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THE PROPOSAL FOR A PALESTINIAN REFERENDUM: WHO'S THE BOSS?

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On May 11, Palestinian prisoners in Israel published a "National Reconciliation Document." The document posed a serious challenge to the Hamas-led government and its endorsement by Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas sharpened the question hovering over the Palestinian political system for several years: "Who is the boss?"

The document was signed by members of Fatah, Hamas, the Popular Front and Islamic Jihad and the text was aimed at helping to end the international sanctions on the PA and to undermine the Israeli justification for unilateral realignment that threatens to block any chance of creating a Palestinian state in all the territories occupied in 1967 and realizing the "right of return." In addition, the document called for implementation of Arab Summit resolutions supporting the Palestinian people and the "focusing" of the resistance to Israel in the territories beyond the "Green Line." Other articles addressed ways to promote national unity and cooperation between the Fatah-controlled Presidency and the Hamas-led government.

Abbas has described the document as "a realistic political vision." In fact, the principles in it reflect the policies he has tried to promote both as Prime Minister in 2003 and since his election to the Presidency in January 2005. But

Abbas not only declared his support; he tried to exploit the document in order to broaden his influence in the context both of organizational politics – by adopting an approach acceptable to leading members of Fatah's younger generation – and of national affairs – at the expense of Hamas. About two weeks after the document was published, Abbas stipulated a target-date for a referendum on the document if it were not totally accepted by Hamas before then. This is part of his campaign to secure public support in the struggle with Hamas over control of the PA, which now takes priority over the dialogue with Israel – a secondary objective in light of the collapse of institutions and the destruction of infrastructure in the PA-controlled territories.

The contents of the document immediately provoked considerable controversy within Hamas. Parliament Speaker Abd al-Aziz Douek, for example, did not categorically reject the proposals concerning inter-organizational cooperation. Other members made acceptance of the document conditional on certain changes. And Prime Minister Ismail Haniyya said that he had to study the document before he could accede to a referendum, although he also characterized the proposal for a referendum as illegal since it was intended to erode Hamas' gains in the recent elections. On this point he

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was backed by Foreign Minister Mahmoud az-Zahar and by Khaled Mashal, the Damascus-based head of Hamas' Political Department. Over time, however, the reservations and calls to defer the issue were increasingly replaced by outright rejection of the idea of a referendum, and Hamas signatories to the document were pressured to show "factional discipline."

The policies contained in the document and especially Abbas' intention to put it to a referendum are the clearest reflection of the poisoned relationship between the Presidency and the incumbent government. All the divisions essentially stem from the same source – Fatah's refusal to give up its traditional bases of power and Hamas' demand to realize its rights according to the election results and the PA's Basic Law. In response to Abbas' refusal to hand over control of the PA's security agencies to the Hamas-controlled Interior Ministry, for example, Hamas – in defiance of a presidential decree – organized armed activists into a militia whose mission is to impose Hamas authority on the streets of Gaza. Abbas, for his part, announced the formation of yet another force in the West Bank to operate on behalf of Fatah. He also transferred authority over the Palestinian News Agency from the Interior Ministry to his own office, thereby depriving Hamas of a major communications channel. Hovering over all these actions are ongoing mutual accusations: by Fatah, that Hamas is responsible for the economic deterioration in the territories because its election provoked the cutoff of international assistance to the PA; by Hamas, that Fatah is responsible for the institutional and social anarchy of the past few years.

On June 10, following the failure of Fatah-Hamas talks about the document and the possibility of a ceasefire and the expiration of the ultimatum given to Hamas, Abbas issued a presidential order to hold the referendum on July 26. At the same time, Hamas and Islamic Jihad

signatories to the document withdrew their support for it. Thus, the group of prisoners who had briefly managed to overcome their organizational rivalries once again split.

In warding off the threat posed by Abbas' call for a referendum, Hamas was helped by both the upsurge in Israeli-Palestinian violence and the escalation in factional fighting. Non-stop Qassam rocket fire from Gaza and attacks or attempted attacks on Israeli targets were answered by intensified IDF pursuit of terrorists in the West Bank and Gaza and by massive artillery fire on Gaza. The latter sometimes caused civilian casualties, and in response to deaths of Palestinian civilians on a Gaza beach, Hamas officially announced the cancellation of the *tahdi'a* (relaxation) agreement signed with Fatah in March 2005 – although its activists were instructed to hold fire following an Israeli threat to target the leadership. Against this background, Abbas would be unable to mobilize the support needed for his policies which, from the prevailing Palestinian perspective, constitute a major concession to and conciliation of Israel. On the domestic front, street demonstrations were organized by Fatah and Hamas activists and armed clashes intensified, involving rocket fire, assassinations and attacks on government facilities. In such circumstances, it would be logistically impossible to organize a referendum.

The irony in all this is that the prisoners' document, which was intended to patch up differences between the Palestinian factions and perhaps even lay the groundwork for renewed dialogue with Israel, has instead become just one more theater of conflict. Hamas has managed, once again, to block an attempt by Abbas to strengthen his standing, and the organizational and national conciliation the document hoped to promote remains as elusive as ever.

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