Strip, with or without the support of the international community, in order to eliminate Hamas' rule and transfer the Gaza Strip to the PA for a transitional period, until general elections are held and an elected national leadership assembled. Ostensibly, this scenario is likely to serve Israel's interest by strengthening Fatah, providing a basis for rebuilding the PA, and paving the way for progress in the negotiating process. However, as of now, it appears that Israel regards such action as ineffective and liable to eventually bring about the opposite result:

Despite the geographic and political division between them, Hamas and Fatah have a common interest in maintaining the PA in the territorial framework of the two regions, rather than establishing separate entities.

weakening Fatah and the PA, strengthening Hamas in the West Bank, and also endangering Gilad Shalit.

### Conclusion

Despite the geographic and political division between them, Hamas and Fatah have a common interest in maintaining the PA in the territorial framework of the two regions, rather than establishing separate entities. The two movements continue to declare their intention of renewing the national dialogue and restoring national unity. The PA continues to finance the public sector in the Gaza Strip, and is in no hurry to declare the Gaza Strip a rebellious province. As proven in the past, the Palestinian population in times of crisis is capable of adapting and reuniting behind the agreed national regime, or a regime chosen in new elections.

According to Israeli and international community perspectives, the PA's *raison d'être* has not evaporated. Israel regards the PA as a partner for political and security dialogue until a permanent resolution based on two states for two peoples is achieved. The international community continues to recognize the PA and is interested in promoting the rehabilitation of its civil and security institutions. The Arab world recognizes the necessity of the PA's existence and the need for reconciliation within it. The PA's fragile existence will continue to hover precariously in the foreseeable future, but to the same degree, the institutions guaranteeing its continued existence will be preserved. The main struggle between the two sides involved in maintaining the PA concerns its future character: secular-national or Islamic-national.

Even though Israel and Fatah define the continued existence of the PA under secular-national leadership as a joint interest, various issues, including internal political weaknesses, make it difficult to take measures to halt the decline of the PA. The ongoing weakening processes in the PA and the national faction, accompanied by the strengthening of radical Islamic elements in the Palestinian sphere, are expected to continue as a result of the anticipated political developments in the coming months in the PA, Israel, and the US. Abu Mazen's chances of reaching a permanent settlement with Israel by the end of 2008 and presenting it in a referendum are dwindling. Under conditions of continued internal division, the Fatah leadership is likely to recognize that it has reached

the end of the road as leader of the Palestinian national movement. The Hamas leadership, on the other hand, which the Palestinian public regards as having a national territorial bent, will continue to operate from a position of strength and belief in the righteousness of its path as the bearer of the Palestinian national standard. It aims at freedom from occupation and the founding of an independent state in the first stage. It still regards the lull agreement and the possibility of renewing the national dialogue as a future means of strengthening its political status and expanding its influence from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank, and will consider its measures in light of its goal to constitute the broadest popular movement in the Palestinian arena.

The seeming stasis in the balance of forces in the Palestinian arena conceals a dynamic situation developing beneath the surface. The inability of the national leadership to achieve its vision of a political settlement based on the establishment of a country bordering Israel enhances the relevance of Hamas as an alternative. It makes it unnecessary for the Hamas leadership to prove the effectiveness of its political line, and camouflages its limitations and failures as a ruling faction. At the same time, in the absence of a political settlement or unilateral determination of Israel's borders with the West Bank, in time, a bi-national reality is liable to emerge. Such a situation is likely to recast the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a national-political conflict to a battle over civil rights, thereby threatening the existence of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

## Notes

- 1 Matti Steinberg, "Anarchical Order in the Arab World," in *Challenges to the Cohesion of the Arab State*, ed. Asher Susser (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, 2008), pp. 41-58.
- 2 Hamas and Fatah disagree on this issue. Fatah legally but unilaterally extended Abu Mazen's term by one year, until January 2010. Hamas does not recognize this move.
- 3 The other border crossings are open, and through them goods enter the Gaza Strip. At the same time, exports from the Gaza Strip have not yet been renewed.