

Palestinian Authority (PA) and PA president Mahmud Abbas. The full report can be found online at www.crisisgroup.org. Footnotes have been omitted for space considerations.

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Political Program

While the main concern at the conference was electing a new leadership, other significant issues were discussed. Eighteen committees dealt with a wide range of topics, though meetings for the most part were sparsely attended, in many cases by no more than 10 or 15 delegates. Most sessions did not produce minutes, and significant decisions were left for the new leadership bodies to tackle later. No action was taken on corruption, for instance, despite the fact that it was a major concern entering the conference.

The exception was the political program. The conference produced a 31-page document outlining the movement's vision and strategy, most of which did not spark controversy. There were a couple of notable exceptions. Going into the conference, the issue was on the minds of most outsiders, especially in the international community and Israel, who wondered if it would abrogate or confirm the movement's long-standing commitment to armed struggle; as a U.S. official put it, "Fatah has been lucky all these years that the attention of the world was focused on the PLO charter. It's not in anyone's interest for the Fatah program to become a topic of controversy." Conference delegates were concerned that Fatah remain true to its historical roots. They focused their attention on two issues in particular: the multiple activities classified as "resistance" and Fatah's definition as a national liberation movement.

Fatah's self-definition—while much discussed before the conference by delegates who feared that their movement would be transformed into a state party—produced scant disagreement. When a delegation of anxious Fatah military officers came to see a presidential adviser in the run-up to the conference, "the issue was closed in 30 seconds," the adviser said. "We are a national liberation movement, full stop." The issue of resistance, and armed struggle in particular, was more difficult. At the conference, a revolutionary spirit of sorts reigned; for some, resistance was a matter of political conviction, while for others,

A6. INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP (ICG), "PALESTINE: SALVAGING FATAH," RAMALLAH, GAZA CITY, BRUSSELS, 12 NOVEMBER 2009 (EXCERPTS).

ICG's 39-page report in the wake of Fatah's 6th General Conference examines the state and future of the movement, focusing on the role played by the conference, the changes it brought, and the challenges Fatah still faces in its quest for internal reform. The excerpts below focus on the political program that emerged at the conference (see Doc. B3 in JPS 153 for a summary) and how the issue of resistance was dealt with during the conference and in the program. They also examine the challenges ahead for Fatah, notably regarding its definition and purpose and relations with the

stoking the crowd's fervor offered a way to garner electoral support. Banners adorned the hall, with slogans including, "Resistance Is a Legitimate Right for Our People." A delegate commented grandiloquently: "The sound of the rifle was heard at the conference. Our movement returned to what it was originally, resistance and armed struggle."

Multiple versions of the political program made the rounds in advance of the conference; some continued to circulate in its wake, leading to confusion about where Fatah stands on the issue of armed struggle. The draft program was circulated prior to the conference, but, with the exception of a select group of ten to fifteen that received the final version with their conference invitation, delegates opened their welcome kits to find yellow Fatah baseball caps and collector kufiyya scarves, along with the original Fatah Constitution dating to the 1960s, but with the new proposed political program nowhere in sight. They would not see the final version until the day of the vote.

Abbas's opening speech—which was later adopted as an official statement of the movement's position by the Revolutionary Council—praised the "popular resistance" taking place in a number of villages that he said was "capable of penetrating the world's conscience and winning the support of the peoples of the world." Lest there be any doubt, he clarified that Fatah reserves the right to pursue "legitimate resistance that is acknowledged by international law"; as for armed struggle *per se*, he spoke about it only in the past tense.

The political program has a more insistent edge. The version confirmed by the Revolutionary Council reads:

The struggle originates in the right of the Palestinian people to fight the occupation. The struggle against settlement, displacement, expulsion and racist discrimination is a right conferred by legitimacy and international laws. Our revolutionary struggle began with armed struggle in the face of the armed seizure of our land, but our struggle has never been limited to arms. The tools and styles of struggle have varied. They have included peaceful struggle—as during the [first] intifada—and demonstrations, uprisings, civil disobedience and confrontations with settler gangs; political, media, legal and diplomatic forms of struggle; and negotiations with the occupying power. Therefore, the right of the Palestinian people to exercise armed struggle against the armed occupation of its land remains an immutable right that legitimacy and

international law confers. Choosing the kind, time and place of struggle depends on individual and collective abilities, the internal and external circumstances, the balance of power, the necessity of preserving the movement, and the people's ability to revolt, preserve and maintain the struggle. . . .

Since it was launched, Fatah has refused to target civilians of any kind or move the battle outside [of Palestine], just as it rejects the chaos of weapons, their misuse and the security breakdown.

The document was the product of the conference's more defiant mood. When the political committee met to discuss the draft on 7 August, with perhaps 1,500 delegates in attendance, passions ran high. Soon-to-be Central Committee member Mahmud al-Aloul introduced five points of clarification, including the specification that "resistance in all its forms"—commonly understood as a euphemism for armed struggle—is a right of all occupied peoples. Delegates broke into a traditional song of al-Asifa, Fatah's defunct military wing, and the refrain ("My weapon emerged from my wound") echoed in the chamber. Informed of the surging emotional tide, a nervous Abbas hurriedly joined the proceedings for one of only four times. He worked to calm the crowd and announced that he supported only the kind of "legitimate peaceful resistance" embodied in "negotiations, negotiations, negotiations."

Abbas opposed including the wording of Aloul's five points in the official program. Ultimately, a compromise was reached pursuant to which the five points would constitute a "declaration" appended to the program. The Revolutionary Council approved the document, including the declaration, at its October meeting.

For the sake of unity, the kitchen-sink approach worked well, generating wide acceptance within the movement, even among those segments, such as the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, that had expressed serious reservations going in. A Brigades leader praised the conference results and especially the declaration, asking "Where is the difference with Hamas? There is complete consensus within Fatah on these principles." The conference leadership might have been able to gloss over differences, but the proceedings themselves were indicative of the tensions within the movement between the priority accorded to negotiations and the widespread belief that they will not suffice.

Reorganizing Fatah and Defining Its Role

But Fatah's problems run much deeper. Organizational and procedural fixes cannot resolve fundamental questions of identity and sense of purpose, in other words, what the movement stands for and would campaign on. There is much truth in the common wisdom that diplomatic failure and corruption dragged Fatah down, but that is not the entire story. The pillars of Fatah's strength—which sustained its quasi-hegemonic position over nearly five decades, until Arafat's death—have vanished. In its early days, these included the ethos of resistance, broad inclusiveness, social organization, and charismatic leadership. What is more, these came together during a heady historical moment, at the height of the decolonization era and amid successful Third World nationalist and revolutionary wars. Later, as Fatah's institutions broke down and its cadres were demobilized, the PA offered an alternative structure, and Arafat himself retained the ability to both impose discipline and impart hope.

Today, these multiple advantages have largely disappeared. Resistance in the region is spearheaded by Islamic, not secular, groups; Arafat is no more; diplomacy is President Abbas's preserve; Salam Fayyad's government dominates the West Bank, while Hamas controls Gaza. Far from being a big tent under which all Palestinian forces assemble, Fatah is being crowded out by competing forces. A Central Committee member described the goal as restoring Fatah to where it was in 1982, a yearning that is more illusion than realistic hope.

Some of the most important, immediate questions will be how to trace clear political boundaries to replace what, over time, have become murky lines—between the party and its leader, and between the party and the PA. The confusion has come at a cost: achievements, when they have occurred, have tended to redound almost exclusively to President Abbas's or Prime Minister Fayyad's benefit, while setbacks often have been blamed equally on Fatah. If the movement is to gain ground, it will need to find a more autonomous role and voice.

For Fatah leaders, the question regarding Abbas is how to be loyal without becoming subservient. By temperament as well as necessity, Abbas has grown accustomed to working independently, barely

consulting the movement from which he supposedly derives a large share of political authority. In light of Fatah's institutional paralysis, any other course could have proved ruinous. But, intent on revitalizing the movement, Fatah's leaders now aim at greater oversight; their frustration at being passive spectators of the president's decisions is palpable.

A first impression of how Fatah's leadership would relate to Abbas was provided by two recent events. In both, the Central Committee was forced to balance its loyalty to him against sensitivity to public opinion. First, after suggesting that he would not meet Netanyahu without prior Israeli commitment to a settlement freeze, Abbas gave in to U.S. pressure and participated in a trilateral meeting in New York with the Israeli prime minister and President Obama on the margins of the UN General Assembly. Abbas insisted that the three-way parley did not constitute negotiations, a defense that prompted skepticism among Palestinians. He failed to consult the Central Committee on what several members saw as a step-down from the conditions the conference had agreed upon for resuming talks. Secondly, Abbas, this time in response to U.S. and Israeli pressure and again without consulting Fatah's leadership, agreed to postpone the vote on the Goldstone report at the UN Human Rights Council.

Of the two episodes, the latter was by far the more damaging, prompting an unprecedented wave of criticism, especially among intellectuals and opinion shapers, that could have lasting consequences, notwithstanding the subsequent decision to change course and push for a vote. The press, both in the Palestinian territories and the wider Arab world, has been brutal and unrelenting. An NGO worker, who regrets his 2006 vote for Hamas, nonetheless said, "if there are elections, I will never vote for Fatah. It sold us out; it abandoned us. Both Fatah and Hamas are only looking out for their own."

With Abbas under intense pressure—from Hamas on the inside and from the U.S. and Israel from the outside—Fatah's leadership publicly rallied around its leader. They joined him in attacking Hamas for delaying reconciliation talks and, in public, only mildly denounced the decision to postpone the vote. In the private words of a committee member, Abbas's

move was an “enormous mistake, but it’s not appropriate or helpful to pile on him now”; before the cameras, committee members spoke in terms of a “mistake” (*kbata*), while Hamas and some others, playing on the linguistic similarity in Arabic, called the postponement a “sin” (*kbati’a*). Fatah’s leadership joined Abbas’s call for an investigation into the postponement of the vote in an attempt to defuse public anger, while seeking to put enough distance between the movement and the decision.

At the same time, Fatah’s leaders sought to put these events to better use, invoking them to bolster their position and leverage vis-à-vis Abbas. In the words of a Central Committee member, the Goldstone affair presents a “silver lining” in that it potentially strengthens the institution’s hands. Specifically, the committee took an informal decision—albeit in Abbas’s absence—that it must be the “source of authority” for the president’s decisions. As a committee member put it:

Abu Mazin [Abbas] is not Arafat. Arafat used to consult on everything. He was strong and often imposed his decision on the institution, but he always included you and never acted unilaterally. Abu Mazin is different. He works alone. But in the future, he will not take any decision without us. We will force him to respect Fatah’s institutions, even though he doesn’t want to and does not believe in institutionalization.

How this will be implemented and to what extent Abbas’s future diplomatic moves will be constrained remain unclear. Among the new leadership, there is little appetite for a head-on confrontation that risks destabilizing a movement that has just begun to right itself. Nor is there a shortage of reasons to tread lightly in dealings with the president. Abbas’s control of funds and appointment powers give him considerable leverage, as does the fact that he has multiple roles, sitting atop not only Fatah but also the PLO and PA. Further complicating the picture is the process by which the new Central Committee was elected and its composition. Current members are more loyal to Abbas—who played an instrumental role in their election—than their predecessors; they also are more politically ambitious, which likely will lead them to keep a more watchful eye on the president’s actions.

For Fatah to delineate its relations with the PA is equally daunting. In the 2006

elections, the movement was tainted by the PA’s record of corruption, malfeasance, and political failure; many voters punished the Authority by voting against Fatah. Today, the problem has changed somewhat: under Fayyad’s stewardship, the government has improved its standing among the public; but Fayyad is not Fatah, and his independence means he can take decisions regardless of the movement’s views, and Fatah cannot take credit despite its dominant position in the West Bank. The debate within Fatah spans the gamut between those who believe it should be in charge of the PA and those who believe in erecting a firewall between party and government.

Fatah’s dilemma regarding the PA is bigger than the prime minister, politically outsized as he may be. Many see resuming control over the government as a must, not necessarily because they are power-hungry or oppose Fayyad personally but because they see it as the only way for both the movement and their national cause to move forward. A former negotiator said:

Fayyad has brought artificial stability to the West Bank and covered up the dysfunction, but so long as he is in place, underlying issues will not be addressed. The PLO and Fatah need to be in charge, to run a government that can move toward statehood. A temporary, artificial government can neither build sufficient political support for the PLO against Hamas, nor can it mount a systematic enough effort at institution building to move us to statehood. You need a political government to do those things. What you have now is a situation in which one shock can bring the whole system down.

Others point out that governmental authority carries its own constraints; the more closely Fatah is associated with the PA, the less it will be able to adopt a confrontational strategy vis-à-vis Israel. During the Goldstone affair, Abbas faced enormous pressure from Israel to scuttle the motion endorsing the report. Less than a week before the vote, in response to the PA’s call for the International Criminal Court at The Hague to investigate war crimes charges against Israel, an IDF [Israel Defense Forces] official said that “the PA has reached the point where it has to decide whether it is working with us or against us.” That confusion—whether Fatah seeks to govern or to resist—remains at the heart of the movement’s predicament.

The trouble has become more acute in light of Fayyad’s recent initiatives.

Long convinced that the PA will get little through negotiations from Israel and that Palestinian efforts need to focus instead on self-reliance, in August 2009 he translated his pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps philosophy into a political agenda with the release of the government's program, "Palestine: Ending the Occupation, Establishing the State" [see Doc. B4 in *JPS* 153]. The document—part political manifesto, part ministerial priorities—called for a ground-up approach to state building over two years. As opposed to a top-down, diplomatic process heavily reliant on U.S. and, especially, Israeli goodwill, Fayyad's government, in the words of an adviser, "takes seriously the power of facts on the ground." . . . The government program is another step in Fayyad's increasingly pronounced political turn. He is garnering growing respect not only for his technocratic competence but also for his political savvy. Fayyad is not a man of the people by nature, but he understands the importance of human contact, and "there is hardly a village in the West Bank he has not visited." He is also taking advantage of the political void left by Fatah. Many in Fatah sense an ambition to remain in office or even run for the presidency and feel threatened by it; a U.S. official remarked: " Hamas and Fatah can unite on one thing. They both want Fayyad out."

The threat Fayyad poses for Fatah is not so much electoral, at least for now, since he lacks a party apparatus or the capacity to mobilize constituents, as it is political in that his ascent is in part a by-product of the movement's strategic muddle: whereas his role and vision are clear, Fatah's are anything but. Ironically, the technocratic prime minister appears to have a more focused political agenda; while he also decries Palestinian dependence on outside actors, he is the Palestinian actor most appreciated by Washington. . . .