

# On the Eve of Palestinian Elections: Israel and Palestinians Enter a New Era

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

On January 19, 2006, Khalil Shikaki and David Makovsky addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Dr. Shikaki is director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, an associate professor of political science at an-Najah University in Nablus, and a senior fellow at the Crown Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Brandeis University. Mr. Makovsky, senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute, is author of the Institute monograph *Engagement through Disengagement: Gaza and the Potential for Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## KHALIL SHIKAKI

On the eve of the Palestinian legislative elections, Fatah maintains only the slightest of leads over Hamas, a scenario which would have been unimaginable one year ago. Since Yasser Arafat's death in November 2004, Hamas has increased its strength by 40 percent, while in the same period Fatah has only increased its support by 10 percent.

Hamas's success is the result of three major factors:

- 1) The continued infighting between Fatah's old guard and its young guard has fragmented the party, allowing Hamas to gain valuable ground. During the 1990s, the old guard not only failed to deliver on their promises, they also refused effectively to incorporate the young guard within the party. The old guard shortsightedly believed that their only rival for leadership of the Palestinian Authority (PA) was the young guard, which allowed them to be blindsided to the threat of Hamas. While the old guard leaders have completely lost their legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinians, Fatah's younger generation is still too weak to take on Hamas alone. Marwan Barghouti is the only unifying force in the party, but so long as he remains imprisoned, the young guard will also remain fragmented.
- 2) The poor performance of the PA and Mahmoud Abbas has enabled Hamas to gain ground. The public's perception is that Fatah has allowed law and order to deteriorate to its current abysmal state and that it is unfit to manage the country. Additionally, Fatah is viewed as struggling with major issues of corruption, while Hamas has campaigned on its clean reputation.

3) Most importantly, Hamas has gained political force due to strategic changes the organization has undergone. Arafat's death opened up the political arena for Hamas's participation, and Israel's disengagement from Gaza pushed Hamas to enter politics so that Fatah could not claim responsibility for the disengagement. Hamas victories in the municipal elections created the internal drive to design political platforms that would address negotiations and socio-economic issues.

While Fatah may lead Hamas in the nationwide balloting by 10 percent -- national-list voting will determine the distribution of half of the seats (66 of 132) in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) -- Hamas will win at least 50 percent of the 66 seats elected on a district-by-district basis. The result will be almost even numbers of seats in the PLC for Fatah and Hamas, with a small number of seats for independents and other parties. Hamas's strong showing will shape the future government. Despite serious internal disagreements, Hamas has made moderate and pragmatic decisions over the past year in order to advance its goal of participation in the government. There has been much speculation on whether Hamas will disband its militias after the elections. Hamas is not likely to disarm unless it is offered a full partnership in the new government. And even if it chooses to disarm, Hamas is unlikely to make any other changes on substantive issues for several years.

Hamas's potential participation in the next government raises questions over the PA's future relationship with Israel and the international community. Economically, businesses may be less willing to invest, resulting in further deterioration of the Palestinian economy. Politically, the United States has declared that will not speak to Hamas unless it recognizes Israel and renounces violence, and Israel may refuse to negotiate with the PA entirely.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

The Palestinian election presents three immediate implications for the United States and the international community:

1) The Palestinian Authority is undergoing a financial collapse, causing the World Bank to refuse to follow through on promised assistance. A significant factor in the PA's fiscal problems has been the addition of 10,000 new security service positions over the past several months. The PA's acquiescence to pressure from armed groups seeking to secure jobs has increased the already bloated security services to 76,000. In order for the United States and the international community to help salvage the PA, there must be fiscal responsibility.

2) In 2003, the Quartet insisted on an empowered prime minister with whom to deal. Mahmoud Abbas's continued indecision again creates the need for a serious prime minister who can make decisions. The recently resigned finance minister, Salam Fayyad, who is running for parliament as part of a new party, is one of the few personalities who could fulfill such a role.

3) The possibility of Hamas's participation in the cabinet is a source of worry for the international community. In a January interview, Abbas stated that whoever participates in the government must adhere to the Roadmap commitments, which would mean Hamas could participate if it met criteria similar to what was required of Fatah in 1988. It remains to be seen whether the criteria would have to be agreed upon by Hamas as a whole or by individual members in order to gain seats in the cabinet. Abbas may try to reach a compromise by appointing to the cabinet Islamists who are not officially connected with Hamas.

It also remains to be seen what Israel's reaction will be to Hamas's participation in the elections. There has been a significant Israeli psychological disengagement from the Palestinians. Because of Ariel Sharon's stroke and Israel's own parliamentary elections scheduled for March, Israelis are not focusing on the Palestinians elections. Israelis will pay attention to the defense establishment, the IDF and Shin Bet in particular, and not necessarily politicians to gauge the outcome of the Palestinian elections.

While the Israeli elections are still several months away, the prospects for Sharon's Kadima party remain promising.

Kadima will also benefit from the already existent centrist constituency that desires a new paradigm in Israeli politics. While Israeli acting prime minister Ehud Olmert can articulate this centrist position, he does not have Sharon's gravitas. Any government led by Olmert is more likely to resort to a governing style that draws on collective leadership rather than the autonomous style that characterized Sharon's decisionmaking. Shaul Mofaz, Avi Dichter, Shimon Peres, and Tzipi Livni will play major roles in the future government. While Kadima has not yet articulated a specific campaign, it is seen as the party that will disengage from the majority of the West Bank and provide secure borders for Israel.

In the 1996 campaign, Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu was able to capitalize on four Palestinian bombs in nine days to come from behind in the polls to win the elections. Any violence between now and the Israeli elections could strengthen Netanyahu's standing. However, Netanyahu may have to become more centrist in his campaign in order to win back voters Likud has lost to Kadima. Labor's Amir Peretz is campaigning on the economic inequality that exists in Israel, but historically defense issues have trumped economic issues at election time. Netanyahu and Peretz have high public negatives; Netanyahu is seen as politically extreme and Peretz is viewed as economically extreme. Kadima will try to shape its image through negative definitions of Likud and Labor.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Elizabeth Young.

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