

PolicyWatch #1569

Fatah Congress: Will New Resolutions Mean a New Direction?

By Mohammad Yaghi
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PolicyWatch #1569 is the second in a two-part series examining the political and organizational implications of Fatah's recently concluded General Congress. This part explores Fatah's external dynamics, specifically how the group's new political program will affect its relations with Israel, Hamas, and the Palestinian Authority. [PolicyWatch #1568](#) examines Fatah's internal dynamics, particularly in regard to its top leader Mahmoud Abbas.

At its recently concluded General Congress, Fatah established a new political program that will affect both its terms of reengagement with Israel and its relations with Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA). Fatah's new constraints on negotiations with Israel, however, may harm Mahmoud Abbas -- PA president and the party's top leader -- who needs to respond positively to international peace initiatives that may conflict with the organization's new rules of engagement. Abbas might ignore these congressional decisions, believing its program is intended only for internal consumption to fend off the accusations of the party's hardline members. Fatah's renewed efforts to reunite the West Bank and Gaza could lead to an escalation with Hamas, since many observers doubt unity can be achieved peacefully.

Fatah's Political Program

According to *al-Ayyam* newspaper, Fatah's new political program sets demanding terms for reengagement with Israel, even more so than those Abbas has been stating publicly since Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu took office earlier this year. The new terms include a complete halt of Israeli settlement construction, especially in East Jerusalem; an Israeli withdrawal from all Palestinian cities, reverting back to the status that existed before the September 2000 intifada; a clear and binding timetable for negotiations; a refusal to postpone negotiations over Jerusalem and refugees; and an insistence on a defined mechanism for arbitration. The program also rejects recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, calls for the formation of a national negotiating committee under Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) supervision, and promises to hold a popular referendum on any agreement to do with final-status negotiations. Fatah believes that most of these conditions were present in the 2003 Roadmap peace initiative, which former Israeli governments accepted as a guideline for the peace process.

According to Nabil Shaath, who drafted the political program, Fatah erred during the Oslo negotiations by not insisting on a freeze of Israeli settlements, which have expanded considerably since the 1993 agreement and have been an ongoing source of Palestinian frustration. Fatah also argues that a clear timeline for the peace process would bolster the party's position on Hamas and minimize the prospects of Israel creating new facts on the ground that would alter the nature of the negotiations. The congress also sanctioned "all legitimate forms of struggle while working toward peace and without limiting the option of peaceful negotiations," noting that among the accepted forms of resistance are "mobilizing popular resistance against settlements, boycotting Israeli products, escalating an international campaign to boycotting Israel, and reactivating Fatah relations with the Israeli peace camp." The political program makes very clear that armed struggle is not on the table at this time.

Fatah, however, did not forswear violence as a future option. According to the PLO news agency Wafa, the congress issued a brief statement to this effect: "While Fatah is clinging to the option of a just peace and is seeking to achieve it, it won't abandon any of its options. Fatah maintains its belief that resistance, in all its forms, is a legitimate right for occupied peoples facing their occupiers." Some Fatah members immediately downplayed the statement, saying it was added in response to opposition parties that have accused Fatah of abandoning armed struggle. Salah Tamari, a member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council and former governor of Bethlehem, agrees: "All calls for armed struggle are for publicity and election purposes." Other credible sources commented that "the calls for armed struggle drew too much giggling from the congress's members." According to Shaath, although the program maintains the Palestinian right to all forms of resistance, it clearly states that resistance should be used within the boundaries of international law and only when all Palestinian factions approve it.

Even as Fatah adopted this political program, the party congress failed to amend its charter, or bylaws, to remove language calling for the destruction of Israel -- clauses similar to sections of Hamas's charter. Instead, Fatah's political program declared that the party's charter will expire when the Palestinians attain self-determination.

Fatah-Hamas Relationship

Although Fatah's political program considers the restoration of unity in the Palestinian territories its top priority, Hamas's recent efforts to extort Fatah -- demanding the release of 870 Hamas prisoners in PA custody in exchange for allowing Fatah members in Gaza to attend the conference -- increased tension between the two factions. According to Fatah officials, Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Russia, and Qatar appealed to Hamas to allow the Fatah delegates to leave Gaza, but to no avail. Musa Abu Marzouk, the deputy to Hamas's political leader Khalid Mashal, stated that Abbas offered, through Egypt, the release of six hundred Hamas prisoners under Fatah's control: two hundred if Hamas allowed Fatah members to leave Gaza, another two hundred when Fatah members reached Bethlehem, and the final two hundred after the congress. Marzouk responded by saying, "Hamas didn't accept that, we don't trust Abbas." Statements by several Hamas leaders revealed that the issue of prisoners was not the sole factor in their decision to refuse Abbas's proposal; they also feared legitimizing Abbas's leadership and hoped to minimize the chance of former PA security chief Mohammed Dahlan's election to the Fatah Central Committee (FCC), the organization's highest elected institution. Furthermore, Hamas officials reportedly received requests from Fatah leaders -- a charge corroborated by Dahlan -- to prevent certain Fatah members from leaving Gaza, in an attempt to skew the election results.

Regardless of these accusations, Hamas's actions became an important topic on the congressional agenda. In his inaugural speech, Abbas reaffirmed his goals of talking with Hamas and unifying the West Bank and Gaza through elections, saying, "The legislative and presidential election must take place in Gaza, the West Bank, and Jerusalem; we will not allow anyone to divide our homeland by ruining the election." If dialogue with Hamas fails to achieve unity, however, the political program outlines other potential steps, including confronting Hamas in Gaza, mobilizing the Palestinian public against Hamas, organizing media campaigns against Hamas activities that do not align with Palestinian and Arab norms and traditions, and demanding an Arab security intervention to return Gaza to PA control. The congress gave Fatah's new leadership the authority to determine the actions necessary to reunite Gaza and the West Bank.

Although antagonism between Fatah and Hamas has increased, Fatah's policy remains steady: the party will continue Egyptian-mediated discussions with Hamas to establish a date for presidential and legislative election, and if this fails, Fatah's methods will escalate. It is worth noting that the congress did not link the PA campaign against Hamas to the PA obligations in the Roadmap, but rather to Hamas's efforts to rebel against the PA in the West Bank. A majority of members in the FCC also do not support making concessions to Hamas, a sign that the Fatah-Hamas relationship will likely become more complicated.

Fatah and the PA

Fatah regards the establishment of the PA as the organization's most important achievement in the last twenty years and pledged to preserve and develop that institution. The congress also decided that Fatah should try to establish a clearer distinction between Fatah's activities and those of the PA, in part by developing its own financial capabilities. Competition has marred their relationship for the past two years, and these decisions will improve the coordination -- and potential harmony -- between Fatah and the PA. Abbas requested that candidates running for seats in the FCC and the revolutionary council who work in the PA security forces resign from their positions. In addition, the congress decided that no FCC member should be allowed to assume an official post in the PA, except as prime minister or the speaker of the legislative council. These restrictions are meant to minimize the friction between the government and Fatah's top leaders, as the congress wants FCC members to spend their time developing Fatah and its outreach. Although this means that Muhammad Shtayyeh, the minister of public works and housing, Abbas Zaki, the PA representative in Lebanon, and Hussein al-Sheikh, the PA minister of civil affairs, will leave the PA after being elected to the FCC, the PA is expected to remain stable -- barring an unlikely agreement to form a unity government with Hamas.

Conclusion

Fatah renewed its commitment to achieve a peaceful settlement with Israel through negotiations, a departure from old principles that relied heavily on armed struggle -- but failed to alter its charter to reflect this stance. The party also maintained its commitment to reunite Gaza and the West Bank, and to achieve new presidential and legislative elections through dialogue with Hamas. Although Fatah measures against Hamas will intensify if unity talks fail, open violence is an unlikely result. The relationship between Fatah and the PA government will improve as Fatah works to separate itself from the government, but because most civil servants and security personnel are Fatah members, it will be a slow process.

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