

Can Fatah Compete with Hamas?

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

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Articles & Testimony

It may be fashionable among some in Washington or even Tel Aviv to believe that it is time to talk to Hamas. But to the members of Fatah and the Palestinian independents in the West Bank with whom I have been meeting, it surely is not. What you hear from them is that Hamas is made up of killers; that they want to be part of a larger Islamist empire; that they are already trying to bring Iran to Gaza; and that the worse thing to do now is to reward Hamas with recognition.

For that reason, you also hear criticism of the Saudis who are pressing Mahmoud Abbas to reconcile with Hamas and forge a new national unity government. Indeed, I was struck by the almost unanimous sentiment that the reconciliation talks which both the Saudis and Egyptians are pushing -- and Hamas leaders like Ismail Haniyeh favor -- will not change Hamas's behavior. Instead, the story goes, Hamas will use them as a tactic to try to build its international acceptability. Worse, it would use a new national unity government to try to do in the West Bank what it has now done in Gaza.

Strong words, but is Fatah ready to compete? Can Fatah transform itself and connect again with the Palestinian public? Can its members reorganize themselves and build such a strong grassroots base that the balance of forces will change between Hamas and Fatah. (This competition might also affect the balance inside Hamas between those who are more programmatic and those who are most extreme). Hamas and within Hamas? Listen to Palestinians from different factions like Abu Kholi, a Palestinian Council member from Gaza, or Husayn Al-Sheikh, a member of the Tanzim from the West Bank, and you will hear that Fatah does not have a choice.

They will tell you that the Palestinian public is basically secular and wants a national, secular future. Hamas's position has grown within Palestinian society by default. The Palestinian public remains more alienated from Fatah than attracted to Hamas. But for Kholi, as-Sheikh, and others, all is not lost, and Fatah can regain its position in Palestinian society.

To do so, several things are required. First, Fatah must have new leaders. If there was one phrase I heard more than any other, it was "Fatah must have new faces." No one meant that a simple veneer would suffice. Rather that the Palestinian public would never believe that Fatah had remade itself if the same people led Fatah. Interestingly, I found great support for Salam Fayyad, now the prime minister, foreign minister, and finance minister of the new

emergency government of the Palestinian Authority (PA). He is not a member of Fatah, but his insistence on creating new institutions in the PA will inevitably build the credibility of the PA and, by extension, the credibility of Fatah.

Second, Fatah must be seen as delivering. What matters more than anything else is action and deeds, not only words. New faces in Fatah represent a starting point. But Fatah and the PA must be seen as active at the local level and being responsive socially and economically. Being responsive also means ending corruption and re-establishing not only the rule of law but a sense of security for Palestinians. It is interesting that Hamas is now trying to present itself in Gaza as restoring law and order. Fayyad is clearly trying to do the same thing in the West Bank. I saw an unprecedented number of heavily armed security forces in uniform on the ground in Ramallah. And Fayyad told me that this is deliberate: He is trying to establish a presence in each city to show that the PA is re-establishing order. Will the armed militias and the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades disarm or be incorporated in a disciplined way into the security forces? That remains a huge question, but Fayyad, at least, is trying to make the decree on disarming something other than an empty promise. Time will tell whether he can deliver on what he is trying to do, but I found much support for his efforts among some of the Tanzim that I met.

Third, there does need to be a sense of possibility about peace with Israel. A process, negotiations, dialogue, and the promise of changes on the ground will count for a lot. Ironically, I did not find the Palestinians I spoke with -- and the number is now over 40 in my two visits here in the last six weeks -- wanting to raise false expectations. No one expects an immediate breakthrough and resolution of the permanent status issues. Of course, that would be desirable. But what I saw was a desire for real, not illusionary changes. Changes that showed that day-to-day life, economically and practically in terms of mobility, would be transformed. Such changes would make permanent status negotiations more believable. Permanent status disconnected from the day-to-day realities will have no credibility. Palestinians would ask me, "If I cannot get from Nablus to Jenin, am I supposed to believe that I will have a state with an East Jerusalem capital?" That is why security and any political process are inevitably tied together.

All this has lessons for American statecraft now. We must keep our eye on the essential objective. The key question now is whether the Palestinians will have a secular future or an Islamist future. Our stake in a national, secular future for the Palestinians is very clear. Without that, there will be no prospect of peace, and Islamists will control the most evocative issue in the region. We should quietly be making that point with the Saudis. Pushing now for a national unity government will only strengthen Hamas, and Hamas's long-term success will mean that Iran will be able to use the Palestinian grievance and ongoing conflict as an instrument to keep the Saudis and others on the defensive.

Beyond this, our essential challenge is going to be how to ensure that Fatah succeeds. While many in Fatah understand the stakes and what is necessary, the call for new faces in Fatah means that the old faces have to be willing to step aside. There are no signs that they are ready to do so. Is Abbas ready to push them? It will go against his very nature to do so. But there is no alternative, and our role and new Middle East envoy Tony Blair's role will require constant pushing in this regard. But we can't just push. We must also deliver real resources. If there was one other refrain I heard from Palestinians, it was "Don't embrace Abbas and Fayyad unless you are also going to deliver real goods to them." Supporting them with great words will only destroy their credibility if we do not also deliver noticeable assistance that will at least improve the economic situation on the ground.

Results on the ground and real hopes will help Fatah. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would do well to keep this in mind. A credible negotiating process is one thing; a symbolic event like an international conference where only hard-line speeches are given that highlight how little prospect of agreement there is, and where there is no practical follow-up, is another. Palestinians are not looking for symbols now. They know the difference between symbols and reality. Let's hope the Bush administration does as well.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and

author of [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](#)

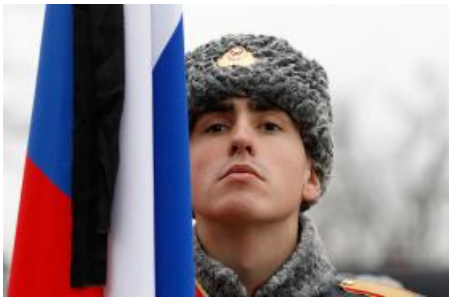
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