

Fatah's Electoral Defeat: The End of Inertia

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The Fatah movement, the principal organizational element within the PLO for several decades and in the Palestinian Authority (PA) since its establishment in 1994, approached the January 2006 elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) while threatened from within and without. The cumulative erosion in the public's faith in the Fatah leadership, together with internal divisions reflected in the movement's failed preparations for the elections, helped its leading rival, the Hamas movement, make the most of its own corruption-free image and organizational skills and score a sweeping victory in the elections.¹

Fatah has recorded impressive accomplishments since its founding in the late 1950s. Originally a small, clandestine organization, it was established as a militant opposition to the political order in the Middle East. With the passage of time Fatah's organizational core acquired extensive inter-organizational and community influence and ultimately became a recognized body with acknowledged credentials in the international arena. Over the years the movement also suffered setbacks and failures, but its leadership displayed considerable powers of survival and rehabilitation notwithstanding tense and hostile interaction with the sur-

roundings. At this juncture, however, it is doubtful whether Fatah will be able to regain its historic status in the wake of the current crisis. This is because the crushing defeat in the elections is the climax of an incremental decline on the movement's three levels upon which it built its powerbase: the organizational system, popular support, and international recognition both of the PLO and the Fatah-led PA as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.

The Organizational System

The PA collapsed during the al-Aqsa intifada, before it had matured enough to become an effective means of legislative and executive governance. At the same time and as part of the process of governmental disintegration, Fatah's own organiza-

tional system fell apart. Fatah has always known splits and divisions, but against the backdrop of years of violent confrontation with Israel the movement evolved into a nominal framework for a web of loosely connected factions. Notwithstanding the various distinctions between the factions, the differences can be reduced to a single crude line separating the generation of veterans from the succeeding generation of leaders and activists. On both sides of this line are individuals and groups that have cultivated their power on the combined basis of region, family associations, connections with field operatives, and internal organizational politics.

One camp centers on the generation of founders, most of whom arrived in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in the early nineties, after the

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Oslo accords were signed. This generation, which is currently led by Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), historically has much to its credit. Its members lent

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structure and meaning to Palestinian politics, which hitherto was an amorphous cluster of organizations built on diverging ideological and regional trends and collective frustration that did not coalesce into a platform for action. Yet with the passage of time, particularly after the establishment of the PA in the territories under the Oslo accords, the members of this generation became a target for stinging public criticism over corruption, faulty management, and political and economic incompetence. The generation of founders, identified with nation building, ultimately became associated with the failure in state building.

The other camp comprises Fatah's intermediate generation, those who began their political careers during the first intifada and consolidated their standing during the second. Prominent representatives of this group include Marwan Barghouti (imprisoned in Israel), Muhammad Dahlan, and Jibril Rajoub. The two

uprisings in the territories were in themselves the very reflection of this generation's growing activism. In addition to the obvious opposition to the Israeli occupation, the first intifada expressed frustration with the political incompetence of the Fatah-led PLO. During the uprising, the Fatah leadership realized the threat to its status brewing in the territories. The rising star of figures from the territories and their emerging connections with Israeli political figures and the US administration drove the Arafat camp to Oslo as a recourse to forestall any independent arrangement by the local leadership and Israel. In addition to disappointment with non-implementation of the Oslo accords and the failure of negotiations at the Camp David summit in 2000, the second intifada reflected frustration with the failure of the Fatah-led PA to realize the political and economic potential promised with its establishment. Over a decade after the veteran Fatah leadership arrived in the territories, the intermediate generation understood that it had to distance itself from the failed image that has cloaked the PA. Its demand to translate its own achievements in the struggle against Israel into official positions of influence has gained force.

Prior to the parliamentary elections a dispute arose between the two camps over the ranking of candidates on the leadership's list. In order to contain the (already limited) influence of the intermediate generation on the street forces, Mahmoud Ab-

bas included operatives from al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in the PA's security branches. The Brigades, nominally affiliated with Fatah, operate independently and have even collaborated occasionally with Islamic Jihad on a local basis in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In order to limit representation of members of the intermediate generation in the "Homeland" list, Fatah's list in the elections, Abbas, in his capacity as chairman of the Fatah appointments committee, reserved places on the list for people who played historic roles in the movement's leadership, but who currently lack any basis of support and therefore did not run in the preliminary elections in late November 2005. Among these were Ahmed Qurei, who was placed first on the list, and Nabil Sha'ath. Marwan Barghouti, who won a majority of the votes in the preliminary elections, was placed second on the list.

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Operatives from the Brigades reacted to election irregularities and later to the published list of "Homeland" candidates with violent protests against the elections committee offices at a number of locations in both

the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. For their part, leaders of the intermediate generation responded by forming the "Future" list. The list was filed on December 14, 2005, the final day for political parties to submit their lists of candidates for the elections. The following days were devoted to combining the lists in order to advance the only clear interest common to both camps – blocking the rising power of the Hamas movement.

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However, merging the two camps did not prevent the Hamas victory. Moreover, the large number of Fatah candidates in the regional lists led to diffusion of the votes and apparently handed Hamas, which took part in the elections as the "Coalition for Reform and Change," an achievement that exceeded actual support for the movement.²

Popular Support

Fatah still enjoys influence in the Palestinian street, but popular support for the movement is based on acknowledgment of its historic role and is divided among factions according

to the lines that reflect the intra-organizational friction. In recent years Fatah's political standing has largely rested on inertia and, in the absence of general elections, was not put to an official test. The results of the January elections for the Legislative Council thus signified the end of the inertia in terms of traditional support for Fatah, and indicated the intensity of the desire for reform and change in the territories. In practice, Fatah has for some years shared influence with Hamas, which has evolved as the principal contender for leadership in the struggle against Israel and in the civilian arena. The two arenas, in which Fatah enjoyed an invincible position for many years, are inseparable. Taking on a direct struggle against Israel consolidated Hamas's civilian standing and the street-level support for Hamas, which grew as the movement filled the void left by the collapse of the PA's civil infrastructure, and acted as a platform for recruiting activists to the violent struggle. Thus, every Hamas achievement eroded Fatah's already diminishing status.

In the two rounds of the elections for the local councils in the West Bank in the first half of 2005, Hamas candidates earned about 30 percent of the votes. In mid-December, a few weeks before the scheduled elections for the Legislative Council and with the internal conflict in Fatah intensifying, Hamas won 60 percent or more of the votes in a number of councils. Consequently, the movement was able to take control of important councils, without needing to form a coalition

with Fatah. Hamas's achievements in the local elections reflected appreciation for the performance of the candidates who had won in the previous elections. Hence, control of

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the councils served the movement as a springboard to attaining additional key positions, both at the local and the national levels. Further evidence of the change in the balance of power between the movements was provided by the agreement signed by Hamas and Fatah in March 2005, which mandated that Hamas would take part in the elections for the Legislative Council in return for a temporary halt (*tahdiya*) to the violent struggle against Israel. On the other hand, Hamas spurned an offer by Fatah in July 2005 to join a unity government.

The *tahdiya* agreement reflected Hamas's capacity for flexibility as it tried to entrench its position by exercising restraint in the very arena that has always been its principal domain for recruiting support. In September 2005, following Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip, Hamas continued solidifying the movement's military and civilian infrastructure in the West Bank. At the same time, the movement leadership announced that its members would stop the firing of Kassam rockets from the Gaza Strip to the western Negev; since then, its

military arm, Izz a-Din al-Kassam, has confined itself to sporadic attacks in the territories. As a prelude to the elections, Izz a-Din al-Kassam units desisted from any spectacular breach of the agreement and from renewing their competition with Islamic Jihad, which sought to trigger another wave of escalation by staging showcase terrorist attacks inside Israel and by firing Kassam rockets.³ Unlike Islamic Jihad, Hamas also refrained from a violent response to the killing of its operatives by the IDF. Israel's with-

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drawal from the Gaza Strip, which earned Hamas much credit in Palestinian public opinion, is still a recent memory. This strategic accomplishment detracted from the remaining shreds of belief in Fatah's ability to break the political-territorial impasse, has spared Hamas the need for immediate tactical achievements in the struggle against Israel, and contributed to the movement's electoral victory.

Fatah's weakness protected Hamas from moves designed to reduce its military strength. In October 2005, after Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip, Fatah forces were stationed in the region. However, Fatah

and PA security agencies did not act systematically to eliminate illegal bearing of arms, specifically the disarming of Hamas. Given the power struggle in Fatah and the rivalry between Fatah and Hamas, no member of the PA's security apparatus would risk measures that could arouse public dissent. Statements by members of the intermediate generation in Fatah in favor of continuing the armed conflict with Israel should be interpreted in this light.⁴ Mahmoud Abbas himself claimed that Israel's attacks on the Gaza Strip would not reduce the firing of Kassam rockets and would lead to escalation. The few arrests carried out by the PA's security services prior to the parliamentary elections focused on Islamic Jihad, which has no grass roots support and as such constitutes a relatively convenient target.⁵

Hamas, founded soon after the first intifada erupted, represented an organizational and strategic transformation of the Muslim Brotherhood. The movement proposed "an Islamic solution" to all the challenges facing the residents of the territories. The ideological message adopted by Hamas matched the regional trend, but the timing of its establishment was one of the expressions of the same dynamic that motivated residents of the territories to resort to a direct struggle against Israel, without instructions from the outside, i.e., the veteran PLO leadership. With the movement's creation the Hamas leadership declared its intention of establishing itself as a viable alternative to the PLO. In

the past few years Hamas has made major strides toward achieving this goal, and democratization in the PA has helped it realize the potential of its influence without making binding ideological concessions. The *tahdiya* was of an operative nature only and its importance grew with the results of the elections, as it became a means of securing the electoral gain.

The International Arena

The two Fatah camps have accepted the principle of a negotiated agreement with Israel. However, they are divided in the way they view the instrumental relationship between popular support and international legitimacy. The intermediate generation aspires to translate its grass roots support into influence over the political agenda, while the veteran leadership adheres to the path the PA has followed since its inception – endeavoring to translate international recognition into consolidation of its domestic position. This approach failed because of the PA's inability to impose law and order and to halt terrorism against Israel. Thus, the veteran Fatah leadership reached an impasse: without achieving exclusive control of arms it was unable to lead the PA to a political process; and without making political progress the PA could not recruit public support in the territories for measures that might restore its control over arms, deny Israel a reason to launch military action, allow economic and institutional rehabilitation, rally the movement's activists around it, and,

possibly, slow down Hamas's build-up.

As a result, the Palestinian Authority's international status, under Fatah's leadership, became less secure. While international recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to national independence remained as firm as before the outbreak of the intifada, against the stagnation in the political process a gap emerged between the PA's international standing and the very political goal that it was created to promote. The partners in the political process in the Middle East – the United States and the European Union – have remained wedded to the PA as a partner for dialogue. However, for some years the talks have focused on ongoing security matters and are of no immediate political purpose, also due in part to Israel's lack of interest in a resumption of talks. In the months before the elections, contacts with the PA were maintained out of a sense of increasing urgency, with a design to strengthen it against the rise of Hamas.⁶ Yet on the whole, the political process was far less relevant to the Palestinian political discourse than it had been during the first years of the intifada. The Fatah leadership was preoccupied with trying to rehabilitate its domestic standing, not necessarily in order to allow renewal of the process but for reasons of survival, and the various Fatah factions were mostly busy with a power struggle between themselves and far less with issues relating to the struggle's objectives and tactics.

The Next Stage

Stabilization of the Palestinian political system will be prolonged and difficult. Some of the problems will be caused by division of authority between the PA's executive branch and its legislative branch, in other words, between the roles assigned to Fatah members and those to be transferred to Hamas following the election results. Mahmoud Abbas is looking to maintain control of the security services that according to PA law are under the president's jurisdiction, as a means of limiting Hamas's

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takeover of the PA and as a basis for recovering Fatah's standing. He has also voiced opposition to transferring the security forces it controls to Hamas power, and rejected Hamas's proposal to unify all the branches into a single military framework that would incorporate the movement's military arm as well. In accordance with the constitution, the president will continue to administer the PA's foreign relations, which is convenient for Fatah and, for now, for Hamas too. The widely-shared concern that Hamas's rise to power will acceler-

ate the spread of the Islamic message in the Middle East may help Fatah strengthen its image as the only viable partner in the political process. For its part, Hamas needs cooperation with Fatah in order to prevent cutbacks and delays in foreign economic aid, without which it cannot provide for the basic needs of the population in the territories or consolidate its regime.⁷ Because of this, after the Fatah leadership rejected its proposal to establish a unity government outright, the Hamas leadership suggested that the government comprise mainly technocrats, rather than politicians.

The PA's constitution paints the balance of power in the Palestinian political system that existed when it was drawn up: the consolidation of power in the hands of the president reflected the balance of power within Fatah itself – between the "inside" and "outside" loci of power, and between Fatah under Yasir Arafat and other organizations. In theory, this legal basis of the PA's structure left Fatah with influential resources. In practice, however, Hamas's electoral victory will constrain Fatah's ability to employ these resources for contending with the combined challenge that faces it: rehabilitation of the movement's organizational system, bolstering grass roots support, and maintaining its international standing.

Fatah faces a period of internal turmoil as a direct result of the tensions that split the movement prior to the parliamentary elections. Control of the forces in the field loosely

aligned with the movement will continue to be at the center of the power struggle between the old guard and the intermediate generation. Immediately after the elections al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades renewed their military activity on the West Bank, indicating their intention to defend the freedom of action they acquired during the intifada years. Brigades members even broke into the offices of the Legislative Council in Ramallah and demanded the resignation of the veteran leadership. Concurrently, calls were voiced by members of the intermediate generation to convene the movement's congress in order to appoint a new leadership that would take on the challenge of recuperation and unification.

One particularly difficult problem with which Fatah is faced is preserving its grass roots level support. As an opposition factor with limited access to PA resources, it will be even harder for Fatah to maintain its bond with the public via the education, welfare, and health systems in the territories. Measures designed to improve Fatah's image and restore trust in it, such as investigating cases of corruption and promising to eradicate the problem, were taken only after the elections – too late to reap results on the domestic scene.

In the international arena, the limited room for ideological flexibility that Hamas can allow itself without losing its identity and credibility seems to leave Fatah a basis for improving its international standing. However, the makeup of the PLC

will not allow Fatah to lead a practical political program, and as there is no political plan in the offing, now more than ever the Fatah leadership lacks any incentive to employ the PA's security forces in a fight against independent militant elements. The onus of restraining Islamic Jihad will be left to Hamas alone, while leading figures within Fatah will endeavor to use al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades as individual and factional powerbases. The broad international support accorded to Abbas in reaction to the Hamas victory, currently the only advantage Fatah holds over Hamas, may delay the change of personnel in the movement's leadership but not for long.

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Conclusion

The results of the parliamentary elections strengthened two intertwined trends that have been growing since the first intifada: erosion of the hegemony of the old Fatah leadership within the movement and the Palestinian political system in general, and

transfer of the focus of the Palestinian struggle from "outside" forces to "inside" forces. In recent years, the two forces that have challenged the standing of the veteran Fatah leadership – Hamas on the one hand and the intermediate generation of Fatah on the other – in effect constitute a single factor with greater significance than the ideological, strategic, and organizational differences between them. Both reflect the consolidation of internal forces against the backdrop of two popular uprisings. Representatives of the generation that sparked the uprisings and led them are now claiming the political asset that for many years belonged exclusively to the Fatah-led PLO: sole representation of the international Palestinian movement.

In addition to changing the power dynamics between Fatah and Hamas, the elections also signified a new stage in the battle between rival internal forces. The elections gave Hamas an institutional advantage and the movement is looking to preserve its achievement, partly through the *tahdiya*, however temporary and conditional. Recognition of the constraints generated by the elections also forced the Hamas leadership based in Damascus to respond to Egypt's demand to grant long-term strategic significance to the *tahdiya*. At the same time Hamas will aim to weaken further Fatah's centers of influence. However, Fatah's intermediate generation will not easily relinquish its traditional strongholds and its claim to the leadership, whether it is faced

with the veteran Fatah leadership or Hamas. The two emerging camps, the Fatah intermediate generation and Hamas, will likely try to collaborate, particularly on local civilian matters, and will as much as possible avoid steps that may lead to direct and extensive confrontation. Nonetheless, it can be envisaged that should the struggle between them intensify it will involve not only civil strife but also staging terrorist attacks on Israel, since this is a proven means of enlisting popular support. Additional disengagement moves by Israel, for example, would encourage each to try to credit itself with an achievement in the West Bank similar to that of the disengagement from the Gaza Strip. An escalation in the internal Palestinian conflict, which would lead to an escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, would make it more difficult to rehabilitate the civilian, economic, and administrative infrastructures in the territories, or revive the prospects for advancing a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian settlement.

Notes

1. Hamas won 74 out of 132 seats in the legislative council, while Fatah won only 45. In the previous council elections of 1996, Fatah won 63 of the 83 seats.
2. A survey conducted by the Palestinian Public Opinion Polls Center in December 2005 indicated support of about 50 percent of inhabitants of the West Bank for Fatah, compared with approximately 32 percent support for Hamas. *Jerusalem Post*, December 11, 2005, *Haaretz Online*, December 19, 2005.
3. A survey conducted by the Palestinian Public Opinion Polls Center in November 2005 indicated support of about 75 percent for the *tahdiya* in the Gaza Strip, and 51 percent support in the West Bank. Ynet, November 9 2005.
4. "Belligerent statements by senior figures in the 'intermediate generation in Fatah'... legitimize terrorist operations," Intelligence and Terrorism Center at the Center for Special Studies (C.S.S.), November 11, 2005.
5. At the same time, in mid-November 2005 Abbas approved the continuation of broadcasts by Islamic Jihad's radio station.
6. The US State Department continued to support the councils in the Gaza Strip that have been controlled by Hamas representatives since the local elections in summer 2005. However, following the victories of Hamas's representatives in the elections to the local councils in December 2005, the US House of Representative decided by a large majority to stop supporting the Palestinian Authority if Hamas officials control the government, thereby signaling that the administration would not necessarily accept the results of democratization in the PA if they departed from those the administration intended when it demanded acceleration of the process by means of general elections.
7. American aid to the Authority totals \$234 million a year. European aid is \$600 million a year.