



THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE PALESTINIAN NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

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This article analyzes the breakdown of the Palestinian nationalist movement as resulting from the policies of Yasir Arafat and Fatah, the Palestinians' leaders for 35 years; the weaknesses of his successor, Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin); the movement's overall strategy and ideology, and how Hamas will seek to consolidate and perpetuate its own rule.

The victory of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group, in the January 2006 parliamentary elections seemed like an earthquake transforming the Arab-Israeli conflict, Palestinian politics, prospects for democratization, and even the region as a whole. Yet this development should not have been a surprise. More than just heralding the rise of Hamas and Islamists, it was both based on and ensured the Palestinian nationalist movement's overdue collapse. While the nationalists will, of course, survive, they have lost their long-held monopoly on power and on setting the Palestinian agenda.

This article analyzes that breakdown as resulting from the policies of Yasir Arafat and Fatah, the Palestinians' leaders for 35 years; the weaknesses of his successor, Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin); the movement's overall strategy and ideology, and how Hamas will seek to consolidate and perpetuate its own rule.

In the long term, Fatah and the nationalists outlived their usefulness. On one hand, they were responsible for almost 40 years of failure. Despite promising—and often falsely claiming—victory they brought on one defeat after another. The Palestinian movement was

chased out of Jordan in 1970 and then out of Lebanon in 1982 and 1983. Israel grew stronger and did not collapse; Arab states provided far less help than the PLO sought. Year after year, the West Bank and Gaza Strip continued to be under Israeli control. Total victory in 2006 seemed no closer than in 1990, 1980, or 1970.¹

True, the PLO did get back to the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1994, but only by making an agreement with Israel. Yet while Israel let 200,000 Palestinians return, a government was formed (the Palestinian Authority, PA), and international aid reached the highest per capita levels for any people in history, the Palestinian situation improved only marginally. Despite ruling almost all the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza for a decade after 1995, Arafat paid little attention to their material needs or well-being. His regime's corruption and oppression did not seem like some ideal outcome.²

Finally then, when the moment of truth came in 2000, Arafat rejected a good offer for a West Bank/Gaza Strip Palestinian state and billions of dollars in compensation at both the Camp David summit and in the Clinton plan. Instead, he led the Palestinians to five more years of disastrous war, which

not only left them with more casualties but also with a wrecked infrastructure and shattered international image.

Ironically, though, while the specific group responsible for so many setbacks was criticized and eventually jettisoned, its very ideas and strategy which had ensured failure are being retained and even reinforced. Maximal demands, dictatorial methods, and terrorist means—the real causes of failure—are accepted by both Fatah and Hamas as well as being supported by the majority of Palestinians.

When given the opportunity to judge the Fatah leaders, however, Palestinians understandably asked a series of valid questions. If they could not obtain a state through either military victory or diplomacy, what good are they? If they ruled so badly in a way permeated by corruption, repression, and anarchy, who wants them to be in charge? If their ideology and strategy were basically identical to Hamas, what did they have to offer that was so superior? If the nationalists could not even create a stable regime, discipline their ranks, maintain unity, or build institutions, why are they needed?

Given this acceptance of Fatah's basic world view, goals, and strategy alongside contempt for its actual performance, Hamas does not require greater moderation but merely an ability to make itself the new hegemonic leadership by seeming to better embody and implement a hardline approach.

Compared to Hamas's toughness and proud extremism, the Fatah nationalists were paralyzed by overweening smugness. Believing their own slogan that they represented the Palestinians' sole legitimate representative, they could not conceive that anyone else might replace them. Rather than

improve their performance, they ignored all the problems that were bringing them down.

In facing the Hamas challenge, the PA and Fatah could certainly have done well enough to survive even within their own traditional approach. Yet the real solution would have been to develop a truly new program based on self-criticism of the past and a sense of reality about the present. They could have made a deal with Israel to end the conflict and obtain a state. The nationalists might have focused on raising living standards; convincing refugees to return to a Palestinian state (rather than demand they move to Israel); gaining credibility with Israel as a peace partner; creating a strong economy, schools, and health system; and other such steps. There is no evidence that the leadership of Fatah or the PA—except for a handful of people—ever seriously considered such a program.

Certainly, there was no attempt to implement anything of the kind. Once a state had been rejected by the PA and Fatah in 2000, it had nothing to offer except more struggle. Hamas rejected the very peace process that Fatah—and Hamas as well—had ensured would fail. By 2006 this seemed, at least to more than half of Palestinian voters, a reasonable position.

Of course, there were also immediate causes for the nationalists' collapse stemming from their glaring failures of the last decade:

--The PLO has virtually ceased to exist, and the large Palestinian populations in Lebanon and in Jordan turned toward Islamist parties, convinced that Fatah would never get them back to Palestine.

--The PA leadership, and especially Abbas, was weak and ineffective. Rather than

care about the masses, they only seemed to loot them.

--Economic prospects were dim. After five years of PA-led warfare, conditions were so bad that the World Bank estimated it would take a decade just to return to the level of 2000.³ In late 2005, the resignation of Finance Minister Salam Fayyad over irresponsible increases in PA salaries removed the sole official trusted by Western donors. European aid virtually stopped.⁴ Fayyad formed his own political party, which won only two seats in the parliamentary elections, a pitiful showing of just how weak real moderates are in Palestinian politics.

--Fatah split into a ruling hardline establishment faction—which also controlled the PLO, PA, and security services—and a youthful hardline faction that ran Fatah's Tanzim grassroots' organization and the al-Aqsa Brigade terrorist group. Even many of Abbas's few supporters joined the latter faction.

--The PA fumbled the opportunity offered by Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. With the Palestinian-ruled areas plunged into factional violence, general lawlessness, and rampant corruption, Fatah only seemed to offer more of the same.

Even given all of these problems, if there had not been elections, Fatah might have continued to rule the Palestinians for years to come. Still, the Hamas victory is not some temporary electoral setback, but a transformation of Palestinian politics. After all, it took ten years after the first such balloting, in 1996, to renew parliament's "four-year" term. Also, Fatah ran the movement for almost 40 years despite numerous failures. Hamas, then, can expect to stay in the saddle a long time.

In Hamas's own terms, this constitutes the beginning of what it calls the third period of Palestinian politics. The first PLO (1964-1967) was an Egyptian client; the second (1968-2006) was Arafat's domain. Now it is Hamas's turn to rule, no matter how badly it misrules.

THE LEGACY OF YASIR ARAFAT

The problems described above can be traced to Yasir Arafat's style and shortcomings as Palestinian leader. Having exercised virtual dictatorship for four decades, Arafat set the PLO's goals as total victory by erasing Israel; the use of terrorism as a central tactic; a high degree of decentralization with minimal discipline or institutionalization; an adventurism that repeatedly led to defeat; massive corruption; and the other key characteristics that led the movement to multiple catastrophes.

Of course, Arafat also had considerable achievements. He kept the movement united, avoided becoming any Arab state's puppet and won it a large measure of international support. Yet despite these gains, much of Arafat's career consisted of surviving debacles of his own making.

In 1993, Arafat signed the Oslo agreement in which he promised to end terrorism and negotiate a peaceful end to the conflict with Israel. In general, he did not keep his commitments. He returned to his homeland to become the head of the PA that seemed poised to achieve a state. Yet as ruler of over two million Palestinians, he devoted virtually no effort to building strong institutions, a productive economy, or a constituency for moderation during his more than 11 years of virtually uncontested power.

Then, in 2000, he rejected, at Camp David and in the Clinton plan, two chances to obtain a state and end the Israeli occupation. Instead, Arafat again went to war, still believing that violence would achieve his goals. The result was four years of bloodshed and the pointless deaths of several thousand people.

Why did Arafat, Fatah, and the PLO behave this way? The fundamental problem was that Fatah has never been a normal nationalist group since its top priority was never about obtaining a state where its people could prosper and live in peace. Achieving total victory by destroying Israel and turning all the contested land into an Arab state was always its ultimate goal.

A revealing item here is their “non-negotiable” demand that all Palestinian refugees should go to live in Israel. Yet no real nationalist movement would want to “give away” its potential citizens in this manner, demanding they live in some other country. The “return” was merely a way to subvert Israel from within, a step toward the ultimate total victory.⁵ This was a demand that ensured no peace agreement would be achieved but whose implementation would provoke years of massive violence and suffering for both sides. Only a strategy that included making the necessary compromises could produce a two-state solution and bring real peace. Anything less would ensure that the Palestinians got no state. Having to choose, the Palestinian leadership preferred continuing the conflict to resolving it.⁶

In contrast, for Arafat and his colleagues, any Palestinian state had to be merely an interim solution that did not interfere with continuing the struggle to its intended end. The nationalists feared that getting such a

state might block it from achieving its fundamental ambition, locking it into a permanent situation. Yet it was this very stance that ensured that the conflict could not be ended in a compromise solution. If things had been otherwise, there might well have been a Palestinian state resulting from a negotiated solution in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s, as well as in 2000.⁷

Instead, Arafat's life was dedicated to ending Israel's existence, even if that policy ensured that an independent Palestinian state would never be born; and Arafat's embrace of terrorism was not a side issue but something essential to his strategy. Arafat believed that by deliberately targeting Israeli civilians he would bring about Israel's collapse. To his dying day, he never lost belief in the efficacy of this method no matter how clearly it failed to destroy Israel while succeeding in discrediting the Palestinians.⁸

However, by the end of his career, Arafat's luck had run out. While many in Europe and elsewhere continued to be swayed by Arafat's unique public relations skills and revolutionary image, increasingly he was being seen as part of the problem, not solution. The events of September 11, 2001, accelerated this process by showing graphically the costs of terrorism. While the world was engaged in a war on terrorism, Arafat remained one of its principal architects and practitioners.⁹ Disillusioned by Arafat's blend of incompetence, unreliability, and violent strategy, the United States and Israel refused to deal with him.¹⁰ Even in Europe and the Arab world, criticisms of Arafat reached an all-time high. Among Palestinians, too, his popularity was at a low point, though they agreed there was no alternative leader. Remarkably, at the time of

his death Arafat was more popular in France than among Palestinians.¹¹

Yet only Arafat's death in 2004 forced the Palestinians to seek a new leader, but his legacy—constantly reaffirmed by most of his colleagues and successors—continues to shape the movement. There are three critical factors by which Arafat posthumously ensured the collapse of the nationalist movement and of his own Fatah group.

First, Palestinian institutions and governmental structures were a mess. Arafat's system was designed to ensure his domination but in a very *laissez-faire* manner. He never built institutions, developed a culture of discipline, or installed a chain of command. All power went directly to him.

Without Arafat, nothing functioned very well and decisions required a consensus only achievable by maintaining the status quo and appeasing a lowest-common-denominator militancy. The movement was merely a mishmash of rival leaders, institutions and militias; nationalist and Islamist groups. Most resources were spent on security forces and buying loyalty. No consideration at all is given to economic organization, social policy, or any of the other issues that shape political debate elsewhere.

Second, in strategic terms, the movement is in an extremely weak position. Foreign aid, Israeli goodwill, and international support have all been squandered. Palestinians might claim to have won every war—most recently asserting that armed struggle had forced Israel to leave the Gaza Strip—but have to face the consequences of being the losers. Refusing to acknowledge the situation meant that the movement rejected the usual response of those being defeated: changing

course, being cautious, reducing expectations, and offering compromises.

Thus, leaders argue that armed struggle is making gains and must be continued, overstating the value of Western and Arab backing as well as Israel's weakness. This tendency to misstate actual conditions and ignore the balance of forces—also trademarks of Arafat—remains a powerful factor blocking any moderate, pragmatic reorientation. While Abbas and a few others realized the extent of the disaster, they could barely talk truthfully about it, much less effect change.¹² Most of their associates deny this reality. The movement has little interest in the material state of its people and so this factor does not pressure it toward moderation. Since they argue that their strategy is working there is no need to change it.

Third, in ideological terms, Arafat ensured that militancy would be the dominant ideological force. The prestige of armed struggle, legitimacy of terrorism, and deification of total victory are extremely powerful forces that even the top leaders cannot oppose without facing considerable risk. Simultaneously, the leadership reinforces these assumptions by demonizing Israel, portraying it as likely to surrender if terrorism reaches sufficient levels and continues long enough, and minimizing any offers it makes for peace or compromise. It never speaks of a realizable Palestinian state that would gather in refugees while being economically and culturally prosperous, but rather of a "return" intended to recreate a mythical pre-1948 Palestine.

This tendency to misstate actual conditions and ignore the balance of forces continues to block any moderate, pragmatic reorientation. This political culture—spread

through the PA-controlled schools, mosques, and media—has now been passed to a new generation. At the same time, the kind of program required as a minimal basis needed to achieve peace with Israel is basically defined as treason, a charge that the many rivals for leadership will not hesitate to fling at anyone deemed excessively moderate.

It must be remembered that to this day, few Palestinians have any idea that in 2000 the United States and Israel offered a comprehensive negotiated solution including an independent Palestinian state in all of Gaza, most or all of the West Bank, and much of east Jerusalem, including sovereignty over the Al-Aqsa mosque.¹³ Misinformed that Israel poisoned Arafat and told that it wants to wipe out the Palestinians, that Israel is the enemy of Islam, has no right to exist, and offers them nothing, Palestinians understandably see long-term armed struggle as their only alternative. Told repeatedly that total victory is both just and that the whole world supports them, they believe this program will triumph. Certainly, such a conclusion makes them unlikely to opt for a comprehensive moderate rethinking of their world view.

All of these factors played into the hands of Hamas. It promised to provide a strong, honest, caring institution in comparison to Fatah's anarchy. As for strategy and ideology, Hamas implicitly offered to continue Fatah's line but to do it better and more systematically. By extolling extremism and militancy, Fatah sowed the seeds and Hamas reaped the crop.

THE FAILURE OF MAHMUD ABBAS

What Arafat wrought could hardly be changed by Abbas, who became the successor leader of the PLO and PA. Abbas is a veteran bureaucrat with limited political ability and no substantial personal base of support.¹⁴ As a result, he was both weak and timid. He failed to advance negotiations with Israel, solve the PA's problems, fix Fatah's ailments, or stop Hamas's growing power. His skills were more than overmatched by his colleagues' radicalism, the younger generation's challenge, the security forces' assertive independence, and Hamas's rivalry. Even within Fatah his personal support was far less than 20 percent, and his few backers fought with him and among themselves.¹⁵

Within Fatah, Abbas faced a growing factional rift in which he could depend on neither contestant. Power was still held by the establishment that served Arafat and supported his policies. These people saw no reason to change their view that the conflict's only acceptable outcome is a Palestinian state in place of Israel.¹⁶ Satisfied with the status quo, these leaders saw no reason to abandon traditional policy and practices. On the contrary, they fought against change. The situation might be objectively disastrous for the Palestinians, but it was very beneficial for them.

Yet while the establishment rejected any reforms or moderation it still had good reasons for having Abbas as nominal leader. He is one of them, a man who could be trusted to support their interests against the younger generation and Islamists. At the same time, they knew he was too weak to challenge their own power. Yet he was extremely valuable, since he could still present a more moderate face to the world,

thus retaining Western support and money better than the openly hardline leaders.¹⁷

Challenging the establishment was a group of younger Fatah militants, including the terrorist al-Aqsa Brigade and Fatah's grassroots' Tanzim group. Its best-known leader was Marwan Barghuti, now serving a life sentence in an Israeli jail as the main organizer of the 2000-2005 terrorist campaign. The young insurgents view the establishment leaders with contempt, as having failed to win victory and instead becoming corrupt bureaucrats. Instead, the insurgents wanted a concerted war on Israel, which they believed would force its withdrawal to the pre-1967 boundaries without any political concessions on the Palestinians' part.

All three of the most powerful Palestinian political groups—the Fatah establishment, Fatah young guard, and Hamas—have the same basic world view, goals, and strategy. Against this combination, Abbas's shaky belief that a moderate course was needed and his timidity at implementing anything had no chance of even partial success.¹⁸ Ironically, after helping make Abbas's administration a failure, the Fatah young guard and Hamas then posed as the alternatives to this unsatisfactory situation. Yet by running so many competing candidates in the January 2006 parliamentary election, the Fatah young guard ensured a landslide victory for Hamas and a defeat for its own organization.

In the run-up to both the 2005 local elections and the 2006 parliamentary balloting, Abbas looked especially inept. Following the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, anarchy prevailed there. Abbas's own "victory" celebration was both eclipsed by Hamas's much bigger rally and disrupted by Hamas men. Dissatisfied Fatah gunmen

repeatedly kidnapped PA officials and took over offices to protest either their demand for jobs or the fact that those already employed went unpaid.¹⁹

One of the most powerful security force commanders, Musa Arafat, Yasir's nephew, was assassinated in a big gun battle almost next to Abbas's own residence.²⁰ On January 4, 2006, al-Aqsa Brigades gunmen killed two and wounded thirty Egyptian soldiers as they took over the Gaza-Egypt border to demand the release of one of their officers who had been arrested by the PA for kidnapping a British family. The next day the PA released the man.²¹ Eight days later, gunmen attacked the home of Interior Minister Nasser Yusuf.²²

With anarchy in the Palestinian-ruled areas, rising factional violence, economic recession, rampant corruption, and no hope for the future, Palestinians turned to Hamas. Fatah had engaged in what might be called a political suicide bombing of itself.

THE VICTORY OF HAMAS

By 2005, the PA and Hamas had bombarded West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestinians for more than a decade with an intense incitement campaign to inculcate their common world view that an evil Israel, which would never give the Palestinians anything, must be destroyed by long-term violence. While many Palestinians would still prefer to put a priority on enjoying better lives and educating their children, Fatah's performance so far and lack of any reason to believe it would change gave them no hope. Those willing to accept Hamas's general view of the situation were also willing to give it a chance to do better.

There were three separate elections in 2005 and 2006 that showed the direction of

Palestinian politics. These included the Fatah primaries, in which hardliners did far better than moderates; the local council elections, in which Hamas triumphed over Fatah; and the parliamentary elections, whose results paralleled the voting for town councils.

In the primaries, the young guard did relatively well in competing for spaces at the top of Fatah's parliamentary list. There was no way, however, that Mahmud was going to turn over all of these slots to them and he did not have to do so. According to Fatah's rules, he had a wide degree of latitude in picking people for the highest positions. Even if he had wanted to do otherwise his colleagues would not have let him push them out of positions of power. Naturally, the young guard was dissatisfied. While Barghuti let himself be talked out of forming his own party, many members of the young guard—as well as others in the undisciplined ranks of Fatah—ran for locally selected seats, thus splitting the Fatah vote.

In the local elections, Hamas performed remarkably well. Fatah may have won more councils but the Islamists triumphed in the ones with the most people. Hamas gained big majorities in Nablus, al-Bireh, Jenin, and Ramallah. By the end of the four rounds of balloting, about half of all Palestinians lived under councils that were controlled by Hamas.²³ The results were a clear warning to Fatah but it did not use the time to do anything different or better. Its fate was sealed.

Members of parliament were elected in two ways in the January election. Half of the seats were chosen on a national level. In this category, the Hamas list received 29 seats compared to 28 for Fatah. Small leftist and liberal parties divided 9 other seats. This was

an impressive victory, though not a landslide, for Hamas.

On the local level, Hamas did even better because of vote splitting for multiple Fatah candidates in many districts. The West Bank chose 41 members: 30 Hamas, ten Fatah, and one independent. However, this understates the Hamas victory since four of the ten Fatah men were elected in Christian seats. In Gaza, Hamas elected 15 to six for Fatah and four independents. This gave Hamas a total of 74 seats to only 44 for Fatah.

THE MEANING OF THE EARTHQUAKE

Why did Palestinians vote for Hamas? In the past, about 20 to 25 percent of Palestinians have identified with Hamas. This means, in very rough terms, that about half of those voting for Hamas support its entire program while the other half backed it due to disillusionment with Fatah's rule.

While this certainly implies that Hamas did not receive a mandate for a purely Islamist program, it in no way means that voters were more moderate on other issues. After all, despite Abbas's personal views and Fatah's nominal ones—it did not explicitly reject the Oslo peace process for example—voters knew that in matters regarding Israel and terrorism the two parties are virtually identical. Few people cast a ballot for Hamas in spite of its hardline views on the conflict. Thus, on most issues Hamas can view itself as having received a mandate. Indeed, it will no doubt find itself in a consensus with the opposition party on these questions.

The most curious claim arising out of the Hamas victory is the idea that the group will now become more moderate. Such

expectations go against history, political logic, and Hamas' actual behavior. In historical terms, the idea that radical groups become moderate after gaining power simply does not fit most cases—certainly not the ones concerning Communist, fascist, Arab nationalist, and Islamist groups. More commonly, as with the Islamists in Turkey recently or Euro-Communist movements in the 1970s, it is precisely a failure to gain power that inspires revisions. However, since Hamas won a big victory with its current program—which largely reflects the Palestinian consensus—it need not moderate.

There are other strong factors, too, militating against moderation. Hamas leaders believe passionately in their ideology and accept it as conforming with God's will, making it rather hard to abandon.²⁴ As a cadre group, it is not responsive to the masses. Even with Fatah, whose doctrine was based to a far greater degree on populism, it was clear that leaders easily ignored or redirected public complaints about casualties or economic hardships. Then, too, Hamas leaders are discouraged from moderation by the competition and peer pressure among them. The career of anyone who can be shown—or even accused—to be guilty of moderation will not go well. Finally, the belief they are winning—more accurately in the Palestinian context, though less so against Israel—gives them little incentive to make concessions.

Speeches and interviews with Hamas leaders in Arabic show no real change from the organization's historic stands, while even those in English demonstrate the careful use of language to give an impression of moderation while maintaining hardline positions.²⁵ Hamas's "peace" plan is for Israel to return to the pre-1967 borders

without exception and allow in any Palestinian refugee who wishes. In exchange, Hamas only says it will not attack Israel until it is ready to do so.²⁶ The organization's deep hatred of Jews and genocidal intentions are still present daily in its statements. Actually, in most ways—though not in its priorities for targets—there is little to distinguish Hamas from Usama bin Ladin, Hizballah, or the Iranian government.²⁷

In one official Hamas video released in December, during the campaign, Raed Said Hussein Saad (Abu Muadh), commander of Hamas military activities in north Gaza, explains that the battle will continue until not "one inch of our holy land is in the hands of the Jews."²⁸ Two more official videos published in February, after the election, show Hamas suicide terrorists, one of whom proclaims in a message to Jews: "We will destroy you, blow you up, take revenge against you, [and] purify the land of you, pigs that have defiled our country...Jihad is the only way to liberate Palestine—all of Palestine—from the impurity of the Jews."²⁹

These are not isolated cases, but express the viewpoint held by all Hamas leaders. Of course, the organization reserves the right to launch terror attacks at a time and place of its choosing. This parallels the Fatah view that terrorism is always justifiable but that its timing must be determined by the leadership based on the movement's interests.

The electoral process's structure and Fatah split gave Hamas far more seats than it would have attained on a purely proportional basis. Yet unless Fatah has a miraculous transformation in terms of its leadership and policies, the leverage offered by incumbency are likely to strengthen Hamas' base and control over Palestinian thought and life.³⁰

A key contradictory factor, however, is the fact that Hamas may not enjoy two of the main usual types of leverage from being in office.

First, one of the main advantages of being in power is control over patronage and money. This is especially true since so many Palestinians are dependent on the PA payroll. The PA has an estimated 140,000 employees whose dependents comprise one-third of the Palestinian population. Just to pay their salaries will require getting \$100 million a month in aid. (Given the massive amount of foreign assistance received by the PA, there are no general taxes collected.) Yet since its victory is producing at least a partial cut-off of Western aid and Israeli payments, Hamas may well not enjoy this powerful leverage.³¹

Second, another key asset of a regime is control over the means of repression, in this case the PA security services. Here, any attempt by Hamas to take over these institutions, and deprive 58,000—mostly Fatah supporters of jobs—could lead to civil war. It is not clear whether Hamas will really be able to gain control of the police and armed forces.

When one adds to this the fact that Abbas will remain the PA's "president," the outcome is more one of "dual power" than of a Hamas dictatorship. At best, though, this means a deadlock: no progress on peace; even more systematic incitement to extremism and hatred; failure to address economic and social problems; and cooperation with the mounting of terror attacks on Israel.

A LONG-TERM CONFLICT: BOTH INTERNALLY AND EXTERNALLY

There is a wide gap between the prevalent Western image of the Palestinian movement and its actual self-defined identity. Much of the West imagines the conflict is about a Palestinian wish to create a West Bank-Gaza Strip state, a simple matter of nationalist resistance to foreign occupation. Yet this is not what Palestinian leaders say when they talk to each other, their own public, or the Arab world.

If this outside perception were accurate the conflict could be quickly and easily solved. Indeed, this would have already happened before the 1948 or after the 1967 wars, when Egypt made peace with Israel in the late 1970s, or during the diplomatic campaign for peace of the 1988-1990 era. The fact that the classical nationalist narrative does not fit here was most thoroughly disproved by the experience of the 1990s' peace process and especially in the way it ended.

In pragmatic terms, Palestinian leaders should be thinking:

We are in a terrible situation and have no state because of our incorrect strategy. Violence, radicalism, and maximalist demands have failed to bring benefits. We must instead try a strategy of compromise, peace, and moderation. Let us accept Israel's existence; get our own state; bring home the refugees to become productive citizens; and focus on economic, social, and cultural development to benefit our people.

Since this seems logical, much of the world simply assumes that such is the Palestinian position.

However, the leadership's real standpoint is:

Our armed struggle is winning. Continue the battle, produce more martyrs, make no concessions, gain international support by projecting an image of moderation, and we will win in the end as Israel collapses or surrenders, no matter how many years are required, lives it costs, or resources must be spent.

Accepting this standpoint, Hamas does not expect to change everything overnight. In fact, given the hegemony of this kind of thinking, Hamas has to change far less in terms of Palestinian ideology, programs, and policies than it might appear; and certainly Hamas has patience. Its leaders often say that 20 years will be needed to wipe out Israel. Since it believes its goal and methods have divine sanction, Hamas is not too concerned with the time needed, international opinion, or any sufferings this plan inflicts on Palestinians.

What it is trying to do now is to establish hegemony over the Palestinian movement in a way that would ensure Hamas will be the permanent leader. Since Hamas's campaign is ahead of schedule—it did not expect to do so well in the election—this can proceed in a step-by-step fashion. Nor does Hamas really worry about winning the next vote, which might never be held or at least, like parliament's previous "four-year term," take ten years to hold.

Hamas knows, however, that it faces two serious domestic barriers. First, while its program of destroying Israel and using terrorism is popular, Islamization is far less supported by the Palestinian majority.

Islamist measures, then, should advance gradually and mostly by local councils.

Hamas's second big problem is more serious: the institutional competition with Fatah. How is Hamas going to form a government and get control of the mechanisms of power—money, jobs, and guns—without triggering a civil war with Fatah. For example, the firing of any Fatah supporter from any job, especially in the overstuffed security forces, could set off a major crisis. Similarly, how can Hamas fight corruption since it could face a civil war if it arrests Fatah officials and puts them on trial?

Given this situation, the most likely Hamas response is to put the priority on what unites Palestinians, i.e., blaming their problems on Israel and fighting against it. Joint Fatah-Hamas terrorist operations have been common since 2000. Rather than shoot at each other, Hamas and Fatah are offered the attractive alternative of cooperating in their campaign against the common foe.

This strategy fits Hamas's effort to make itself leader of the whole people and "national" cause—rather than just an Islamist party—in a way parallel to how Chinese, Cuban, and Vietnamese Communists achieved similar outcomes. Since there is basically no political difference between Hamas and Fatah except for Islamism, this should not be too difficult. For example, Hamas wants to ensure the educational system will raise a generation that would reject any peace or compromise with Israel, extol terrorism, and vote Hamas.

Meanwhile, Hamas will stick to its radical line in order to consolidate and guide its supporters. As Hamas leader Mahmud Zahar explains, "Those who built their structure on the basis of the Quran...cannot budge because of promises from America or a dollar from

Europe," and, "Our program is to liberate Palestine, all of Palestine."³²

At the same time, though, Hamas will try to create an illusion of moderation among foreigners. Its current "moderate" plan states that if Israel concedes everything (withdraws from all of the West Bank and east Jerusalem, while letting all Palestinian refugees come live in Israel), in exchange Hamas will not attack Israel until it wants to do so while reserving the right to commit genocide on Israel.³³

However, even this offer does not mean Hamas would make any effort to stop others—Fatah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas people operating "unofficially"—from staging terror attacks during this time; or, in Zahar's words, "Anyone who thinks the calm means giving in is mistaken. The calm is in preparation for a new round of resistance and victory." As for previous Palestinian commitments, he explains that Hamas is entering parliament in order "to eliminate any traces" of the Oslo agreements. This means that all previous concessions made by Israel have achieved no reciprocal steps by the Palestinians.³⁴

Fatah also has a multi-layered strategy, but it is in far worse shape. The election defeat has solved none of its problems. All the establishment leaders are still in place, the bitter factional strife is completely unresolved, and Fatah is stuck with a weak, discredited Abbas as its standard bearer. Still, he can provide a moderate face, a way to attract international money and support with the message: "Hamas are the bad guys; we are the good guys."

Yet the main two elements of Fatah strategy remain terrorism and patronage. Fatah will fight desperately to hold onto jobs

and money, with the implicit threat of a civil war if its interests are neglected. At the same time, Fatah's gunmen will try to attack Israel to prove it the superior fighter; striving by fighting against Israel—rather than against corruption, for example—to defeat its rival at home.

Nevertheless, Fatah leaders are still living in a dream world, having no sense of how to organize and compete politically. Without control of the budget and government agencies, how well will Fatah hold onto its supporters? Recovery, if it happens at all, will be very difficult for Fatah, which could face splits as well. Indeed, large portions of Fatah might well ally themselves to Hamas. At a minimum, the purportedly nationalist forces are in deep crisis; at worst, they may become a permanent minority that simply tries to compete within the framework laid down by Hamas.

For the Palestinian movement generally, weakness and failure is guaranteed by these same factors: internal divisions and the inability to make key decisions, on the one hand, and the lack of moderate goals or a viable strategy, on the other hand. Military victory is impossible; a war based on terrorism is counterproductive. As a result, it is unable to achieve a state, end the Israeli occupation, improve its people's material well-being, end the violence, or gain good relations with the West.

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NOTES

¹ For a detailed history of the PLO up to 1994, see Barry Rubin, *Revolution Until Victory?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

² For the story of the PA era, see Barry Rubin, *The Transformation of Palestinian Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

³ World Bank, "The Palestinian Economy and the PA's Fiscal Situation: Current Status," February 1, 2006.

⁴ Reuters, November 15, 2005.

⁵ Faruq Qaddumi, long the closest thing to a number two man in the PLO and later the head of Fatah explained, "The Right of Return of the refugees to Haifa and Jaffa is more important than statehood." *Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2002

⁶ This was best laid out in a Fatah document, "44 Readers why Fateh [sic] movement rejects the proposals made by U.S. President Clinton," in Fatah Movement Central Publication, *Our Opinion*, January 1-7, 2001.

⁷ Such opportunities took place, for example, regarding the Camp David agreements between Egypt and Israel; the Reagan plan and Jordan-PLO negotiations of the 1980s and the U.S.-PLO dialogue era of 1988-90; as well, of course, as the Oslo peace process.

⁸ This issue is discussed in detail in the author's "The Origins of PLO Terrorism," in Barry Rubin, *Terrorism and Politics*, (NY: St. Martin's, 1991).

⁹ A good example here was of Arafat's involvement with the Karine-A arms' smuggling operation in December 2001-

January 2002 along with Lebanese Hizballah terrorists and Iran. Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin, *Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2003) pp. 253-54.

¹⁰ In President George W. Bush's words, "I saw what he did to President Clinton," and did not want to waste his time trying to work with someone who was not going to make peace. Associated Press, April 24, 2003.

¹¹ "Poll: French see Arafat as hero," *Jerusalem Post*, November 9, 2004. Compare to Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, Poll No. 51, June 2004; Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Public Opinion Poll #13, September 23 and 26, 2004.

¹² For his most interesting such statement, see *Al-Rai*, September 27, 2004. Translated in MEMRI, No. 793, October 5, 2004, downloaded from <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP79304>.

¹³ For an account of the negotiations based on interviews with many participants, see Rubin and Rubin, *Yasir Arafat*, pp. 185-203. For an example of Arafat's deliberate distortions on this matter, see page 210. See also the accounts in Bill Clinton, *My Life* (NY: Knopf, 2004) and Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).

¹⁴ An analysis of the PLO Executive Committee and Fatah Central Committee show literally not a single member to be a committed personal follower of Abbas.

¹⁵ Examples of these rivalries include Prime Minister Ahmad Qurei (Abu Alla) who often opposed Abbas, and the rivalry between Gaza Strip security chief Muhammad Dahlan and his West Bank rival Jibril Rajub.

¹⁶ A good example of this school is Sakhr Habash, the head of Fatah's educational and ideological activities, but statements to this effect can be found from virtually every top Fatah official.

¹⁷ After all, the Western policy of "supporting the moderates" could only be sustained in regard to Abbas as the PA's leader, since his Fatah counterparts—with the exceptions of Abu Alla, Dahlan, and Fayyad—barely manifested any moderation at all.

¹⁸ It should be remembered that Abbas, though he wanted to make a deal with Israel, was very strongly attached to the "right of return" idea that made such an agreement impossible. See, for example, his statement in *al-Ayyam*, January 26, 2001.

¹⁹ AP, August 22, 2005. The Hamas rally was attended by 10,000 people; the official rally by only a few hundred.

²⁰ Bloomberg, September 7, 2005. There were many other attacks on senior officials. For example, a bomb exploded in front of the Gaza home of the PA's attorney general, AP, August 1, 2005.

²¹ For the strong Egyptian reaction, see *al-Quds*, February 17, 2006 and *al-Hayat al-Jadida*, February 18, 2006.

²² AP, January 12, 2006.

²³ UN Development Program, "Elections Palestine."

²⁴ See text of Hamas charter in Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, *The Israel-Arab Reader*, (NY: Penguin, 2001).

²⁵ The Hamas position at best is equivalent to the 1974 PLO stance, which was rejected internationally and took 20 years for the PLO even to claim had changed, and even then this idea proved untrue. On the PLO "two-

phase" plan, see the text in Laqueur and Rubin, *The Israel-Arab Reader*, pp. 162-63; and Rubin and Rubin, *Yasir Arafat*, pp. 69-70.

²⁶ For example, in an interview with Dream-2 television on February 13, 2006, deputy head of the Hamas Political Bureau Musa Abu Marzouq explained: "We say that all of Palestine, from the [Jordan] River to the [Mediterranean] Sea, belongs to the Palestinians....An independent Palestinian state with full sovereignty over the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip is a temporary and phased solution...not the permanent solution." He likened the Hamas view to that of Arab states between 1948 and 1967 when they waited for the right moment to go to war against Israel but waged the conflict through terrorism and other means. <http://www.memritv.org/search.asp?ACT=S9&P1=1043>.

²⁷ In common, they view the West and the United States, and also Christians and Jews, as waging a war on the Muslim world. Muslims must unite, use violence, defeat these forces, and establish an Islamist state wherever Muslims live, with a longer-term goal of world conquest. While Muslim Brotherhood-style groups, including Hamas, put the primary goal as revolution within the place where they live (in Hamas's case, against Israel), Jihadist groups (following bin Ladin's view) generally put the priority on attacking the West.

²⁸ Reuters, January 12, 2006.

²⁹ Translation in Palestinian Media Watch Bulletin, February 14, 2006.

³⁰ An interesting example of how victory reinforces itself is shown by a public opinion poll conducted shortly after the election.

Asked who they would vote for a few days after the election, 44.1 percent said Hamas compared to only 31 percent for Fatah—a far higher margin than in the actual voting. Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, Poll 57, February 2006.

³¹ Up to now, the United States alone has provided eight times more aid than all of the Arab world put together, while Arab total contributions have been at the same level as the individual grants made separately by Sweden, Germany, the United Kingdom, or Italy, and far behind what Norway provides! It will not be easy to replace Western donations even if some countries continue to provide aid. See the OECD report at

³² *Jerusalem Post*, February 14, 2006.

³³ Interview with Dream 2 TV, February 13, 2006, Translation by MEMRI #1098, February 22, 2006. To view the interview: <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP109806>.

³⁴ *Jerusalem Post*, February 14, 2006.