

Inside Palestinian Politics: Preparing for Israel under Sharon

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Brief Analysis

As Ariel Sharon prepares to take power following his landslide victory, significant changes are also underway in the Palestinian Authority (PA). In anticipation of Sharon's victory, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and leading PA personalities have been preparing a new political agenda to deal with the apparent end of "final status" negotiations and the new Israeli leadership. The most provocative event in recent days has been the issuance of a document penned by a senior PLO official and longtime associate of PA Ra'is (Chairman) Yasir Arafat which raises the specter that mainstream Palestinian politics are publicly reverting to the radicalism of pre-Oslo days.

The Commission of National Independence On February 1 Palestine National Council (PNC) Speaker Salim Za'anoun held a press conference in Cairo to announce the establishment of the "Commission of National Independence" (Hay'at al istiqlal al watani). Although this announcement came as a surprise to many, the idea to establish the organization had been vetted by Za'anoun with top Palestinian leaders in Ramallah several weeks earlier.

Typically, new Palestinian organizations and committees do not attract much attention; there are many of them and their influence with the upper echelon of decision makers in the PA is limited. But those reportedly involved with this initiative included an impressive list of luminaries: Fatah Tanzim leader Marwan Barghouthi, PA Security heads Jabril Rajoub and Amin al-Hindi, Hamas leaders Ismail Abu Shanab and Mahmoud al Zahar, PLO Political Department Head Farouq Qaddumi, and respected human rights advocate Haidar Abdel Shafi, among others. As a result, the Commission's draft platform has drawn extensive coverage in the Arab press.

The most stunning element in the document is the statement that articles in the PLO Covenant calling for the destruction of Israel remain valid:

"The establishers [of this organization, including the Speaker of the PNC] consider that the PLO Covenant remains in place inasmuch as the PNC has not until now met to ratify the changes which were previously suggested, particularly that a legal committee was not formed to adopt the demanded modifications."

These clauses, many of which referred to "armed struggle as the only way to liberate Palestine," are the ones Arafat claimed to have nullified in 1996 and which, at Israel's insistence, the Palestine National Council confirmed were

nullified at a December 1998 session in Gaza attended by President Clinton.

In addition, Za'anoun's declaration casts doubt on the continued applicability of the Oslo Declaration of Principles, saying it "served its purpose," but from this point on, United Nations resolution particularly the original partition resolution, UNGA 181 should serve "as the reference" for any future negotiations.

The draft platform of the Commission also covers a broad range of issues related to Palestinian governance. On the surface, these appear to be critical of Arafat. For instance, the draft suggests the need for new elections and for Arafat to appoint a prime minister to tend to day-to-day matters of government while the ra'is provides overall supervision of PA operations. The document attacks corruption and calls for local elections, the establishment of effective judicial procedures, the enactment of a constitution, an end to the use of military courts, and a renewed respect for human rights in the PA.

Since many of the signatories, such as Abdel Shafi, are well-known critics of Arafat's control of the PA, most observers first considered the formation of the Commission to be a challenge to Arafat's authority. However, the outcome of a February 4 meeting between Arafat, Za'anoun, and Abdel Shafi suggests otherwise. Instead of being taken to the woodshed by Arafat for his insubordination, Za'anoun told an al-Sharq al-Awsat interviewer that Arafat actually gave "his blessing to it [the Commission] and any notes it distributes." This revelation does not come as a surprise. Za'anoun has been a close and trusted ally operative of Arafat since the 1950s and would only act particularly on an issue such as this with the express approval of the ra'is.

Fatah Central Committee When the Central Committee of Fatah met in Gaza on February 4 to discuss the impending election of Sharon, the discussions echoed the topics covered in Za'anoun's Cairo document. Like the Commission of National Independence document, for example, the Fatah Central Committee meeting focused on the need to "consolidate the internal front" and get the Palestinian house in order to deal most effectively with a Sharon government. In this regard, the Central Committee called for closer coordination between the Palestinian National, Central, and Legislative Councils. No further operational details were released.

The Fatah meeting also debated the merits of the Za'anoun document. As one Central Committee member later commented, "It was presented, and was turned over for study." Notably, whereas some PA security apparatus and Hamas officials listed as signatories of the Cairo platform denied involvement with the new Commission, prominent Fatah members like Sakr Habash, Hussam Khadr, and Marwan Barghouthi have not distanced themselves from the organization.

Implications: Fatah's Growing Role At first glance, it appears that Za'anoun's Cairo initiative reflects a division within the Palestinian leadership and among Palestinian activists. Indeed, there are signs that nearly five months of intifada have exacerbated the already deep fissures within the PA. In January, for example, PA Television head and Arafat associate Hisham Makki was assassinated in Gaza, a killing reportedly related to corruption and competition between "insider" and "outsider" Palestinians. And only last week, during an interview, Fatah Tanzim leader Marwan Barghouthi spoke candidly about the divergent "trends" in Fatah, i.e., a split between those who support negotiations as the means to achieve Palestinian goals and those who opt for violent confrontation.

A closer look, however, shows that Fatah's position seems to be growing stronger relative to other forces in Palestinian society, especially the governmental structures of the PA. The Commission's platform conforms to the positions advocated by Fatah, Arafat's political party, and its proposals maintain Arafat's position of authority while addressing the key complaints of Fatah insiders regarding corruption and rule of law. The platform also takes the popular Fatah line vis-a-vis negotiations with Israel, namely that international and not U.S. sponsorship should be the primary basis of the process. In fact, the United States is only mentioned once in the Commission document, where it is referred to as "imperialist." At the same time, the document advocates "a return to adherence" to UN

resolutions, including UNGA 181 and UNGA 194 on refugees, as the "reference" for any future talks. This call for "a new basis" for negotiations was echoed by Marwan Barghout in a February 5 interview with the Hamas weekly *As Sabeel*, in which he demanded "international sponsorship and not American sponsorship" in the talks.

At this point, it is unclear if the Za'anoun initiative is an Arafat stratagem to raise the prominence of Fatah at the expense of the institutional figures of the PA. Regardless of where and why the idea for the Commission emerged, however, should Arafat endorse the hardline policies advocated in recent months by Fatah, it will be tantamount to a formal abdication of the Oslo decision to opt for negotiations as the strategy to achieve Palestinian goals. It will also become increasingly difficult to distinguish Fatah's position that violence is the "only way to work with Sharon" from the official position of the PA.

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