Fatah's Struggle for Institutionalization

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Considerable similarity exists between the manner in which Fatah came to be involved in the *intifada* that broke out in late 1987 and its leading role, this time as head of the Palestinian National Authority (PA), in the *Al Aqsa intifada*, that erupted in September 2000. In both cases the *intifada* was triggered by a specific incident, setting ablaze the Occupied Territories, which were in any case rife with tension. In both cases organizations affiliated with the Fatah, including the popular committees and the Tanzim (a Fatah-related organization of street forces) rapidly gained control over the popular unrest, and directed the ensuing riots.

Despite these similarities, a difference between the two cases exists as well. In the year 2000 the Fatah's institutional status was quite different from its status in the late eighties. With the outbreak of the first *intifada*, Fatah stood at the helm of what was essentially a popular struggle. Despite the popular and political support accorded to the Fatah-led Palestine Liberation Organization, the organization itself had not obtained the kind of recognition that would enable it to be a partner in political processes that would influence the status and future course of the Palestinian national movement as a whole. Fatah therefore focused on a strategy of violent struggle, aimed at compelling regional and global actors to address its demands. On the other hand, by 2000 Fatah was leading the internationally recognized Palestinian National Authority (PA), the government of the Palestinian state-in-formation. This status had turned it into a central partner in an established political process, impediments and obstacles notwithstanding.

The question arises: what motivated Fatah to return to its former role as leader of a popular struggle, when doing so meant risking the regression, if not the downfall, of the organization's process of political institutionalization? In other words: why did Fatah leaders — who as we have said were already at the helm of a near-state that had won significant international recognition — engage in a struggle against Israel, knowing that this would jeopardize the political achievements attained through the Oslo accords?

In reply to this question, the following is a review of Fatah's process of institutionalization and an attempt to evaluate the organizational need that leading the *intifada* was expected to meet. It shall argue that leading the violent struggle did not in principle contradict Fatah's position as head of an established national authority. Indeed, the opposite would appear to be the case: given the socio-economic challenges faced by Fatah since taking the reins of the PA, and in light of the political situation that prevailed on the eve of the *intifada*, Fatah's leadership sought to use the struggle to buttress both the organization's ascendance in the domestic arena and its status *vis-à-vis* external forces. In so doing, Fatah leaders ensured the organization's influence on the political moves that would decide the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In an interview that was broadcast by Israel TV's Channel One on 17 December 2000, a Tanzim activist stated: "The Authority is the PLO; the PLO is Fatah; and Fatah is Arafat." The aim of the violent struggle led by Fatah in the West Bank and Gaza Strip beginning in September 2000 was to convey the message of this organizational link.

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The establishment of the PA in 1994 was anchored on the Oslo accords. The legal and international authority of these agreements accorded Fatah both legal validation and broad international recognition as the representative of the Palestinian people. It represented a quantum leap in the process of institutionalization in the Palestinian popular struggle as it then stood. Important milestones that preceded this development include the founding of Fatah in 1959, its later emergence as the leading Palestinian organization, and formalization of Fatah's leading position in 1969, when it became the head of the PLO. Beyond both these and other historical developments there have been three pillars, or bases of legitimacy, that substantiated Fatah's process of institutionalization throughout the years. The first was the organizational basis, i.e. the organization *per se*. Another was the movement's basis, i.e. the organization's base of popular support. These two pillars formed the basis for the third — international recognition of the PLO, headed by Fatah, as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.

Fatah was the first Palestinian

organization to call for a direct confrontation against Israel. While it did so within the context of an all-Arab front, the organization specifically stressed the particularist Palestinian cause. Similar to other organizations of popular struggle, Fatah formed itself on the basis of an organizational core with clearly defined boundaries. At no time was this core ever monolithic, made up as it was of various apparatuses and sub-groups. Its unifying determinant lay in the aim to preserve the organization and entrench its political status in surroundings that had long been hostile both to its goals and to its very existence. This hostility was manifested by attempts to shape the nature and limits of the organization, and in more extreme cases, by efforts to control or even destroy it. To survive and grow within this complex and hostile environment, Fatah embraced a strategy of violent action. In its early years, before it had acquired external legitimacy, this the only way that Fatah could find its place on the regional agenda: the practice of violence was designed to provoke Israeli counter-action and to drag Arab states into a confrontation with Israel. The violent struggle was also a primary means to mobilize popular support — Arab in general and Palestinian in particular — expected to translate into pressure on governments to embark on a war to liberate Palestine. Popular support was also intended to reinforce Fatah's position among other Palestinian organizations active in furthering their own status in a similar manner.

The violent struggle did in fact place the Palestinian issue on the regional agenda. It also made a decisive contribution to the institutionalization of the Fatah-led PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people. This development reflected growing support for Palestinian organizations in general, and for Fatah — the largest and strongest of them all — in particular. The popular support and organizational growth that followed brought about substantial changes in Fatah's course of action. Throughout the years, the primary organizational core expanded to include apparatuses dealing with social and civil affairs, whose job was to attend to the daily needs of the organization's popular base. This organizational complexity evolved in the late 1960s against the backdrop of the power struggle between Palestinian organizations, particularly Fatah, and the Jordanian monarchy. Following the expulsion of Palestinian organizations from Jordan in 1970, this process was accelerated and enhanced in Lebanon, reaching its peak on the eve of the IDF invasion of that country in 1982. A gradual and relatively belated process of institutionalization of Fatah leadership in the Territories under Israeli rule took place at the same time. While popular support was initially aimed at forming an infrastructure for the perpetuation and expansion of the violent struggle, in practice the popular base was managed by sub-organizations and apparatuses which, judging by their agendas and functions, were far removed from active involvement in the violent struggle. Hence, the PLO progressively institutionalized as an organization based on firm social foundations, as the leader of a popular movement.

Concurrently, the PLO garnered growing international recognition. This recognition, though by and large reserved and conditional, validated the organization's political institutionalization, coupling it with acceptance by state-level actors as an influential and legitimate actor in the regional scene. By the end of the 1960s, Fatah was supported by several Arab states and Eastern-bloc governments, some of which even accorded it material aid. In 1974 the PLO was officially recognized by the Arab summit conference as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. In that year it was also recognized by the UN and invited to participate in UN forums dealing with issues concerning the Middle East conflict.

As stated earlier, the institutionalization process of Fatah was based on three pillars of legitimacy: its existence as a coherent organization, its popularity as a movement (i.e., as a broad framework of collective national action), and the political recognition accorded to it in the international arena. The consolidation of each of these pillars proceeded concurrently, each one emphasized in a specific evolutionary phase of the organization. Notably, stressing one of the pillars in no way belittled the significance of the other two. Thus, popular support was coordinated and effectively governed by the organizational solid core, which continuously expanded as the organization gained the characteristics of a movement. The two bases of legitimacy — organizational and popular — were mutually sustaining, and both served to mobilize political legitimacy. External support, for its

part, reinforced the dominance of the Fatah-led PLO in the internal Palestinian setting.

A further significant characteristic of this institutionalization process was the tension that prevailed between the respective pillars of legitimacy. Fatah's institutionalization process was in itself a determinant of efforts to stop it in its tracks. The far-reaching ideological objective of liberating Palestine, coupled with the violent struggle undertaken to that end, disrupted the agenda of Middle East states. Fatah's activities threatened to drag them into a war not of their choosing, and undermined the stability of their respective regimes. Thus the organizational growth, accompanied by the strengthening of its military potential, provided regional state and sub-state actors with a pretext to wage war against Palestinian organizations in general, but primarily Fatah. In some cases it seemed that confrontations that were accelerated by the increasing strength of the organizations significantly disabled Fatah's institutionalization enterprise. This impression was created mainly in cases where the administrative and operational infrastructure was uprooted, from Jordan and from Lebanon, and had been forced to establish itself anew. Constant tension also prevailed between the violent struggle and the social and political courses of action. Development of the organization's civil infrastructure, and its resulting vulnerability, as well as the political accomplishments attained by the PLO, were all factors that held up the implementation of the strategy of violence, as it was termed. The violent course of action persisted, *inter alia* because it constituted a sphere of conflict among the diverse organizations vying for leadership of the national movement. However, over the years this *modus operandi* changed on the tactical level and mainly in the scenes of action, due to circumstantial constraints. To reduce the damage to relations established with governments, particularly in the West, organizations affiliated with the PLO gradually focused their violent action on the arena of the conflict — Israel and the Occupied Territories.

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International recognition was used first and foremost to exert pressure on Israel. However, the institutionalization process could not actually go beyond a certain point without American and Israeli recognition of the PLO. Until the early nineties (indeed, until the initiation of the Oslo process), Israeli interests and the objectives of the Palestinian national movement were considered mutually exclusive by both sides. Israel's failure to recognize the PLO, added to the delay in official US recognition, prevented the organization from exercising direct and legitimate influence on attempts to advance a settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Moves aimed at resolving the regional conflict — mainly the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, which included an agreement on a settlement for the Palestinian problem, challenged the PLO's political status, threatening to erode its popular support.

This danger became more tangible in late 1987, with the eruption of the *intifada* in the Territories. The PLO did not initiate the riots. Indeed, the riots broke out no less in protest against the political stagnation of the PLO leadership than in protest of the occupation itself. To preserve its status, Fatah hastened to seize control of the uprising, assisted by the network of popular apparatuses established in the Territories over the years, particularly since its expulsion from Lebanon. Within a year the PLO was forced to deal with a further challenge — pressure from inside the Territories to use the uprising as a basis for a political process towards a settlement. To convert the impact of the intifada into political gains, the PLO made concessions — denouncing terrorism and recognizing of the UN partition plan of historic Palestine — acts which were tantamount to stepping away from the organization's historic strategic aim and from the struggle it had undertaken for decades to achieve it. This move, taken in November 1988, gained the PLO recognition by the US. Concurrently, and resulting from its direct encounter with uprising in the Territories, Israel's stand became more flexible. A window of opportunity opened for dialogue, enabling a process that culminated in the signature of the Oslo accord by Israel and the PLO. Elections held in

the Territories placed Fatah in the lead within the PA, thereby according it the status of official partner in a political process *vis-à-vis* Israel.

The diplomatic channel was paved with difficulties and postponements. The time allotted in the Oslo accord to Israel and the PA to prepare the ground for talks on a permanent settlement ran out, and negotiations between the sides reached an impasse. The result of the Camp David summit held in July 2000 strengthened the Palestinian claim that the political process was leading nowhere. From the Israeli perspective, the concessions Prime Minister Ehud Barak was prepared to offer PA Chairman Yasir Arafat were sweeping and generous. However, from the Palestinian perspective they were still far from what Arafat was ready to accept in return for a declaration that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had ended, a major Israeli demand. Arafat could not agree to Israel's demands without risking serious erosion of two of his three legitimacy pillars — domestic-popular and external-political — on which Fatah had institutionalized. The PA did not receive the Arab-Muslim support it needed to yield in East Jerusalem, and was therefore unable to accede to Israeli compromise offers on that issue, even it had been ready to do so. The plan proposed by Barak as a basis for lasting borders between Israel and the future Palestinian state would have left the Palestinian Authority with control over a disintegrated political entity, difficult to manage, with alarmingly unsure economic and political foundations. No less important, the agreement proposed by Israel essentially left the Palestinian refugee community, which had served as Fatah's primary pillar of popular legitimacy, out of the picture.

Acceptance of Israel's terms as formulated in the summer of 2000 would have aroused accusations against the PA — and against Fatah in particular — of betraying the spirit of the struggle and the objectives that guided its quest for institutionalized status. While various states and international organizations were expected to back such an agreement and commit themselves to assist in stabilizing the Palestinian state, international sympathy was not perceived as suitable compensation for the anticipated loss of popular Palestinian support following its concessions. In other words, on the eve of Camp David, the basis of political legitimacy was not broad enough where the Arab-Muslim world was concerned, nor was it significant enough where the international setting in general was concerned, to compensate Fatah for the anticipated weakening of its popular basis of legitimacy in the wake of acceptance of Israel's proposal.

Moreover, Fatah's organizational basis of legitimacy — its standing in the Territories — did not permit risking erosion of the popular support on which it relied. In the years that followed the Oslo accords, Fatah strove to preserve the leading status to which it had laid claim since its formation. Its formal status was reinforced through an administrative system established within the context of its primacy within the PA. This system has been governed by the organization's own people, particularly cadres who came to the Territories from the headquarters in Tunis. This organizational buildup did not exempt Fatah from the need to maintain its base of popular support. To preserve its status, Fatah had to fulfil the mandate awarded to it by the Oslo accords and by additional agreements signed with the Israeli governments in subsequent years, and by furthering Palestinian national aspirations. Dialogue with Israel ruled out the use of the course of action that had served as a primary means of mobilization — violent struggle. Now the only legitimate *modus operandi* was political dialogue.

The gradual transfer of territories in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from Israeli to PA control was contingent on fighting opposition forces that hoped to frustrate the political process through violent struggle — the same tactic on which Fatah had built much of its legitimacy in years past. When these same opposition forces succeeded in carrying out violent attacks on Israelis, Israel suspended the negotiations and/or held up the implementation of agreements, arguing that these attacks testified to the PA's lack of either ability or intention to control opposition groups. The PA was therefore compelled to walk a tightrope: all-out war against the opposition, as demanded by Israel, could have prevented a regression in the PA's goal of obtaining political institutionalization. Yet fighting opposition groups decreased popular support, another pillar of Fatah's legitimacy. Over the years it seemed that the PA, through various security apparatuses, had managed to reduce the danger to the continuation of the political process from belligerent opposition forces. However, the price was steep in terms of popular support:

suppression of opposition included silencing critics that had hoped to promote improved norms of governance within the PA. The failure to make good on democratization of Palestinian politics, evidence of crass violations of civil rights, and reports of corruption and improper use of foreign aid resulted in public dissatisfaction. This in turn increased tension between the PA leadership and local forces, which had suffered a loss in the wake of the institutionalization of the leadership arriving from Tunis. Added to this were the economic doldrums into which the Occupied Territories declined, and the absence of independent growth. A narrow class formed in the Territories, accumulating economic and political advantages during the years of the political process, while the general public waited for the promised long-term improvement of the situation. Holdups in implementing decisions on further withdrawal, in addition to growth in Israeli settlements in the Territories, eroded the legitimacy of the Oslo process and by extension, that of the PA and its leading organization.

The failure of the Camp David summit in July 2000 increased the sense of futility that prevailed in the Territories. On the one hand, public opinion polls held there indicated considerable apprehension regarding a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood; on the other hand, no progress in the negotiations with Israel was in sight. Prior to the eruption of the Al-Aqsa *intifada*, the PA faced a choice between stabilizing its *external* legitimacy through political action, and stabilizing its *domestic* legitimacy through violent struggle. In the weeks that followed Camp David it seemed that the PA had opted for the former; preparations were made for a confrontation with Israeli security forces, but no initiative to this effect was taken. The PA focused on attempts to mobilize international — and especially Arab — sympathy, for its refusal to accept Israel's positions, but this move had only marginally importance to the residents of the Territories. In any event the impression was that the PA was facing an almost, if not totally, impossible political situation. The Territories were filled with tension stemming from criticism of the PA and, in time, a local incident sufficed to spark the popular uprising.

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From the onset of the disturbances in the Territories, the second operational alternative — channeling the agitation into a head-on confrontation with Israel — became a default option. Under the evolving circumstances, leading the street forces by diverting the function of governing apparatuses to management of the confrontation with the IDF, was the most obvious development. These apparatuses included the police, the preventive security, and the locally organized Tanzim. The Fatah leadership had for years sustained the Tanzim, which was aimed at controlling and directing the street forces if and when the need arose. When the unrest, which increased in light of domestic difficulties and a political impasse, threatened the status of the PA and its leading organization — the need did indeed arise. The swiftness with which these apparatuses took command of the uprising averted a loss of control, shortened the phase of popular uprising, and converted it into an organized and more violent struggle. Notably, the popular uprising did not abate all at once, but rather was coordinated and manipulated by the PA in order to mobilize external political support. Media coverage of the confrontation — between popular forces and a regular army — was intended to mobilize international sympathy for the Palestinian struggle. This, it was hoped, would translate into pressure on Israel, which would compensate the PA for an anticipated ebb in Israel's readiness to make the concessions it had raised in negotiations, which were in any event far removed from what the PA was willing or able to accept.

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Fatah did not initiate the manner or the timing of the eruption of Al Aqsa *intifada*. Nevertheless, its taking up position at the head of the camp was inevitable. Through this step Fatah emphasized its adherence to its historic task as champion of the Palestinian national ethos. The confrontation with the IDF was meant to convey to various target audiences from whom Fatah derived legitimacy

for its leading position — headed by the residents of the Territories and the Palestinian refugee camps outside the Territories — the message that it was entitled to and worthy of its leadership status. This goal was no less — perhaps even more — significant than the declared objectives of the uprising — breaking the political deadlock by diverting international attention to the Palestinian problem and creating circumstances which would arouse criticism against Israel. This analysis also points to the dynamics that would probably lead to an order by the PA to bring the confrontation to a halt. The violent struggle, which was declared as a war for national liberation, would continue alongside the political struggle, at least in a limited and controlled manner, until exhaustion of its ability to minimize threats to the popular basis of legitimacy of the PA. It is likely to decrease only when it will become detrimental to the PA status. Indications to this effect would take the form of public indecision in the Territories regarding the efficacy of the struggle, and increased domestic as well as external pressure on the PA to return to the negotiations. Renewed emphasis on the political process will presumably also be accompanied by a PA effort to stabilize its status *vis-à-vis* domestic forces, particularly Hamas and the Tanzim, who stepped up their influence on the Palestinian political system during the uprising.

The national position of Fatah had been institutionalized long ago. Any agreement reached in order to advance an interim or permanent settlement of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, would inevitably be an outcome of the volatile struggle led by Fatah over the years. To complete the circle, the organization's historic leadership is striving to set its indelible seal on this agreement. Fatah's leading role in the struggle proves yet again that it will not aim for a declaration of independence under any condition. A possible result of this realization would be the expansion of the political flexibility that would assist the organization to adopt and spearhead difficult decisions when the moment of truth arrives.

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