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Hamas vs. Fatah: Is Confrontation Inevitable?

Featuring Ghaith al-Omari, Mohammad Yaghi, and Dennis Ross
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On January 10, 2007, Ghaith al-Omari, Mohammad Yaghi, and Dennis Ross addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Dr. al-Omari, a visiting fellow at the New America Foundation, has served as a political advisor to Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah and as a legal advisor to the Palestinian negotiating team. Mr. Yaghi is a Lafer international fellow at The Washington Institute and a columnist for the Palestinian daily al-Ayyam. *Ambassador Ross, the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow, is a former U.S. Middle East peace envoy and author of* The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace *(2004). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

GHAITH AL-OMARI

There are three possibilities for the future of the troubled Hamas-Fatah relationship. The first is the default option, involving perpetual tension with progressively worsening violence—and no decisive victor. Each side mistakenly believes that it can swiftly defeat the other. Hamas believes it can win through continued rearmament and resistance, and that its political message resonates with its constituency. Its own efforts—along with Hizballah's perceived victory in summer 2006—have lent Hamas confidence in its current footing. For its part, Fatah believes it has historical claim to both power and representation, and that its rule of the Palestinian Authority (PA), the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and the governmental security apparatus are ingredients of a decisive victory, regardless of the continuing arms race.

However, the results of the current stalemate benefit Hamas, not Fatah. The longer Fatah is out of power, the more difficult it will be for the faction to reorganize itself; prolonged disorganization may spark a downward spiral toward disintegration. Conversely, Hamas is doing well. It deflects blame and exhibits sustainable organizational abilities.

The second possible outcome is decisive confrontation initiated by Fatah, with the aim of severely degrading Hamas's ability to pursue and project its policy. However, the conditions for this do not exist and would need to be created. Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) does not have the political cover to confront Hamas. If confrontation is pursued, he may be perceived as a proxy for American and Israeli interests.

In the case of confrontation, Arab and other Islamic states would have to be prepared to accept a high number of casualties. If they sought a premature end to the confrontation, they would only weaken Abbas further. Regional states must acknowledge the importance of sustained engagement if in fact a conflict occurs, since successful confrontation would reestablish the credibility of Fatah and Abbas. However, violence could quickly spin out of control, and success cannot be guaranteed.

The third scenario is sustainable national unity, which would include a deeper sharing of power. Certain preconditions must be met, however. First, Fatah must accept a fundamental redrawing of the Palestinian political map that addresses all of Hamas's constituents and accepts outsiders such as Khaled Mashal. In

addition, if Fatah wants Hamas to cooperate, then Hamas would require a place in the PLO and the granting of legitimacy to its armed wing's request for authority. This is only possible if Hamas accepts the Quartet's three conditions for recognition. It must be noted, moreover, that a political compromise with Hamas may preclude a peace process, lead to further Islamization of Palestinian society, and, perhaps, facilitate a final Hamas takeover of the Palestinian political system.

MOHAMMED YAGHI

The current course of the Fatah-Hamas confrontation can be best understood through each party's approach to the PA. Hamas's priority is to deepen its control of PA institutions, supplant Fatah's dominance over the PLO, and become the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. For Hamas, the PA is a tool needed to gain internal and external legitimacy, strengthen its armed wing, and build the necessary social and economic systems that support its goal of resistance.

Hamas justifies its position by arguing that the Palestinian people requested a change in leadership in the January 2006 elections, and that the political system should reflect this. The election, as an indicator of Palestinian public opinion, illustrated frustration with Fatah's corruption. To reflect this new reality, and to protect its rule, Hamas formed a military executive force from the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades and its allies, which grew after two months to more than 5,500 members and which now seeks to expand to 12,000.

Fatah, on the other hand, has had a difficult time adjusting to the election results. It continues to believe it has legitimate control over the PA and its institutions, which symbolize all of its achievements since the Oslo Accords. However, its past corruption and its failings in governance and security continue to taint its reputation.

Whereas Hamas wants to bring Fatah under its umbrella by advocating for a unity government, Fatah sees unity as a way to get Hamas out of authority and to restore its control over the PA. Fatah justifies this approach as the only way to end the economic and political sanctions declared by the Quartet in March 2006. However, the group's intentions go beyond ending the sanctions and restoring lost glory. Fatah wants to use its authority and resources to maintain its leadership of the Palestinian national movement. Moreover, it has made clear that it will respond to attacks against its members in Gaza through action against Hamas's interests in the West Bank.

Given the seemingly incompatible objectives of Hamas and Fatah, a confrontation between them appears increasingly unavoidable. Abbas's latest decision to hold early presidential and legislative elections may only exacerbate the friction and act as a catalyst for confrontation. A more effective approach to contending with Hamas's electoral victory would have been for Abbas to encourage Fatah to mobilize as an active opposition party, challenging the merits of Hamas's program and its ability to govern. Fatah should be preparing to defeat Hamas at the ballot box—not in armed street clashes. If Hamas is given a chance to govern and fails, it would be a defeat not only for Hamas, but for the entire Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Middle East.

DENNIS ROSS

Fatah currently believes it is in a zero-sum struggle with Hamas, which seeks complete domination over the Palestinian political arena. Fatah's leadership, as well as many high-profile independents, perceive Hamas as a stubborn entity opposed to accommodating, settling disputes, or working with anyone but its own members. Hamas does not use the substantial outside assistance it receives for supporting the Palestinian population, but rather for subsidizing its grassroots political and service infrastructure—which benefits only its own members. Moreover, it is attempting to extend its hold into the West Bank, and this has served as a wakeup call for Fatah.

Abbas's decision to call early elections stems from his personal frustration with Hamas, particularly after it embarrassed him by reneging on a unity deal he was preparing to sell to the international community. Given

the perceived implausibility of a national unity government, those around Abbas are now pushing him to confront Hamas rather than accommodate it. The idea of a Palestinian civil war remains as much of an anathema as ever. However, a strategy of competition rather than violent confrontation may emerge as a means of challenging Hamas's influence without an escalation toward civil war.

Fatah's leaders are beginning to conclude that, to survive politically, they must compete with Hamas in all arenas: political, economic, social, and in the mosques. Hamas has made a deliberate effort to monopolize the latter in order to organize and communicate with its constituents. Activists recognize that any kind of competition with Hamas must include a strategy that uses the mosques to spread alternative political messages. Indeed, the mosques remain a focal point of networking and affecting the broader political perceptions of Palestinians.

These ideas for competing with Hamas may be more theoretical than practical at this stage, but they signal the preferred direction of Fatah's leaders. For Fatah to compete effectively with Hamas's established social service networks, it requires money and resources to fund its own programs and build its security forces with an eye toward deterring Hamas. Fatah expected Saudi Arabia to deliver financial assistance, but this has yet to materialize. The lack of Arab political support for Fatah has especially benefited Hamas. In their efforts to entice Hamas away from Iran, the Arab states appear interested in an accommodated political outcome that would retain Hamas's political power at the expense of Fatah. However, a national unity arrangement based on Hamas's preferences would only solidify the group's position of authority.

Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestinians may value the future, but they are also deeply concerned about the quality of life today. It is one thing to talk about a political horizon in abstraction, but Palestinians will view any such discussion with great skepticism unless it includes immediate and demonstrable improvements to daily life.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Peter Badal.