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## **Palestinian Public Opinion a Year after Hamas's Victory**

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One year after Hamas's sweeping electoral victory, Palestinian politics is not only locked in a dysfunctional stalemate, but also marred by increasingly deadly factional violence in Gaza. Since a roadside bomb exploded on January 25—targeting a vehicle carrying members of Hamas's Executive Force—more than thirty-two people have been killed, seventy-five injured, and dozens kidnapped in the deadliest wave of fighting between Hamas and Fatah to date. Despite a truce that was supposed to have gone into effect this morning, fighting persists in Gaza.

President Mahmoud Abbas's December call for early presidential and legislative elections heightened tensions between the parties, but it remains unclear under what circumstances he would attempt to turn his threat into a concrete plan. His preferred option still seems to be the formation of a unity government, as indicated by his acceptance of Saudi King Abdullah's recent offer to host unity talks in Mecca.

In this context, it is important to evaluate Palestinian public opinion, particularly among those who voted for Hamas but who are not ideological followers of the group's Islamist agenda. To date, Hamas retains a high level of public support because it is not being blamed for the past year's failures, and it has survived the political and economic boycott imposed by the Quartet (the UN, United States, European Union, and Russia). Meanwhile, Fatah has not even begun to unify or to cleanse itself of the stains of corruption that led to its defeat last year, and its public posture has only increased suspicions of its motivations.

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Recent polls conducted by independent organizations such as Near East Consulting, the Norwegian nongovernmental organization Fafo, and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) may lead one to believe that Fatah would win the next election by margins ranging from 6 to 17 percent. The last PSR poll from mid-December found that if early elections were to take place then, Hamas would receive 36 percent of the vote, Fatah 42 percent, and all other factions 12 percent, with 10 percent still undecided. However, the substantial undecided category indicates that Hamas could still win at the polls.

Regardless of their results, all such polls are inconclusive, with the same inherent problems that resulted in their failure to predict the past election's outcome. Unless the Palestinian electoral system is changed, half of the legislature's seats would be determined by proportional voting, and half by direct election of candidates at the district level. In last year's election, Hamas narrowly defeated Fatah in the national proportional balloting, but swept forty-five district seats to Fatah's seventeen. Advance polls failed to account for district preferences and thus radically underestimated Hamas's electoral potential.

### **The Limited Impact of Sanctions**

Despite the conventional wisdom that the Palestinian Authority (PA) faces severe economic sanctions, the numbers tell a different story. According to data released by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics on

December 26, 2006, the PA had received \$550 million in aid during the first eight months of the year and expected the figure to reach \$760 million by year's end. In 2005, before Hamas's election, the PA received \$352 million—less than half of what it was expected to receive in 2006. Much of this increase came from the Quartet's Temporary International Mechanism (TIM), which, according to the European Union, funds health-care services, utilities, and welfare support for 40,000 of the poorest Palestinian families.

The Central Bureau of Statistics did record a substantial decrease in the PA's internal revenue—from \$1.29 billion in 2005 to just \$370 million in 2006. Much of this difference resulted from tax and customs revenues collected and held by Israel (which recently released \$100 million of these funds to Abbas). Adding internal revenue and aid, the 2006 sum would have been \$1.13 billion, or down 31 percent from \$1.64 billion in 2005. Hamas has tried to overcome this significant reduction in PA revenue by cutting government spending to a minimum. It reduced the operating costs of all ministries by 38 percent and spent virtually nothing on development projects except for the construction of two new hospitals, which allowed for reduced spending on health-care treatment outside the Palestinian territories.

In addition, more than 75 percent of PA employees—those with salaries less than \$450 per month—now receive regular payments from the TIM or from internal revenue sources, and Abbas's office has been able to pay salaries from funds transferred directly from the Arab League. The 12,500 civil servants with higher salaries received their full December salaries late this month and have been scheduled to receive their remaining unpaid 2006 salaries as well. As a result of these improvements, the months-old civil servants' strike officially ended earlier this year.

Public opinion also appears to support Hamas's efforts to smuggle money into Gaza after its leaders' visits to Iran and various conservative Arab Gulf states. Whereas previous PA officials were known to have embezzled funds into their own accounts, Hamas leaders are seen as taking steps to improve public welfare. Officially, these efforts have led to the transfer of \$63 million to the Ministry of Finance for public use, further offsetting the effects of sanctions.

### **Fatah's Continued Problems**

Since its defeat last year, Fatah has been more focused on how to return to power than on behaving like a real opposition party. Fatah's message has focused on the need for "a government capable of lifting the unjust economic siege." This message makes Fatah appear to be a partner in the international sanctions against Hamas, suggesting that the only way to renew outside aid involves returning Fatah to power—not changing the Hamas stances that inspired the sanctions in the first place.

Fatah remains as divided as ever, with continued public feuds between Abbas and the Central Committee. Abbas's main committee rival, Farouq Kaddoumi, went so far as to join Hamas leader Khaled Mashal in a Damascus press conference opposing the president's call for early elections. Ongoing public rivalries within Fatah only reinforce the public perception that the party has neither learned its 2006 lesson nor engaged in any serious internal reform.

### **Affecting Public Opinion**

Despite its gains, Hamas's public support is vulnerable, especially because of its contributing role in the ongoing internal violence in Gaza. The killing of intelligence official Baha Baloush's three children and the gruesome assassination of Preventive Security colonel Muhammad Ghraib in front of his family and neighbors on January 4 damaged Hamas's image. The group denied involvement in the first incident but could not hide its role in the latter. Ghraib himself called Palestinian television during the attack to ask for help while Hamas Executive Force members attacked his home with rocket-propelled grenades. If Hamas continues to act with such impunity, and Fatah is able to demonstrate restraint during confrontations, Hamas will lose significant public support. However, Fatah will not affect public attitudes if it is seen as provoking further violence (e.g., through acts such as the roadside bomb attack on Hamas Executive Force personnel).

In response to the Baloush and Ghraib incidents, Fatah was able to garner massive public support at rallies in Gaza and Ramallah celebrating the organization's anniversary. According to witnesses, these were the largest public gatherings since Yasser Arafat's funeral in 2004. Fatah could take advantage of Hamas's missteps by organizing more rallies and showing coherent leadership with effective ties to its grassroots support. It could also tangibly demonstrate reform by tackling the issue of security anarchy in the West Bank, where it has the resources to enforce law and order. Should Abbas use security forces to disrupt the activities of armed gangs in the West Bank—many with close ties to Fatah—he will demonstrate that his party can play a similar role in Gaza.

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