

# What Happened to the Fatah Young Guard?

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Feb 1, 2006

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As much as Hamas's landslide victory in the January 25 Palestinian legislative elections was a triumph for the Islamist movement, it was also a crushing defeat for the younger generation of Fatah leaders who had hoped the election would facilitate a leadership transition in the long-ruling Palestinian national liberation movement. So long as Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat dominated Fatah, leaders of the young guard who earned their bona fides during the first and second intifadas could only gain as much political influence as Arafat permitted. To circumvent Arafat's power structure, the young guard long advocated internal elections as a means of demonstrating its popularity on the street. Only after Arafat's death did the young guard get its wish in the form of primaries in advance of the legislative elections.

Rather than proving the young guard's popularity and ability to lead the party to victory in national balloting, however, the primaries exposed the chaos within Fatah. The movement's governing Central Committee and Revolutionary Council procrastinated in deciding on basic issues, such as who would be eligible to vote in the primaries and how the primaries would shape Fatah's electoral list. Months of haggling stalled technical preparations so that polling stations lacked accurate registration lists and the correct number of ballots when primaries actually occurred in late November and early December 2005. Although members of the young guard won most of the top slots, their victory was overshadowed by the unruly voting process, contested results, and allegations of fraud. The process demonstrated to voters that despite the efforts of the young guard, Fatah remained a corrupt organization more concerned with retaining power than imposing reform.

With only a couple of weeks between the primaries and the deadline for candidate registration, the old and young guards in Fatah then entered into a struggle over the formation of their electoral lists. The old guard initially tried to ignore the primary results and secure the top positions on Fatah's national slate for itself, but was forced to back down after the young guard formed a parallel list called Al Mustaqbal, "The Future." While the two groups compromised to forge a unified façade, disgruntled members nonetheless ran as independents in many districts, splitting the Fatah vote. Even within the young guard, personal rivalries often prevailed over common interests, and

natural allies competed against each other in voter mobilization and campaigning. The contrast with Hamas's disciplined, well-oiled electoral machine could not have been more striking.

If the elites within Fatah were divided before the election, they are even more so in its aftermath and have yet to devise a strategy for moving forward. Most of the revolutionary council has called for accelerating preparations for Fatah's sixth general conference, a meeting of delegates that sets the policies, direction, and leadership of the movement. Fatah last conducted such an exercise in 1989. Once again the young guard is divided: imprisoned leader Marwan Barghouti supports expediting the conference, for example, while Ahmed Hilles of Gaza opposes it as an attempted power grab by a limited group. Although the conference is in theory the appropriate venue to redefine Fatah and its leadership, the young guard appears incapable of uniting in order to advance its agenda -- which focuses on the needs of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza -- and resist the priorities of Palestinian leaders based in Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, and elsewhere.

Fatah's immediate challenge is deciding whether to join a Hamas-led government or to create an opposition, as most Fatah leaders publicly favor at least for now. An even greater challenge will be rebuilding the allegiance of its volatile constituency, which launched mass demonstrations immediately following the elections and called for the resignation of Fatah's central committee. For Fatah to compete effectively with Hamas and lead Palestinian politics once again, it would need to develop a mechanism for handling disputes internally and find honest, respected, and popular leaders. Whether Fatah's young guard can regroup and tackle these challenges depends entirely on its ability to solve the organizational and personal rivalries that became painfully evident during the electoral process. The very survival of secular Palestinian nationalism may hinge on whether such a transformation occurs.

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