

# The Internal Israeli-Palestinian Conflicts: Continuity and Change in Domestic Politics

Nov 15, 2011



Brief Analysis

**O**n November 8, 2011, Khalil Shikaki and Shai Feldman addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Shikaki, a senior fellow with the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University, has directed the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah since 2000. Dr. Feldman is the Judith and Sidney Swartz director of the Crown Center and a professor of politics at Brandeis. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## KHALIL SHIKAKI

**T**hus far, Hamas and Fatah have fared well in weathering the Arab Spring. Although the former's popularity was significantly lower than Fatah's when thousands of Palestinians first took to the streets in March, neither faction was spared the angry demands for regime change and unity.

Hamas, under pressure from both Egypt and the street, dealt with the crisis by signing the May reconciliation agreement and cracking down on demonstrators. And with its triumphant conclusion of the Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange, the group effectively closed the door on any "Palestinian Spring" in Gaza.

In contrast, Fatah leader and Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas embarked on a successful two-pronged strategy of co-optation and reform. He also garnered support for his recent statehood campaign at the UN, albeit not as much as Hamas gained from the Shalit deal.

The greater challenge for both factions lies in navigating the regional fallout. For example, once Hamas realized that it would be suicidal to remain allied with Syrian president Bashar al-Asad in the face of his brutal suppression of demonstrators, the group immediately began searching for an alternative headquarters for its Damascus-based leadership by improving its relations with Egypt and Jordan. Meanwhile, Abbas suffered a heavy personal and strategic blow with the fall of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, who had been a vital ally. Although he has managed to maintain positive relations with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, he is concerned about the makeup of the next Egyptian government.

In seeking to make the most of the Arab Spring, then, Hamas has two main goals: ensuring that political change in Egypt serves its long-term interests, and transforming Gaza into a something like an independent state under its control. Several recent developments in Egypt serve the first goal, including Cairo's permanent (albeit limited) opening of the Rafah border crossing, the blind eye it turns to most contraband smuggling into Gaza, and the probability that Islamists will come to power in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Hamas has also made headway on the second goal, establishing all the formal institutions of a state, doing away with the position of president in its political system, all but discarding the Palestinian Basic Law, creating its own supreme judicial council, and stocking the parliament with Hamas officials. Its current reworking of Gaza visa requirements is further indicative of these statehood ambitions. Unless the Palestinian-Israeli peace process is revived within the next twelve months, changes in Hamas's regional status will crystallize, and Gaza statehood will

become only a matter of time.

For Abbas, the Arab Spring has provided a means of creating a real alternative to direct negotiations with Israel -- namely, public support for a nonviolent revolt. Because Abbas does not believe that such negotiations are currently a viable path to statehood, he now sees a combination of international diplomatic warfare and domestic nonviolent demonstrations as his only means of progress. This was also the nexus at which his initial cooptation of the "Palestinian Spring" took place; Abbas promised demonstrators that the PA would facilitate nonviolent protests in the West Bank as long as they do not threaten the PA's existence or the lives of Israelis.

Going forward, Hamas's success will greatly depend on its ability to shift its alliances. Jordan's recent decision to treat Hamas and Fatah equally has already facilitated this process, and a significant Muslim Brotherhood presence in Egypt's next government would also help Hamas in this regard. Furthermore, the group does not believe that its opposition to a two-state solution will hinder its dealings with either nation.

For Abbas, Washington and Israel's apparent reconsideration of sanctions against the PA may be a promising sign that they still value him as a partner for peace and rival to Hamas. Yet his state-building efforts will be at risk if he continues on his alternative path rather than resuming negotiations. Embarking on a nonviolent protest campaign could hold even greater risks, with demonstrations potentially spinning out of control and descending into violence -- an even more likely outcome if the campaign coincides with Israeli sanctions.

In the meantime, both Hamas and Fatah will continue to pay lip service to reconciliation and, in all likelihood, make some superficial progress. Yet because the public's call for reunification is more emotional than rooted in socioeconomic interests, such empty gestures will serve their purpose for now. To be sure, if presidential elections were held today, Fatah would be able to reunify the West Bank and Gaza on its own terms -- Hamas is in no position to win the presidency because the public does not support its Islamization drive in Gaza. For that same reason, however, Hamas would oppose any call for near-term elections, making them unlikely to take place anytime soon.

## **SHAI FELDMAN**

**S**everal major debates are taking place in Israel today, centering on Iran's nuclear program, the Palestinian statehood bid at the UN, recent developments in Egypt and Syria, and Turkey's regional ambitions. None of these debates threatens Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government -- whose track record, it should be mentioned, reveals that it is probably the most right-wing government in Israel's history.

Netanyahu's support was not affected by this summer's social/economic demonstrations in Israel. The protest movement is now suffering from internal fragmentation as it struggles to articulate a consensus on what government action it would like to see. In fact, Netanyahu's domestic support has improved due to five recent developments: his May speech to the U.S. Congress, his September speech to the UN General Assembly, his handling of the recent crisis with Egypt, the perception that he acted responsibly in the latest round of violence with Hamas, and the Gilad Shalit deal. Although calling for early elections in the spring may therefore be in Netanyahu's interest, a number of former prime ministers have done so in the past with a similar mindset only to meet defeat.

Most of the current domestic debates are not between the governing coalition and the opposition, but rather between coalition officials -- particularly the eight key ministers of Netanyahu's "inner" cabinet, as well as defense officials and other members of the government. Key political players have shown a growing tendency to abandon positions that they have stubbornly held in the past. Netanyahu, for instance, signed the Shalit deal despite his strong public opposition in earlier years. And others are adopting unexpected positions. On the issue of a military strike against Iran's nuclear program, for example, parliamentarians "Boogie" Yaalon and Benny Begin have taken more flexible, less hawkish stances than their traditional political dispositions would suggest.

Moreover, the substance of these debates seems to be more serious than Ehud Barak recently indicated. The debate

over a strike on Iran, for example, has encompassed not only the operational issues of such a mission, but also the timetable of the threat, the consequences of Iran going nuclear, the fallout from a preemptive strike, and how U.S.-Israeli relations should factor into such a decision. Although not all of the above is being explicitly expressed, it is important to note that such domestic debates -- contrary to press reports focusing on political drama and vendettas -- involve serious and multifaceted diplomatic and military deliberations.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Olivia Holt-Ivry. ❖*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022



Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

# Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

## TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)