

The Institutional Regression of the Palestinian Authority

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The eroding credibility of the Palestinian Authority (PA) since the eruption of the current Israeli-Palestinian confrontation in September 2000 has hindered, if not countered, the institutionalization process of the PLO. The organization's most impressive achievement has been the almost complete identification between international recognition of the legitimacy of the Palestinian people's struggle for self-determination and international recognition of the right of the PA, as the organizational extension of the PLO, to lead the struggle. Ironically, since the start of the al-Aqsa Intifada, a breach has developed between the PA's stature and the political objective upon which it was originally founded. That is, while the recognition of the Palestinian people's right to national independence has remained as firm as it was on the eve of the uprising, and the need to promote this goal, as perceived in the regional and international arenas, has even heightened, the PA's domestic and international stature has grown increasingly tenuous.

Mass demonstrations supporting the PA were held in the territories in September 2002 following the IDF's renewed siege on the Authority's headquarters in Ramallah, but they failed to dispel the impression that the PA leadership's grass roots standing has worn thin. Similarly, although American pressure forced Israel to lift the siege, this did not imply that the United States was expressing sympathy or support for the PA itself. Rather, it was clearly an American effort to curb escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict against the background of the

administration's preparations for an attack on Iraq. Criticism also dwelled in large measure on the siege's hindering the process of institutional reform in the territories, a perspective that further underscored the PA's international isolation.

Exacerbated Israeli military pressure on the PA, usually in response to major suicide attacks against Israelis, has tended to result in both heightened condemnation of Israel's harsh policies and outbursts of popular support for the PA. However, such waves of support have not substantially reversed the regression in the PA's stature, reflected by the volume of international demands for administrative and security reform. More importantly, although calls for reform implicitly reiterate the need to create a Palestinian state alongside Israel, they also reflect skepticism regarding the PA's ability in its present composition to advance this goal. The decline in the PA's stature has also been accelerated by ardent petitions for administrative reform that originate in the domestic Palestinian arena. These demands question the ability of the PA, with its current structure and leading figures, to promote the national cause – whether that entails recognition of Israel, as the national mainstream advocates, or non-recognition of Israel, as the Islamic stream and other radical groups espouse.

Whatever the source, the numerous calls for reform bear witness to the PA's failure in fulfilling its civil and political duties.

External Pressures

President Bush's speech of June 24, 2002 focused on the Middle East and reiterated American hopes of an independent Palestinian state. Nothing essentially new was stated: since the 1990s the need to establish an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel has been a central pillar in the United States' overall effort to achieve stability in the Middle East. Accordingly, the Palestinian dream of self-determination received further backing in a period when national independence otherwise appeared completely blocked, namely, in the midst of a head-on confrontation with Israel and massive erosion in the belief within the Israeli public and government on the attainability of a political settlement. The American administration remained faithful to the goal of establishing a Palestinian state, despite the systematic rejection by the PA of various plans proposed by the United States for a return to the negotiating table in the aftermath of the failed Camp David talks.

The new ingredient in the president's speech was his focus on the PA's diminished international status and his call for a change in leadership. The heart of the statement was Bush's challenge to the Palestinian people to replace its current political leadership with one more suited to performing the governmental duties required for participation in the political process, and with the courage and authority to adopt a compromising approach to conflict resolution. This position was

echoed in the "roadmap" for Middle East peace, which was presented by the administration in October 2002. The roadmap confirmed the need to establish a Palestinian state, whose borders remain to be determined, as a principal part of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, the plan reiterated the need for extensive organizational and security reforms in the PA.

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Significantly, the American policy of the roadmap strongly matched the position of the Israeli government.

Israel's position on the PA and its chairman crystallized already during the first weeks of the al-Aqsa Intifada. The Israeli government estimated that renewed negotiations with the PA would be impossible, a view reflected in the words of then Prime Minister Ehud Barak, that "Arafat is no longer a partner in the political process." This position was echoed verbatim by the national unity government under the leadership of the Likud Party, which was elected in February 2001. While the Israeli government did not officially abandon its acknowledge-

ment of the need for Palestinian political independence, the PA was perceived first in Jerusalem and ultimately in Washington as an obstructive factor that would continue to hinder progress towards a settlement. This view was strengthened after September 11, 2001, against the backdrop of the American administration's heightened sensitivity towards terrorism as a means of political struggle. For its part, the Israeli government interpreted the Bush administration's declaration of a global war on terror as a green light for a frontal assault on the PA.

In June 2002, even before Bush's policy statement and already under heavy international pressure to execute administrative reform in the PA, Arafat presented a new cabinet. The release of approximately ten percent of the PA's taxes, frozen by Israel at the outbreak of the uprising, displayed Jerusalem's interest in encouraging the reforms. In July, talks were held between then Israeli Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer and a delegation of top PA officials headed by then new minister of the interior, Abd al Razek Yihya, and Arafat's key advisor, Muhammad Dahlan, with the aim of giving solid backing to security reforms that were a prerequisite for an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Bethlehem. In early August, details of the security reform were discussed in Washington between Dahlan and Yihya and representatives of the Bush administration. Arafat's approval of the security reform talks reflected his

recognition of the imperative to change the method of struggle and to improve the PA's image in order to regain American confidence in the PA and in him personally. However, while the talks testified to the growing awareness on both sides of the need to break the deadlock, the continued attacks and attempted strikes against Israelis on the one hand, especially by Islamic factions, and Israel's counter-responses in the territories on the other hand, emptied the talks of any practical meaning and left them with symbolic value only.

The regression in the PA's stature in recent months can also be seen in the criticism and intervention emanating from Arab capitals. The fear of potential upheavals stemming from the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation has led President Mubarak to declare on a number of occasions that he would not allow Arafat to drag Egypt into a war not of its choosing. In order to reduce the possibility of the confrontation's slide into a regional collision, or what seemed more likely, the eruption of popular demonstrations in Arab countries against Israel's policies in the territories, the governments of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, together with some members of the European Union (EU) and the American administration, pushed for cease fire discussions between the Fatah and Tanzim on the one hand and Hamas and the Islamic Jihad on the other hand. As a framework for structural reform regarding security, CIA Director George Tenet drafted a plan to unify the various independent

Palestinian security units. According to the plan, Egyptian, Jordanian, and Saudi Arabian security forces, together with American personnel, would supervise the reform process and train PA security agencies to curb strikes against Israel. True, the Arab governments were wary of external intervention in the Palestinian political system, and particularly of the American and Israeli demands for

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removing Arafat. But they also shared the view that it would be impossible to temper the violence without a political horizon offered by the Israeli government, which in turn depended on a change in the Palestinian hard line.

Members of the Palestinian Authority and their chairman received some consolation from Western European support. Western Europe's approach to the PA was far less critical and qualified than American and Middle Eastern opinions; nevertheless, the EU froze the transfer of contributions to the PA when Israel produced evidence that directly implicated Arafat and other

high-ranking officials in financing strikes against Israelis. These documents were seized by the IDF at the PA's headquarters during Operation "Defensive Shield" in April 2002, when the IDF reoccupied West Bank cities in response to the Passover massacre. But after a number of weeks, following refutation of Israeli evidence of PA complicity, and in light of the devastated Palestinian civilian infrastructure, economic collapse, and humanitarian crisis caused by IDF operations, the transfer of funds resumed. Concurrently, various Western European figures and organizations persisted in attempting to devise a formula to jumpstart the negotiations between Israel and the PA. Overall, however, European support of the PA was of minimal importance due to the EU's limited influence on the American administration regarding Middle East affairs in general, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular.

The EU, together with the United States, Russia, and the United Nations, is a member of "the Quartet," a group that was established to explore ways to end the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. The Quartet is also part of a multi-national task force comprised of additional donating countries and organizations (Norway, Japan, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank) that works at promoting reforms in the PA. Efforts are likewise underway to revamp the Palestinian security forces – the assumption being that without a cessation of the strikes against Israelis, it will be impossible to halt

Israel's campaign to undermine what remains of the Palestinian administrative infrastructure, alleviate human misery in the territories, and renew talks between the sides.

Like the roadmap, this agenda, drawn up by the Bush administration, corresponds with the official position of the Israeli government. Perhaps predictably, the steps that were designed to improve the security situation are more concrete than measures intended to reform other PA spheres of governance. Pressure for the democratization of the political system in the territories translates into direct intervention in the internal affairs of the Palestinians, a move that Western and Middle East governments prefer to avoid, in part because of their awareness that the attempt to impose changes from the outside will be of limited effect. Moreover, it is generally estimated that progress in reform will be an uphill struggle as long as the violence continues. Therefore, it is natural for the international parties to concentrate on taming the cycle of violence that exacerbates tensions in an already tension-ridden Middle East, whether triggered by the Arab-Israeli conflict in general, or more specifically by protests in the Arab world against what are regarded as American-Israeli dictates on Palestinian issues.

Domestic Pressures

Calls within the territories for governmental reform have focused frequently on the PA's poor record in

managing the conflict with Israel, though not necessarily in order to meet the security demands presented by the United States and Israel. Rather, they represent the Palestinians' drive to find a connection between the current modus operandi of the struggle and their long-term political goals. Equally important, the call for reform reflects the desire to see good governance in operation.

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The domestic criticism of the PA has revolved around its inadequate performance during the Intifada and the regression in the PA's international standing, but it evolved without a direct link to the international criticism and for its own reasons. First of all, internal criticism cites the political stalemate that preceded the eruption of the uprising as a primary source of complaint. It has since joined other issues, such as the ruination of the civilian infrastructure in the course of the confrontation with the Israeli security forces and the human suffering in the territories. These are central factors that are seen as not only

having hastened the functional collapse of the PA, but as evidence of the PA's inadequate management as well.

Israel's hard-line policy, which was designed to curb the uprising and especially to repel the rapid escalation by the Palestinians in the use of firearms and suicide attacks, has promoted efforts to destroy the PA civilian and security infrastructures. Furthermore, the PA itself contributed to the downfall of its own authority and mechanisms of control by inciting militant factions to execute independent attacks against Israel in order to aggravate the confrontation. This policy resulted in the strengthening of regional security apparatuses institutionally linked to the PA. The independent status of Fatah-affiliated organizations, such as the Tanzim and the al-Aqsa Brigades, also increased. This development testifies to a persistent management style inherent in the Palestinian national movement since its inception: a central leadership that encourages the proliferation of factions in order to preempt the creation of a rival nucleus of power. Other groups that have gained influence and improved their military capability during the uprising belong to the Islamic current, which began preparing itself as an alternative to the mainstream nationalist forces as early as the 1980s.

The erosion of the PA's status reflected not only the loss of control, but of authority as well. The undermining of its authority stemmed from the disappointment in

its performance - its inability to protect civilian infrastructures and its failure to reap any political achievements from the relentless, demanding struggle against Israel. Interestingly, the call for administrative and structural reforms urged by the American administration and the Israeli government corresponded closely with the demands for major changes voiced in the territories. In the first stage of the uprising, criticisms of the PA's administrative and political failure were jettisoned to the sidelines of the Palestinian discourse. Yet as casualties resulting from IDF assaults mounted, (approximately 2000 dead and thousands more wounded), the economy disintegrated, and the overall misery deepened, demands intensified for a strategic plan that would take into account the population's distress and pave a realistic path to political achievement. This call was sounded in context of the demand for the PA's democratization and the institutionalization of administrative norms, a demand that had also been voiced in the territories in the years prior to the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada.

Contrary to the joint American-Israeli position that set administrative and security reforms as preconditions to humanitarian aid and the outline of a political horizon, Palestinian spokespersons from all factions stipulated humanitarian relief and the draft of a political outlook as preconditions to the cessation of attacks and the implementation of

reforms. At the same time, in the second half of 2002, the tenor of the discussions indicated that Palestinian factions had internalized the need to respond to external pressure regarding the violent nature of the struggle against Israel in order to allow for a steady flow of aid and economic relief. The talks held in July 2002 under the aegis of parties in the EU between Fatah and the Tanzim on the one hand, and Hamas and the

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Islamic Jihad on the other, were an attempt to reach a common ground on goals and strategies of action. Israeli air strikes in Gaza, which targeted a senior member of the Hamas military wing but also killed a number of civilians, temporarily interrupted the discussions. Related discussions were held in the "Higher Monitoring Committee," which had been set up at the beginning of the uprising and included representatives of twelve Palestinian organizations.

None of these talks, however, succeeded in hammering out practical decisions regarding the goals and methods of either the struggle or

governmental reforms. Basic differences between the Hamas and the Fatah-affiliated organizations precluded an agreement. A principal bone of contention was the adamant Hamas and Islamic Jihad adherence to the vision of a Palestinian state in all of Palestine and continued attacks inside Israel's 1967 borders. Even Fatah failed to come forth with a unified position: Hussein al-Sheikh, the organization's West Bank commander, called for an end to attacks inside the Green Line, while for their part, the al-Aqsa Brigades hinged their acceptance of al-Sheikh's approach on the release of detainees in Israeli prisons and the rejection of all foreign intervention in the Palestinian political system. These discords reflect an inter-organizational contest over leadership, and an intra-organizational struggle fueled by cross-generational tension and the refusal of factions to concede any turf they had acquired during the uprising. Against this backdrop of internecine power struggles, it is not surprising that an inter-factional agreement that could have presented Israel with a genuine challenge was beyond reach.

The external demands for administrative and security reforms forced Chairman Arafat to take steps that would allay the pressure, and equally as important, strengthen the PA's status and his own position. Among the changes that occurred within the PA were the reallocation of roles and the appointment of a transitional cabinet, which included several people who had gained

credibility outside of the PA – especially the new ministers of the interior and treasury. Furthermore, despite protests by local activists, heads of the security agencies who had built independent power bases during the Intifada were removed from their jobs and replaced by people close to Arafat. These changes occurred in June 2002, within the framework of Arafat's "One Hundred Day" plan of governmental reform.

By September 2002, however, the PA's leadership confronted an unprecedented challenge – the resignation of the entire cabinet upon its realization that it would not win a vote of confidence from the Legislative Council. The fact that security reforms were seen as expressions of surrender to Israeli and American pressures and thus would not earn the PA any political profit partially explains the Legislative Council's lack of confidence in the cabinet. Also influential was the assessment by many Council members that the appointment of a new cabinet in itself was insufficient to guarantee sweeping governmental reform and rectify the PA corruption, inefficiency, and loss of direction. With the approaching elections in the territories, whether they would take place in early 2003, as Arafat urged, or be postponed, as the Israeli government preferred and which seemed more likely, many Council members chose to sever their association with the PA. However, in late October 2002 Arafat applied enough pressure on the Legislative Council so approve a new cabinet,

albeit quite similar to the one that was forced to resign. The most significant difference was the replacement of Yihya by Hani al-Hassan, a long time associate of Arafat. The entire chain of events, therefore, testified to yet another example of Arafat exploiting calls for reform as a means of enhancing his own position.

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organizations, efforts were also made to solve the intertwined political and humanitarian crises – efforts that were independent of any national agreement between Fatah-affiliated factions and Islamic opposition groups. Fifty-five Palestinian politicians and intellectuals drew up a manifesto in June 2002 condemning suicide attacks against civilians within the Green Line. Among the signatories were members of Fatah and other groups, many of whom belonged to the circles that had participated in the institutional buildup in the territories in the 1980s, and who had been among the PA's

most virulent critics after its creation. One of the leading figures in this group was Sari Nusseibeh who, together with Ami Ayalon, a former head of the General Security Service and a leader of the Israeli Peace Coalition, formulated principles for a final status settlement. The ideas outlined in this document reflected marked departures from either Israeli or Palestinian mainstream opinion, which perceived any compromise as a sign of submission under pressure and thus an invitation to the other side to radicalize its positions. The significance of the Nusseibeh-Ayalon principles, therefore, lay in their public expression of the search for an alternative path.

In September 2002 additional signs in the West Bank pointed to the growing awareness of the PA's weakness: in the Ramallah region, local popular committees sprang up that adopted the example of civil organizations that had been established during the first Intifada. These organizations were the expedient of activists affiliated with the nationalist mainstream striving both to fill the gap created by the demise of the PA's civil infrastructure and to prevent the Islamic opposition from expanding its popular base of support through an existing network of welfare institutions.

Tension between External and Domestic Pressures

In light of the broad international recognition of the Palestinians' right to statehood, and the mounting grass roots criticism of the PA's

administrative incompetence, the Palestinian Authority can no longer justify the current regression in its status as the non-recognition of Palestinian national rights – as the PLO was wont to do in times of crisis.

In order to close the widening rift between political recognition of the PA on the one hand, and the recognition of the Palestinian national cause on the other, the PA leadership will have to reassert its control in the field, restore its institutional authority, and refurbish its public image. But in view of the various and often discordant claims from at home and abroad, the PA appears incapable of meeting this complex challenge.

To restore its international image and deny Israel reasons for a sustained presence in the territories that on the eve of the uprising were under Palestinian control, the PA will have to act against the violent nature of the struggle. A drastic reduction in the frequency and scale of the attacks against Israeli targets will not be possible without circumscribing the free movement of militant factions identified with the Islamic camp or with militant nationalist groups, some of which enjoy a considerable degree of operational independence alongside institutional affiliation with Fatah. However, with the collapse of the PA's control mechanisms, implementation of any decision to rein in the militants will prove a most difficult assignment. Positions of power assumed by independent parties that have demonstrated their ability to dictate the pace and direction of the struggle serve as

evidence of the PA's functional weakness. The continuing search within and across various organizations in the territories for a way to reestablish an acceptable fabric of life indicates the organized efforts being made in the face of the PA's floundering. Another example of the national leadership's weakness is its own inability to arbitrate between the Tanzim and Hamas over the conditions for a cease fire.

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It can be assumed, therefore, that only an initiative for a cease fire that will emerge at some point in response to increasing signs of weariness in the population and will be promoted by the factions spearheading the struggle will yield practical results. Judging from the past, the PA will adopt the sentiment on the street and package it into a political framework. Such was the nature of the PA's response to tensions in the territories in the summer of 2000 that grew out of the growing frustration with Israeli occupation, but even more so with the PA's failure to bring about its termination. In this case, unrest was

translated into a violent uprising against Israel. The same dynamics forced the PLO to embrace the Intifada that erupted in the territories in the late 1980s. Similarly, it was popular pressure in the territories that culminated in the consolidation of a compromise policy, which enabled the PLO to participate in the Oslo peace process and eventually sign the Declaration of Principles.

The main obstacle to attaining a cease fire agreement among the radical factions, and as such to promoting a restitution of the PA's international image, is the militant atmosphere now raging in the territories. Thus far, this atmosphere has overshadowed the population's weariness. Therefore, after two years of a confrontation that has claimed a high number of casualties and economic devastation, the PA would need to produce some achievement in the form of Israeli concessions before it can make any concessions of its own. But at present, Israeli concessions appear virtually unobtainable in light of the skepticism in the Israeli public regarding the attainability of a lasting settlement. Moreover, the continuation of the attacks against Israelis, which results from the militant atmosphere against the backdrop of the inter-factional struggle, enhances further moves by the Israeli government to discredit the PA and destroy its functional capabilities. At the same time, a by-product of Israeli pressure is a periodic temporary wave of domestic and external support for the PA, especially as a symbol of the

Palestinian struggle for self-determination and statehood. Nonetheless, it seems safe to presume that Israeli pressure will continue to wear down the PA's ability to translate its symbolic quality into administrative and political capability.

Postscript

In battling the Intifada, the Israeli government has directed efforts to stripping the PA of its political credibility and administrative capabilities. Toward this goal, Israel has scored some impressive achievements. However, the question remains, to what extent does the collapse of the PA's control in the territories and the erosion of its international status serve Israel's long-term political and security interests. It may be argued that the total breakdown of the PA in the administrative and security spheres, along with the further erosion of its political significance, will not necessarily spawn an alternative central leadership. Instead, it may intensify the anarchy within the Palestinian political system to an extent that will lend a pretext for Israel's full takeover of civilian and security matters in the territories. This scenario would probably minimize any prospects for a renewal of talks towards a settlement, and not necessarily mitigate the security challenges presented to Israel by militant Palestinian factions. Under such circumstances it appears that only massive doses of external pressure applied to both sides might convince them to return to the negotiating table. Furthermore, even if under conditions of full

Israeli control an alternative Palestinian leadership that is genuinely interested in reaching an understanding with Israel is formed, it remains to be seen whether it will have the ability to guarantee quiet so that the renewed talks can take place.

The PA's status as a national symbol has been undermined and eroded, but through the power of its historical roots, it still serves as the supreme symbol of a Palestinian national struggle. This symbolic value maintains the PA as a primary vehicle for implementing any policy, in particular one that entails political concessions. Therefore, even the PA's most outspoken critics, vexed by the painful attrition that the Palestinian population has had to endure and the interminable political impasse, now speak primarily in terms of reforming government administration, and less in terms of a revolutionary replacement of the Palestinian leadership. Hence, in order to leave an opening for a renewal of Israeli-Palestinian talks, and notwithstanding their criticism of the PA's poor track record in policy and administration, the State of Israel and international circles should allow the rehabilitation of the PA's political legitimacy.