

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

May 15, 2005

CONSEQUENCES OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

Anat Kurz
Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

A major political-strategic objective of Hamas since its creation has been to institutionalize itself as an alternative to Fatah as the dominant force, first in the PLO and thereafter in the Palestinian Authority, as well. As an intermediate goal, Hamas leaders during the first *intifada* sought to be incorporated into the PLO, on condition that they be given 40% representation in PLO institutions. That demand was grounded in the degree of support among the population in the West Bank and Gaza claimed by the movement's leaders, and it became a constant feature in the list of conditions put forward in ongoing Fatah-Hamas talks, particularly the discussions in the latter stages of the second *intifada* aimed at limiting the violence of the "armed struggle." For its part, Fatah consistently rejected the demand to confer on Hamas the status of influential partner in the PA, even though that could have reduced the incidence of terrorism and strengthened the PA's international standing.

Recently, however, there has been a clear shift in the balance of forces between the two movements. In two rounds of local elections, in February and early May, Hamas representatives gained about 30% of the votes, in part because the social welfare activities of Hamas winners in the first round gave a boost to Hamas candidates in the second round. And while Fatah retained

its overall primacy, the election results clearly showed that it now faces a substantial force with considerable potential to do even better in the future. That potential will be tested in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections scheduled for July 2005. In short, the process of democratization, to which the PA is committed, relieves Hamas of any further need for inter-organizational compromises in order to be legally incorporated into the national leadership.

Parallel to its "civilian" competition with Fatah, Hamas has acted to preserve and enhance its senior position in the armed struggle against Israel. True, the Palestinian organizations led by Hamas and Fatah did reach an agreement in March 2005 on *tahidia* ("relaxation"). Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), the elected Chairman of the PA, needed that agreement in order to advance his plans to reform and unify the various PA security organs (a requirement for the restoration of PA control of the territories), and Hamas compliance was a necessary if not sufficient condition – other organizations were also involved in terrorism – for achieving these goals. But it is also true that since that agreement was reached, there has been a steady rise in the incidence of attacks launched in and from the Gaza Strip – mostly in the form of Qassam rocket and mortar attacks on the western Negev – by Hamas operatives. These reflect the

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

www.dayan.org/

movement's determination to make the point that disengagement from Gaza amounts to Israeli acknowledgement that the Palestinian popular struggle cannot be suppressed by military means and that it will, in any case, be carried out under fire. The attacks are also meant to show that the PA's security forces are incapable of ending the "armed intifada."

Since the post-*tahidia* Qassams have not resulted in any casualties, Israel has not felt the need to take immediate or large-scale counter-measures. Nevertheless, the incessant firing underscores the PA's reluctance to risk internal strife by enforcing a real ceasefire on Hamas or other organizations, including Fatah-affiliated factions. Instead, the PA has thus far relied on inducements such as recruitment of militants into its own security agencies, rather than coercive measures such as their forcible disarmament.

But by shying away from open confrontation, the PA also risks further blows to its own standing. For example, although Israel handed over some areas of the West Bank to Palestinian security control immediately after Abu Mazen's election, further such steps were postponed because of ongoing terrorist activity. Israel also suspended plans for additional prisoner releases. Such developments inevitably undermine the PA's standing and further strengthen the opposition. The PA is therefore caught in a trap – policies deemed necessary to enhance its domestic standing preclude measures designed to establish its reputation as a reliable negotiating partner for Israel.

Hamas effectively exploits this trap. Since it was founded during the first *intifada*, it has steadily broadened its public appeal as a central element of the struggle front. Its growing influence has expanded the infrastructure of terrorism but also consolidated the power base upon which it relies as it pursues its contacts with the PA. The most recent gains have come following Abu Mazen's election. In exchange for Hamas' acceptance of *tahidia*, the Fatah leadership has endorsed changes to the elections

law for the Legislative Council, i.e., the introduction of a degree of proportional representation, that will make it easier for Hamas to achieve electoral expression of the popular support it enjoys. In other words, Hamas has registered a political gain without being forced to abide fully by its obligations under the agreement.

Hamas therefore rejects any thought of postponing PLC elections until late 2005 – an idea raised by some Fatah activists who fear current trends in public opinion as reflected in the local elections and hope that a delay will allow them to put together a united list of candidates and make more substantial progress in security sector reforms. But Hamas is determined to eliminate any plausible basis for Fatah's traditional claim to be the "sole legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people. The democratization of the Palestinian political system – which is enthusiastically supported inside the territories and encouraged by Israel and the international community – will advance Hamas' goal.

Persistent terrorist attacks in and from the Gaza Strip underscore questions being raised about the strategic rationale behind the disengagement, and a dramatic upsurge in attacks could even delay its implementation. In any event, disengagement will take place against the backdrop either of escalating conflict between Hamas and Fatah (if the PLC elections are postponed) or of Hamas' formal integration into the Palestinian leadership. In the latter case, Hamas may actually accommodate the widespread Palestinian desire for some normalization of daily life and help to restrain acts of terror against Israel. But even in that case, Hamas is unlikely to moderate its ideological platform in the foreseeable future, and a PA in which Hamas plays a central role will be an even more implacable political adversary for Israel.

KEYWORD: Palestinians