

Who Among the Palestinians Can Deliver?

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Brief Analysis

The consistent detachment of "old guard" Palestinian leaders during the past three years of violence has dramatically influenced the nature of the current Palestinian political map. Parallel to the weakening of the old guard, new generations of leaders are emerging that have already become integral to the processes shaping Palestinian politics. Who among these figures can put an end to the ongoing wave of terror and usher in a brighter, more stable future for Palestinians?

Palestinian Power Centers

Yasir Arafat, who lost some of his power during the short reign of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), is regaining momentum as the undisputed leader of Palestinians and continues mainly to support terrorism by deliberately avoiding any attempt to halt it. In fact, Arafat strongly believes that by following the path of violence and terror, he will be able to achieve his desired political ends. As long as Arafat remains in the area and deliberately prevents the grooming of a potential heir, two political arms (which he himself founded) will continue to operate in parallel. The first is an official, yet fragmented, order led by the leadership formerly based in Tunis and operated by the intermediate generation (discussed below). The second is an informal, unofficial body formerly led by the Tanzim. In the course of the last three years of intifada, this latter body has been taken over by radical terrorist groups such as the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. In fact, the Brigades are operated and funded largely by radical militant groups outside the Palestinian Authority (PA) such as Hizballah and Iran's Revolutionary Guards, who are motivated by an uncompromising desire to bring about deterioration in the ongoing conflict with Israel.

The Old Guard

During the recent violence, leaders comprising the old guard have been losing their power, prestige, and influence—mostly because of their relatively moderate positions regarding the conflict, and the fact that—other than Arafat himself—they have not encouraged any operational activity. But the old guard is becoming irrelevant mostly because they have failed to prove themselves to Palestinians. The regime they created—the PA—did not meet the needs of the people. Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala), Abu Mazen, and others belonging to the founding generation of Fatah were forced by Arafat to maintain old-fashioned management methods suitable for an underground organization, rather than undergoing a maturation process that would have transformed them into a leadership cadre prepared to run a country. The corruption of the old guard simply disappointed the people, a fact consistently expressed in public opinion polls.

The Intermediate Generation

The generation that led the first intifada in the 1980s gained credibility as local leaders primarily by carrying out successful terror activities against Israel; many served Israeli jail terms, and, accordingly, gained greater familiarity with Israeli society, politics, and culture. Members of this generation, who are generally opposed to using terror as a political tool, include Hussein al-Sheikh, Abed Elfatah Hamil, Qadura Fares, Hani al-Hasan, and more prominent figures such as Muhammad Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub. An exception within this group is Marwan Barghouti, head of

the Tanzim in Ramallah. Although considered a moderate prior to the current hostilities, Barghouti took an exceptionally harsh terrorist line against Israel after September 2000 and was arrested on April 15, 2002.

Muhammad Dahlan, who has recently undergone studies in England, has begun to prepare the Gaza Strip for the "day after" the planned Israeli pullout. In so doing, he has negotiated with a distressed Hamas following the recent death of its top two leaders, thereby reinforcing his position as a strong, authoritative leader in that territory. Jibril Rajoub, although maybe capable in the West Bank, has not gone out of his way to confront Palestinian terrorism using his loyal followers from the former Preventive Security apparatus.

The Young Generation

In the course of the present conflict, the PA in general, and Fatah in particular, have undergone several processes, among them the creation of a younger generation of leaders, which is of utmost importance. This newly created tier consists of the children of the first intifada who grew up and matured into the current conflict as terrorist leaders. Many have criminal backgrounds, and most are poor and largely uneducated. Raed Carmi from Tulkarem, for example, who was killed by Israel on February 14, 2002, becoming a local martyr and heroic symbol. Other members of the "young generation" such as Zachrya Zbidi from Jenin, Naef Abu Sharh from Nablus, Nasser Masuda from Hebron, Khaled Shawish from Ramallah, Nasser Awis from Nablus, Muhammad Naifa from Tulkarem, and Abdel Karim Awis from Jenin have also become local heroes, mainly due to their involvement in terrorist activity. These young people are influential, with strong ties to the operative field, and are considered part of the local political equation. However, they are also viewed by Israel as being responsible for many terror attacks and are defined as having "blood on their hands." For the time being, it seems that Hizballah is controlling the young generation from outside the West Bank through money and operational instructions. In the long term, if they are reembraced by the intermediate generation, they could be encouraged to abandon the terrorist path.

The Mediators

A relatively new tier of middlemen has also emerged in the field, serving to mediate between the young and the intermediate generations. As "agents of influence," most of these mediators are political activists whose link to terrorism is weaker. Most hold political posts at Fatah regional offices and are close, in one way or another, to low-seniority terrorists. In many cases, the intermediate generation, as well as other senior PA figures such as Rajoub, Tawfiq Tirawi, and Dahlan, are using the mediators to literally buy influence in the field. In that regard, Hussam Shahin, head of the Jerusalem Shabiba (Fatah Youth); Abdel Wahab Shada, secretary of Fatah's Tulkarem headquarters; and Ita Abu Ramila, secretary of Fatah's Jenin headquarters (currently in Israeli prison), could eventually combine their local political power with access to field activists and financial aid from the intermediate generation to curb Palestinian radicals.

Conclusions

At present, no one in the PA seems to be able to control the two parallel Palestinian arenas—the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Dahlan lacks meaningful influence in the West Bank, and Rajoub has no real hold in Gaza. Because of the fragmented layout of the West Bank, it is doubtful whether a single figure exists there that can control these Palestinian cities by himself. The current Palestinian leadership is fragmented, weak, and uncoordinated. Even worse, they are primarily preoccupied with personal infighting.

With the old guard still around—and with money and institutions remaining subordinate to Arafat and his loyalists—there will be no real possibility for fundamental change. For its part, the intermediate generation, which now opposes terrorism as the only tool by which to achieve political gain, is viewed by the young generation as irrelevant. For the intermediate generation, the young generation is too immature to lead, and too irresponsible in choosing terrorism as the only valid, strategic option. Only if the intermediate generation unites around a common cause will

they be able to lead Palestinians to a better future.

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