

Where Have All the Palestinian Moderates Gone?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

In October 1999, while researching a book on Palestinian politics, I had coffee with then Palestinian minister of labor Rafik Natsheh on the patio of the InterContinental Hotel in Amman, Jordan. A member of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)'s Fatah Central Committee, Natsheh was a consummate political insider, but he was also a courageous and outspoken critic of Palestinian president Yasir Arafat's authoritarian tendencies at a time when deference to Arafat and support for violent resistance constituted the rough center of Palestinian politics. During our meeting, Natsheh struck me as soft-spoken, thoughtful, and politically "moderate." I subsequently wrote in my book that "it was clear that he [Natsheh] had become, surprisingly, a supporter of Oslo" -- the 1993 accord that laid the foundation for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to end the conflict.

I hadn't thought about that Amman meeting in years, until last week, when I read an interview with Natsheh in the pan-Arab daily al-Quds al-Arabi, where he said that Fatah, the faction of the PLO that led the campaign to forge peace with Israel through direct negotiations, "does not recognize Israel's right to exist." He added that Fatah had likewise never abandoned the armed struggle. What's more troubling, Natsheh's authoritative interview is the latest in a series of previously deniable comments by current and former senior Fatah officials -- including one-time Gaza security chief Mohammed Dahlan -- that undercut the fundamental premise of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking: the renunciation of violence and the acceptance of Israel's right to exist.

What seems clear to me now, as Fatah gathers in Bethlehem this week for its first general assembly in more than a decade, is that the recent statements of Natsheh and his fellow "moderates" signal a broader sea change in Palestinian politics that has occurred over the past decade. Democratic politics are indeed taking shape among Palestinians, but they're mirroring the increasingly extreme views of the population at large. In short, the desire for popular support has not moderated Hamas, but has radicalized Fatah.

No doubt, years of stagnation in the negotiations -- attributable at least in part to Fatah-orchestrated violence -- have proved frustrating and radicalizing for many Palestinians. Yet the recent statements from senior Fatah leaders also smack of political expedience. Fatah, it seems, is looking to shore up its political base, and that base has become more radical in the past several years. Recent surveys suggest that 52 percent of Palestinians support armed attacks against Israeli civilians inside Israel. So Fatah, which in recent years has lost ground to the Islamist terrorist organization Hamas, could be trying to better position itself by competing for militant votes.

Regardless of why Fatah is openly tacking to the right now, the statements have profound implications for Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. The leading faction of the PLO that signed the Oslo Accords with Israel -- in which both sides agreed to "recognize their mutual legitimate and political rights . . . and achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace settlement and historic reconciliation through the agreed political process" -- now says it never consented to the terms of the deal. Fatah's formal rejection of the Oslo terms of reference essentially constitutes the PLO's renunciation of the entire agreement.

Ever since Hamas militarily took over Gaza in 2007, advocates of the peace process have been promoting reconciliation between the Fatah-led government and the Islamist terrorist organization in the hopes of jump-starting Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The Obama administration via its peace envoy George Mitchell is even pressing for Syrian assistance in forging a Palestinian national unity government. Given Fatah's latest pronouncements, however, one wonders how this development would help move the talks along. Today, Fatah and Hamas are fighting for power in the Palestinian Authority (PA), but philosophically speaking, their positions on Israel appear closer than ever.

I had always believed that there were moderates within Fatah -- like Natsheh -- who supported peace negotiations and sought reconciliation with Israel. Even with the ascendance of Hamas, one could always point to a "peace constituency" among the Palestinians. But when people like Rafik Natsheh start denying Israel's right to exist, it's a sign that the Palestinian political center has shifted. Moderates still exist and the PA continues to take some positive steps -- such as removing militant preachers from West Bank mosques and cooperating with Israel on security matters -- but its actions seem more focused on preventing Hamas inroads than promoting peace with Israel. Indeed, recent reports indicate that the PA is currently naming streets in the West Bank after terrorists.

Sixteen years after the Oslo Accords -- and following repeated claims of Oslo's death -- Natsheh's comments confirm the end of that peace process. For years, Washington has placed its hopes in Mahmoud Abbas, the PA president who also serves as Fatah's leader. But in the absence of any denial coming from Abbas, the comments of Natsheh -- a close associate of Abbas -- stand as Fatah's official position. Today, Fatah may be better than Hamas, but the organization is clearly no panacea. Based on Fatah's disposition toward Israel, it is all but assured that a Palestinian national unity government will not advance negotiations. The sooner the Obama administration recognizes Fatah's shortcomings, the sooner it can start developing a new paradigm for Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

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