

The Future of Palestinian Politics

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

On April 24, 2007, Wafa' Abdel Rahman, Owen Kirby, and Mohammad Yaghi addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum on the Palestinian social and political environment since Hamas's victory in January 2006 legislative elections. Owen Kirby is the manager of the political pillar of the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative. Mohammad Yaghi is the Washington Institute's Lafer international fellow and a columnist for the Palestinian daily al-Ayyam. Wafa' Abdel Rahman is the founder and director of Filastiniyat and is currently visiting Washington on an Eisenhower fellowship. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

OWEN KIRBY

Democratic development in the Palestinian Authority (PA) is at the top of the Bush administration's priorities. While the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections of January 2006 were democratic, democratic elections by themselves do not constitute a democratic system. The current situation in the West Bank and Gaza cannot be called democratic by international norms. Respect for the rule of law and human rights and observation of individual rights and freedoms do not currently prevail in the PA.

Amongst the Palestinian people, however, the soil is fertile for the requirements of a democratic government. The decline in Hamas's popularity since the 2006 elections has demonstrated that Palestinians want a representative, accountable, and effective government. Such a government would work not only toward the resolution of national issues but also toward the establishment of the rule of law, the growth of a viable economy, and the development of national institutions and services that meet the needs of the people. It is these particular needs that Fatah failed to meet during its tenure in power, and that Hamas campaigned on so effectively.

Given Fatah's poor record and Hamas's failure to demonstrate better governance, the questions remains: What can be done to give Palestinians the government they deserve and the world a real partner in the pursuit of sustainable regional stability and peace?

The weakness of third parties in the Palestinian authority has left Fatah as the only viable political force with the potential to wrest power legitimately from Hamas. Fatah's revival will not be simple. Fatah's weakness stems from a number of factors including a lack of internal democracy, a leadership out of step with the current Palestinian reality, corruption, and chaos caused by the armed wings of the movement.

In order to remedy Fatah's internal discord, immediate steps should be taken. First, Fatah should formalize internal democratic practices, specifically by conducting democratic internal elections from the top down. Second, Fatah should develop and communicate a vision and a political program that goes beyond national issues and encompasses the spectrum of Palestinian social, political, and economic needs. Third, the movement should reform and redefine the role of the PA through rooting out corruption and incorporating women and youth. Finally, Fatah should marginalize the armed wings of its movement.

The Bush administration has a keen interest in the progress of Fatah's internal reform and can offer technical assistance for internal democracy and transparency. However, in order for true reform to occur Fatah must demonstrate the political will and the leadership required to compete successfully in a democratic system.

MOHAMMAD YAGHI

Hamas's victory in the January 2006 legislative elections, as well as Fatah's failure to overcome its internal divisions and implement reform, suggest that a third alternative may be needed to lead the Palestinian people. Many Palestinians are frustrated by the existing choice of either the extreme Hamas or the corrupt Fatah.

Palestinian readiness to accept a moderate third party has been demonstrated by the majority support among Palestinians for a two-state solution and a peace treaty with Israel to end the conflict. Furthermore, Fatah's failure in the elections may have been a protest vote against the corrupt years of Fatah's rule, which would demonstrate Palestinian desire for a radical change.

Several small parties and political blocs exist that share a common agenda and could present a third alternative. These include the People's Party, the Palestinian Democratic Front, the Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA), Mustapha Barghouti's Palestinian Initiative, and Salam Fayad's Third Way. While the desire for an alternative exists, in the 2006 election these smaller parties fared poorly, receiving 5 percent of the national vote and winning 6 parliamentary seats out of 132.

There are several reasons for the failures of these parties. First, many of the leaders of these groups belonged to the same leftist, Marxist-Leninist parties and shared similar positions. This created a difficulty in choosing a leadership and agreeing on how to arrange the party list. Some leaders, furthermore, have minimized their role by becoming mediators between Fatah and Hamas instead of challenging their primacy, in the hope of becoming ministers in the government. These leaders are not seeking to replace the existing secular regimes or the well organized Islamic parties; rather they are seeking to join those regimes and at the same time retain good relations with the Islamic movements.

Civil society organization, for their part, have grown so used to criticizing the corruption of Fatah over the last six years that they have refrained from engaging in the same criticism vis-a-vis Hamas, let alone challenging its political agenda. The trend between these parties, therefore, is for more division rather than more unity.

The failures of the third parties demonstrate that it would be a mistake to invest time and effort to promote a third party in the Palestinian territories at this time because they must first work toward an internal unity, a common agenda and political discourse. Without these developments, Fatah remains as the only viable alternative to Hamas.

WAFI' ABDEL RAHMAN

Discussions of how to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to achieve a viable, empowered Palestinian state with sovereign borders usually revolve around Fatah and Hamas, as if no other forces exist in Palestinian society. The alternative to these groups may not necessarily be found in small political parties but in the grassroots movement of civil society and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Civil society organizations and activists have been working toward the preservation and improvement of

Palestinians' rights and freedom for years. Following Hamas's victory in the PLC elections, civil society organizations had to work to prove that freedom exists in the Palestinian territories in the first place. Existing civil society organizations have been pushed into a development model of providing relief while their society is still under development. At the same time, Hamas had been running the best social enterprise in the Palestinian territories; the Hamas welfare operation not only provides social services but combines them services with ideology. It was with this formula that Hamas won the PLC elections.

Palestinian civil society organizations should learn from Hamas's example. The grassroots cannot go on simply talking about leadership and empowerment. What is needed, is a total transformation of society through grassroots work. The international community should do more to support the work of grassroots civil society organizations.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Sadie Goldman. ❖

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