PALESTINE: SALVAGING FATAH

Middle East Report N°91 – 12 November 2009

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why should anyone care about Fatah's fate? The 50-year-old movement, once the beating heart of Palestinian nationalism, is past its prime, its capacity to mobilise withered. Racked by internal divisions, it lost the latest and only truly competitive election in Palestinian Authority (PA) history. It promised to fight for liberation, achieve independence by negotiation and effectively manage daily lives through the PA yet achieved none of this. Those yearning for resistance can turn to Hamas or Islamic Jihad; the address for diplomacy is the PLO; governance depends on Prime Minister Fayyad in the West Bank, the Islamists in Gaza. President Abbas' threat not to run in upcoming presidential elections is the latest sign of a movement and project adrift. Yet Fatah's difficulties do not make it expendable; they make it an organisation in urgent need of redress. A strong national movement is needed whether negotiations succeed and an agreement must be promoted, or they fail and an alternative project must be devised. Fatah's August General Conference – its first in twenty years – was a first step. Now comes the hard part: to define the movement's agenda, how it plans to carry it out, and with whom.

Fatah's problems by no means are entirely of its own doing. They are an outgrowth of the singular Palestinian experience: still under occupation yet already in the process of state-building; clinging to the notion of armed struggle even as it embarked on negotiations. The nationalist movement first benefited from this condition: as the dominant faction in the PLO and the core of the PA when it was established in the mid-1990s, it controlled the diplomatic agenda, ran the government and, largely through its charismatic founder, Yasser Arafat, retained the mantle of resistance. The balancing act soon became unsustainable. Governance afforded an opportunity to dispense patronage, but its corollary, corruption, earned the movement public scorn. Fatah was saddled with a moribund peace process. In 2004, it mourned the loss of its leader.

But if Fatah did not create its own predicament, it has been remarkably uninspired in seeking to overcome it. The movement allowed its institutions to wither and rank-and-file militants to drift, as its elite sought perks and privileges of government positions. It sought hegemony over the PA even as it paid lip service to pluralism. It did not bring its political agenda up to date or adapt it to a shifting environment. It resisted renewal of its leadership, marginalising generations of activists and depriving the movement of necessary lifeblood. Worst of all, it failed to respond to or learn from a long list of devastating setbacks: the second intifada and the ensuing devastation of the PA; Hamas's electoral victories, beginning with municipal elections in 2004 and 2005 and culminating with the parliamentary elections of 2006; the Islamists' takeover of Gaza in 2007; and the bankruptcy of the peace process.

Fatah's General Conference, which took place in Bethlehem, signalled awareness that something dramatic had to be done. In many ways – beginning with the fact that it was held at all – it exceeded expectations. In the conference run-up, the movement organised an unprecedented number of regional elections to designate participants, renewing leadership at many levels; at the conference itself, governing bodies – the Central and Revolutionary Council committees – long dormant, were reactivated. The vast majority of successful candidates are new to official leadership; unlike their predecessors, they grew up in the occupied territories, giving them greater familiarity with those among whom they live. Abbas emerged with new legitimacy, finally stepping out from his predecessor's shadow. There were glitches, some significant. A large majority of conference delegates ultimately were not elected but appointed by fiat. Heavy-handed control of the conference amid widespread accusations of electoral fraud left some feeling that they had been manipulated, assigned bit parts in a piece of political theatre that was decided elsewhere. Still, many saw this as an important stage in revitalising the movement's internal organisation and presence on the ground.

If Fatah moved toward internal reform in Bethlehem, it fell short when it came to its other major challenge: to clarify its political purpose and project as well as relations with the PA, President Abbas and Hamas. Speaking to Fatah members, high and low, is instructive, not so much for what they say as for what they do not: despite

a 31-page political program, few can clearly explain let alone agree on what the movement stands for; how it ought to react if the peace process remains paralysed; whether it can or should engage in non-violent, mass protest; how to deal with Hamas or how to reunite Gaza with the West Bank.

The challenges facing Fatah will likely only heighten in coming months. The last few weeks provided a stark illustration in the form of two successive political mishaps that damaged Abbas's – and by extension, albeit indirectly, Fatah's – credibility: the Palestinian president's decision to attend a trilateral meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Obama despite the absence of an Israeli settlement freeze; and, far more injurious, his decision to postpone consideration of Justice Richard Goldstone's report on the December-January 2009 Gaza war at the UN Human Rights Council.

The future will not be more kind: Israeli-Palestinian talks appear at a standstill, U.S. diplomacy at the mercy of events, rather than in control of them; inter-Palestinian talks are at an impasse; a competent, independent and politically savvy prime minister is becoming stronger at the PA's helm; and Abbas has ordered presidential and parliamentary elections for January 2010 which, if held, will defy Hamas and put him at odds with many within Fatah itself who fear West Bank-only balloting will further entrench the geographic and political divide. The Palestinian president's announcement that he would not run further clouds the picture: assuming elections occur and assuming Abbas sticks to his vow, the movement would confront a tumultuous transition for which it is wholly unprepared. All these matters will require Fatah to take a stance and take action.

The U.S. and, with it, much of the international community, pressed Fatah hard to hold its conference, arguing that change was indispensable to ensure its future success. Their diagnosis was right, yet the prescription was incomplete. Reforming Fatah's leadership and its sclerotic institutions is a must, and the process should continue. But for a movement that has lost its project and purpose, something more is required. It will need to ask itself hard questions about its agenda, modes of action and political alliances. These include in particular:

- *Whether to develop a strategy of non-violent, popular resistance:* the conference paid homage to the notion of armed struggle, and delegates reacted enthusiastically at its mention. But the concept has shown its moral failing as well as political shortcomings and, in practice, Fatah has moved on. The issue is whether it can devise a strategy between violence and passivity in which forms of popular action would have pride of place and which would provide a way forward if negotiations toward a two-state solution fail.
- *How to relate to the PA:* Fatah is a national liberation movement, yet since the Oslo years it has merged with a government. This overly promiscuous relationship tarred the movement as corrupt, while demobilising and disorienting its cadres. Fatah will have to decide whether it wishes to administer the occupied territories and build state-like institutions or prefers to focus on its liberation agenda, disengage from the PA and let it govern.
- *What to do with Hamas:* Reconciliation will depend on the actions of both movements, not just Fatah, and on the views of outside actors, not merely Palestinians. Fatah, nonetheless, will have to assess for itself whether national unity is a priority, whether it is prepared to make room for the Islamists and what price (notably in terms of relations with Israel and the U.S.) it is prepared to pay.

A leadership equipped with a clearer vision, more democratic and more attuned to popular sentiment, could limit negotiators' flexibility and capacity for concessions. It also would be more credible, legitimate and capable of carrying its constituency. Outside actors, the U.S. and Israel among them, might not like all the answers Fatah ultimately provides. But they would be better than no answers at all.

Ramallah/Gaza City/Brussels, 12 November 2009

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PALESTINE: SALVAGING FATAH

I. INTRODUCTION: FATAH'S DECLINE

For much of its history, Fatah was the embodiment of Palestinian national aspirations, virtually synonymous with the Palestinian cause itself.[1] Founded in the late 1950s or early 1960s[2] by refugees residing in Kuwait, it launched its first attack on Israel in January 1965 and attained a mass following in 1968, after the Battle of Karameh, when, with the help of the Jordanian army, it stood its ground against an Israeli incursion into the East Bank. During this early period, Fatah's legitimacy and popularity were intimately tied to its resort to armed struggle – to its having, in effect, "fired the first shot".[3] Even after revolutionary fervour faded and Fatah gradually moved toward diplomatic engagement – beginning in the early 1970s and reaching its climax in 1988, when its leader, Yasser Arafat, accepted UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 – armed struggle remained central to the movement's ethos and image. As a leader in Nablus recalled recently, Arafat was known to say that "he didn't need the legitimacy of elections, since he had the legitimacy of the gun".[4]

Despite the democratic centralism purportedly guiding Fatah's internal order,[5] elections, especially at the highest levels, historically have been given short shrift. The General Conference, its senior decision-making body, is supposed to meet every five years; in the nearly five decades since the organisation was founded, it has convened five times; the most recent had been in 1989. This reflected both Arafat's personal style and the structural constraints of a liberation movement operating without a territorial base and in often hostile environments. Fatah was born as a secret organisation, led first from Kuwait, then Jordan, then Lebanon, then Tunisia, before its leadership relocated to the West Bank and Gaza in 1994. Its presence in the occupied Palestinian territories was necessarily clandestine, at least until 1982, when it began limited above-ground activities via its student movement, Shabiba, since Israel classified it as an illegal organisation, rendering elections difficult if not impossible. Other countries, including Jordan and Syria since the early to mid-1970s, banned open organising of the sort required to run elections.

The gun was not the movement's only source of strength. Another was its broad inclusiveness. Eschewing a clear ideological program, Fatah was never a party with a clearly defined philosophy. Rather, it was a movement, even a broad umbrella; Arab nationalists, Ba'athists and Marxists of various sorts found their home, as did Islamists, all united by little more than belief in national liberation and the conviction that it would come through armed struggle. Inclusive of the full gamut of Palestinian society, Fatah was, in its very construction, representative. Inside and outside, rich and poor, old and young, secular and religious – the overwhelming majority of Palestinians saw Fatah as theirs. Recalling her youth in Nablus, a political analyst said, "everyone was Fatah, since there was no facet of life – cultural, social, economic – that Fatah didn't touch. It was the air we breathed. You became Fatah without even realising it".[6] Pluralism (*ta'addudiyya*) became a watchword and its corollary, unity, sacrosanct.

Satisfying everyone and balancing competing interests encumbered decision-making, as it most often went hand in hand with a lowest-common-denominator approach to politics. But it was also of critical value in maintaining Fatah's unity and hegemony over the national movement. Arafat proved master in this exercise. Often criticised, he seldom was challenged as Fatah's leader and was able to carry the movement along even when he took historic

[1] The authoritative history of Fatah is Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for the State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford, 1997).

[2] The date of Fatah's establishment has never been clearly determined. Some put it in 1959, others in the early 1960s. See ibid and Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation: People, Power and Politics* (Cambridge, 1984).

[3] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, June 2009.

[4] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Nablus, March 2009.

[5] The Fatah constitution states: "The elected leadership assumes its responsibilities on the basis of the democratic centrality principle which warrants commitment of the lower ranks to the higher ranks' decisions. The leadership is, in turn, held accountable to its conferences and councils. Higher leaderships assume a pivotal responsibility which embodies the utter unity of the organisation in different districts and institutions". From the introduction to Fatah's (original) by-laws, which date to the mid-1960s.

[6] Crisis Group interview, Nablus, May 2009.

decisions, not least the 1993 signing of the Declaration of Principles, the first of the Oslo accords.

Fatah's big tent was supported by an organisational structure as effective as it was byzantine. Its cells in the occupied territories (like its branches throughout the diaspora) had only tenuous links with one another, often tied together solely through connections to the outside leadership. Here, too, Arafat was the "maestro",[7] the glue that linked the movement's disparate and sundry pieces. Eager to control and wary of outside interference, he kept the pieces directly linked to him in order to maintain what he called the "independence of Palestinian decision-making". While he largely succeeded in that task – an achievement all the more remarkable in hindsight – it served other, less disinterested purposes. His rule was a study in authoritarian style and patronage networks that, especially from the early 1980s on, frustrated the emergence of challengers or of a successor generation of leaders and progressively weakened the movement's institutions. "People like to talk about the chaos of the movement now", a longtime activist said. "But chaos has long been one of Fatah's main forms of organisation".[8]

This accelerated with the Oslo process, as Palestinians, led by Fatah and the newly-established Palestinian Authority (PA), embarked on an uneasy and incomplete transition from national liberation to state-building. The movement's administrative structures weakened as the PA's strengthened. Its "commissions" (*mufawadiyyat*) – which had served as ministries of a state-in-exile – were suffering even prior to Oslo because of the steep decline in funding from Gulf countries wrought by Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein during the 1990-1991 Gulf War. After the PA was established, even the critically important social affairs and foreign relations commissions in effect ceased operations. The Mobilisation and Organisation Commission, led by Central Committee member Muhammad Ghnaym, was never transferred to nor active in the West Bank and Gaza until the second intifada, when it arguably was too late.

Mobilisation of the population through Fatah seemed unnecessary – indeed to some extent undesirable – in an era when the Palestinian leadership was intent on centralising authority and consolidating its power through the PA. As a result, the movement's clandestine hierarchy never made the transition to open organising, and recruitment was neglected. "We lost our relationship with the people", said Dalal Salameh, a longtime Fatah activist and newly elected Revolutionary Council member, "There was a feeling that Fatah was the PA, and the PA was Fatah. The concern was building state institutions and distributing the benefits that flowed from them, as if it was the movement's due. We lost the connection with our base and the people more broadly".[9]

By the late 1990s, the only parts of Fatah's once impressive structure that remained intact were its senior leadership levels, including the movement's two most important bodies, the Central Committee and Revolutionary Council (which met only irregularly); the Higher Movement Committees – one each in the West Bank and Gaza – which were assemblies of prominent local leaders who had earned their reputations during the first intifada; and the leadership committees of organisations like the Women's Union. Beneath this top level, which also comprised historic figures, little was left, despite weak and insufficient efforts at resuscitation late in the decade.[10]

Other factors were at play. Within a relatively short period of time, the PA had acquired a reputation for inefficiency and corruption, and the diplomatic process stalled. The two pillars of Fatah's legitimacy – that it could govern through the PA and could achieve political progress through negotiations – were gravely undermined.

The second intifada hit Fatah especially hard. The newly formed Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, which provided a loose umbrella for the movement's alienated militants, sprang to life as a result of internal competition between Fatah leaders, dissatisfaction with Oslo's slim yield and Fatah's worry that the Islamists were seizing the initiative.[11] The militia-like Brigades became a principal element in the social breakdown that characterised the uprising's later years; with the PA security services destroyed – and in any event no small number of security service personnel moonlighting in the Brigades – they wreaked havoc.

The intifada also resulted in the death or imprisonment of many local leaders at Israel's hands. Virtually all Fatah offices were destroyed along with, in many instances, its membership rolls, which never had been particularly complete to begin with. By 2004, for example, seven of the nine members of the Fatah regional council in Hebron were either dead or in jail, and organised movement activities had ceased; what regional membership records existed were obliterated when an Israeli F-16 bombed

[7] Crisis Group interview, senior Fatah leader, Ramallah, June 2009.
[8] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, June 2009.
[9] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009.
[10] Crisis Group interviews, Fatah activists, Ramallah, July 2009.
[11] On the origins and early evolution of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°32, *Who Governs the West Bank? Palestinian Administration under Israeli Occupation*, 28 September 2004, pp. 22-28. See also Jean-Francois Legrain, "Les Phalanges des martyrs d'Al-Aqsa en mal de leadership national", *Maghreb-Machrek* 176, summer 2003, pp. 11-34.

the movement's headquarters.[12] The situation was the same in much of the rest of the West Bank and Gaza.[13]

But it was Arafat's death in November 2004 that laid bare the degree to which the movement had lost its purpose and any semblance of institutional coherence, as well as the extent to which it had come to depend on one man. Abbas assumed Arafat's mantle as head of both the Palestine Liberation Organisation and PA, while Faruq Qaddumi continued as secretary general of Fatah. Without its "maestro", nobody could quite manage the movement's tangled and fractious threads. At the highest levels, the Central Committee – debilitated by age, illness, infighting and death – had already ceased to meet regularly.

Freed of his allegiance to Fatah's historical symbol, Qaddumi – long a critic of the Oslo Accords – stepped up vocal criticism of the PA, which he had never embraced, and its president, Abbas, whom he had never respected. Even though Abbas was a Fatah founder, his power stemmed more from the absence of any credible rival and, increasingly, from the international backing and financial support he received as PA president. As relations among Central Committee members deteriorated and the institution became paralysed, many decisions regarding Fatah became Abbas's alone.[14]

At lower levels of the Fatah hierarchy, Arafat's death also unleashed chaos, with arguably even graver consequences. A series of electoral contests exposed just how far it had fallen. The first harbingers came when Fatah lost three successive rounds of municipal elections in the West Bank in 2004-2005. In 2005, as it prepared for elections to the PA legislative council, the movement broke out into open feuding. In lieu of a General Conference to renew its leadership, it opted for primaries to determine a slate of candidates. The manoeuvre, intended to give the Fatah base more of a voice, backfired when armed confrontations broke out between camps, and the primaries were aborted.

Key leaders – including Marwan Barghouti (from an Israeli prison cell), Muhammad Dahlan and Jibril Rujub – rejected the subsequent candidate rankings and formed an alternative slate known as the "Future" list. A formal split ultimately was avoided, and renegades returned to the fold, but damage had been done: many remained unhappy and stood as independents, which split the Fatah electorate and contributed mightily to Hamas's resounding electoral victory in January 2006.[15] Their frustrations notwithstanding, aspiring leaders chose not to challenge the senior leadership nor declare it illegitimate, fearing this would plunge the movement into further and perhaps irrevocable disintegration.[16]

The elections did not mark bottom. In June 2007, following a period of tense relations between Hamas (which sought to assert its newfound power) and Fatah (which tried to deny having lost its own) only momentarily and superficially patched up with the Mecca accords and formation of a national unity government,[17] the Islamist movement routed its rival's forces in Gaza in June 2007 and assumed power alone. Nor did the political track stem the tide: the Annapolis process, launched with great fanfare by the Bush administration in November 2007 to rejuvenate Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, failed to yield an agreement by the end of 2008, the purported deadline. This confirmed the suspicions entertained by many Palestinians regarding the futility of the kinds of negotiations that had been held since the Oslo Accords and with which both Abbas and Fatah were closely identified.

The judgment was further confirmed, at the end of the year, when Israel's Kadima-led government, the PA's ostensible peace partner, launched Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, which Fatah watched passively from the West Bank – the first time since the movement's inception that it sat out a battle with Israel.[18] This, as much as anything, symbolised how much the movement had changed – in outlook as much as purpose – since its founding. A Fatah leader who did not shy from criticising Hamas and was scornful of its performance during the Gaza fighting, said, tellingly, "they nonetheless assumed the mantle of resistance".[19] A former Arafat confidant lamented that

[12] Crisis Group interview, Fatah regional council member, Hebron, May 2009.
[13] Crisis Group interviews, Fatah regional council members, Nablus, Salfit, Tulkarem, January-July 2009.
[14] For instance, when Fatah ministers joined the cabinet in June 2009, Abbas took the names neither to the Central Committee nor to the Fatah parliamentary bloc, as had been Arafat's practice. Instead, he undertook informal consultations with a handful of Fatah leaders.

[15] The PLC vote was conducted under a mixed system, with half of the 132 seats apportioned by proportional representation, the other half by a district system. In the former, Hamas's Change and Reform list won 44 per cent of the vote and 29 seats to Fatah's 41 per cent and 28 seats. The latter gave Hamas its considerable majority. With many Fatah-affiliated candidates running as independents, Fatah split its vote. Hamas wound up with 74 PLC members (77 including independents who campaigned with Hamas), as compared with only 45 for Fatah. Complete results can be found at www.elections.ps.
[16] Crisis Group interview, Dalal Salameh, longtime Fatah activist, Ramallah, July 2009.
[17] See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°68, *After Gaza*, 2 August 2007.
[18] Certain branches of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades fought Israel, but they were at odds with the official leadership in Ramallah. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°23, *Gaza's Unfinished Business*, 23 April 2009.
[19] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, June 2009.

Fatah, far from what it once was and some rank and file still wished it to be, had become a movement of bureaucrats, "no longer fighters [*munadilin*] but clerks [*muwazzafin*]".[20]

The war exacerbated a long-brewing and escalating crisis of confidence within the movement about its identity and role. Was it still a national liberation movement, banking on armed struggle among other confrontational means to achieve its goals? Or had it become a state-party, intent on building institutions and wagering exclusively on negotiations to further its aims?[21] To this identity crisis was added Fatah's institutional decay, inability to rejuvenate and loss of popular confidence. The movement found itself without an address at the top, with its highest bodies empty shells that neither met regularly nor set policy. Nor did it possess an effective organisational structure capable of mobilising supporters and maintaining discipline among members.

Fatah's situation notwithstanding, the situation improved markedly in the West Bank, as Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, appointed in the wake of Hamas's Gaza takeover, spearheaded a campaign to restore law, order and governance.[22] In doing so, he by and large had Fatah's cooperation;[23] still, the credit went to him far more than to the movement

Fatah's state of decay was, of course, of great concern to Fatah itself. Even before the most recent setbacks, pressure from the lower ranks was pushing the leadership toward at least cosmetic reform; after the 2006 debacle and with new elections looming in 2010, the need to rejuvenate the movement, modernise its structure and renew its upper ranks became harder to resist. But, over time, pressure also came from abroad. In the U.S. in particular, fear was growing that Fatah would not recover, that Hamas's influence would continue to expand and that, in the process, any hope for a two-state solution would evaporate. Reforming Fatah would become a rallying cry for Washington and its allies as well.

[20] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009.
[21] See also Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "The Lost Palestinians", *New York Review of Books*, 9 June 2005.
[22] Today, according to Israeli Intelligence Minister Dan Meridor, cooperation between the PA and Israel, particularly in the security realm, is the best it has been. *Jerusalem Post*, 19 October 2009.
[23] Fatah leaders – including reported Brigades patrons – claim they played a role in dissolving the militias by withdrawing support and encouraging them to demobilise. Crisis Group interview, senior Fatah leader, Ramallah, October 2009. Amnestied fighters told Crisis Group that they had wanted to give Abbas a chance to advance his diplomatic agenda, though exhaustion after years on the run from Israel and the popular demand to create the conditions for on-the-ground improvements likely played a bigger role. On the PA's efforts to establish law and order and rein in the Brigades, see Crisis Group Middle East Report No 79, *Ruling Palestine II: The West Bank Model?*, 17 July 2008.

II. THE SIXTH GENERAL CONFERENCE

As a growing number of Fatah members saw it, a key step toward reversing the decline was to convene its long-overdue sixth General Conference (hereafter "Conference"), the movement's highest decision-making forum. In their view, it would yield a new, more active and credible leadership recapturing respect of the rank and file and the Palestinian public writ large; an updated political program defining what the movement stands for; and a new organisational structure bolstering the movement for forthcoming electoral battles.

In a sense, the Conference had been in the making since 2004, when the Revolutionary Council issued a recommendation to Yasser Arafat to begin preparations. But these were more theoretical than real. Effective preparations began only after the 2006 electoral shock, which served as a wake-up call to the once dominant movement. By the time the Conference assembled in August 2009, many in Fatah were convinced that the future of the movement hung in the balance. Everyone agreed on the need to hold it, but everyone also worried about the consequences of doing so. Failing to hold the Conference could have led to slow disintegration or an explosive split, since new leaders and the base were agitating for a voice in movement affairs, but it was feared that convening it could yield an equally dangerous result, should passions flare and the dissatisfied walk out.

The accounting is mixed but far better than many had expected. The regional electoral process leading up to the Conference – which yielded successive layers of leadership containing some 250 individuals, around the West Bank and Gaza – was the largest the movement has ever undertaken. At the Conference itself, the vast majority of those elected to the senior leadership bodies were new.[24] Abbas stepped out of Arafat's shadow and strengthened his position, genuinely endorsed as chairman and rightful head of the movement. It is no exaggeration to say that he emerged a transformed man, but it was more the process of having brought the Conference about, rather than the event itself that was responsible. The leadership bodies, after years of paralysis, were reactivated, and a political program that enshrines the key principles of the movement, including negotiations, was approved.

Still, the Conference did not bring the change that many had hoped. The vast majority of delegates were not elected but rather appointed by senior movement leaders. Many felt that the Conference did not provide the necessary accountability, did not tackle many of the weighty issues facing the movement – in particular that of strategy – and simply gave an official stamp of approval to those already influential within the movement. Heavy-handed control amid widespread accusations of electoral fraud left many feeling that they had been manipulated, assigned bit parts in a piece of political theatre that was meant to lend credibility and legitimacy to the top echelons. The Conference was, as best, the beginning of a process, a "transitional step" as regional activists are calling it, that might pay fuller dividends in the future.

The Conference elected two bodies:

- **The Central Committee** is Fatah's chief executive organ. According to the movement's by-laws, it is charged with carrying out the movement's decisions and political program as well as directing its daily operations. It has 22 members, including nineteen elected by ballot at the Conference; Abbas, who was elected chairman (*ra'is al-haraka*) by acclamation; and two appointed by Abbas and confirmed by the committee and the Fatah Revolutionary Council.[25] The committee is headed by Abbas in his capacity as chairman.
- **The Fatah Revolutionary Council** is the movement's monitoring body. It also holds policy-making authority in certain realms during intervals between General Conferences. It is charged with following up Central Committee actions and has the authority to fire and replace its members. It is composed of approximately 100 members; 80 elected and another nineteen to 24 appointed. It is headed by a secretary general, Amin Maqbul.

The Conference's other role is to set movement policy. The Sixth Conference approved a new political agenda; adopted a program for "building the homeland" including social and economic development; and altered the movement's internal structure.

[24] For the Central Committee, 14 of the 19 never served on the body before and for the Revolutionary Council, the same is true of 75 out of 80.

[25] According to the old Fatah constitution, the Central Committee was composed of eighteen elected and three appointed members, plus an unspecified number of secret members from the occupied territories, by convention two, for a total of 23. At the Sixth Conference, the same total count was maintained. Eighteen members were supposed to be elected (in addition to Abbas by acclamation), and four appointed. Because, after a contested recount, the eighteenth and nineteenth places finished in a tie, it was decided to award both candidates seats on the committee and, therefore, appoint only three. With the Central Committee today composed of 22, one spot remains open for nomination. It reportedly is being held open for a woman. Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, October 2009. The committee's membership is presently exclusively male.

A. REGIONAL ELECTIONS AND FIELD ORGANISATION

Local and regional elections around the West Bank and Gaza were crucial in preparing for the Conference. More than exercises in delegate selection, they helped build local structures around the West Bank – less so in Gaza, given Hamas control – that can sponsor movement activities and mobilise members. While much work remains – one activist involved in the process called the nascent structures mere "outlines" of what really would be needed to rebuild the organisational infrastructure[26] – regional Fatah leaders take pride in having progressed as far as they did. Perhaps more important for the Conference itself, the regional elections helped Fatah's power centres build electoral blocs. Most crucially, they created an internal constituency within the movement with an interest in change that Abbas subsequently leveraged for holding the Conference in the face of resistance by the entrenched leadership.

The Mobilisation and Organisation Commission prepared the internal elections. Because Fatah's field structure had been thoroughly neglected in the 1990s and sustained further debilitating losses during the second intifada, the apparatus necessary for holding elections had to be almost entirely rebuilt from the ground up. In early 2005, the Mobilisation and Organisation Commission appointed local membership committees, whose first assignment was to identify membership. This was not an obvious task. Fatah never was a party in the traditional sense; for much of its history, it was more akin to "shared national property",[27] a kind of default political identity for Palestinians who did not belong to any movement. Lines between sympathiser, supporter and member often were blurred.

"If you wanted Palestinian liberation and were not something else, you were Fatah", said one activist.[28] Another said, "it used to be that you could be both independent and Fatah. It was not a contradiction in terms".[29] Under such circumstances, distinguishing supporters from members was not easy and reconstituting membership rolls – which at best had only been partial – almost impossible. As a result, most local committees choose to construct rosters from scratch.

The membership committees designed and distributed questionnaires around the West Bank and, before the Hamas takeover, in Gaza, in order to establish membership and rank.[30] An organiser in Hebron claimed that only those "who would be a credit to the movement" were accepted.[31] Security committees worked in parallel with membership committees, vetting applications and producing a blacklist of "thousands" of names deemed unsavoury either because they were alleged to be corrupt or to have committed a crime or because they supposedly had ties to Hamas, which Fatah feared was trying to infiltrate the movement.[32] Today, three months after the Conference, the process is far from complete.

Elections proceeded in stages, based on Fatah's pre-Oslo organisational structure. They began at the middle of the hierarchical chain, at the branch (*shu'ba* or *mawqi'a*) level, and proceeded upward, each level of leadership electing the one above. Each branch – the unit of Fatah organisation in a village or neighbourhood, consisting of 200-300 members – elected a leadership committee of nine to eleven people. Three to five branches then banded together and elected the leadership of the next level, the "area" (*mintaqa*); three to five areas then elected the leadership of the next level, the "region" (*iqlim*). In theory, this process was to have produced regional leadership councils of eleven to thirteen members in each of the West Bank's fourteen and Gaza's six regions.[33] The regional levels attracted most atten-

[26] Crisis Group interview, Mobilisation and Organisation Commission worker, Ramallah, July 2009.
[27] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, June 2009.
[28] Crisis Group interview, Fatah activist, Ramallah, June 2009.
[29] Crisis Group interview, Fatah activist, Nablus, June 2009.

[30] The questionnaires ascertained the academic, personal and political qualifications of each would-be member and asked for references to verify claims. Qualifications included time spent in prison, holding a university degree, activism within Shabiba, the Fatah youth group, or within a student union, being a former member of a regional council or demonstration of previous affiliation with Fatah. Crisis Group interviews, Mobilisation and Organisation Commission workers, Hebron and Ramallah, May and June 2009.
[31] Crisis Group interview, Mobilisation and Organisation Commission worker, Hebron, June 2009.
[32] Concern with rebuilding the credibility of the movement continues today. In Hebron, three Fatah members were stripped of their membership by the regional council in May 2009, one for committing a crime and two others for attempting to use their influence to protect the offender. Crisis Group observation, Hebron, May 2009.
[33] The West Bank has fourteen regions (Jenin, Tubas, Salfit, Qalqiliya, Nablus, Tulkarem, Jericho, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron City, Hebron North, Hebron South, and Yatta) and Gaza six (Rafah, East Khan Yunis, West Khan Yunis, East Gaza City, West Gaza City, Northern Gaza).The first regional elections were held in October 2007 in Jenin, a traditional Fatah redoubt and the single largest region; the Mobilisation Committee was convinced that if elections worked there, they would succeed everywhere. Last to finish its elections, in January 2009, was Salfit, a small region that was never particularly well organised and that, by the time of the regional elections, had only 1,400 members (as compared to 50,000 in Jenin). Crisis Group interviews, Mobilisation and Organisation workers, Ramallah, October 2009.

tion during these elections insofar as regional council members were automatically slated to become Conference delegates.

In practice, election procedures were anything but straightforward, disappointing some field activists who felt the process was manipulated by senior and local leaders. The process differed from region to region and, at the lower levels – the branches and sometimes the areas – voting often was replaced by consensual apportioning of seats. This was done because organisers feared that rivalries or controversies would stall or disrupt the process. As a Mobilisation and Organisation Commission worker said, "when you have a vote, you have a loser. And when you have a loser, you have a problem".[34] At higher hierarchical levels, influential local leaders inflated the size of many regions, especially in the northern West Bank, in a bid both to grab more Conference representation and to mollify the different streams competing for seats.[35] A committee worker summed up: "We had to take account of both party and personal interests. You might call it democracy with a little extra sugar on top".[36] Accusations of vote buying also prompted controversy.[37] Several regional elections were marred by violence, threats thereof and boycotts.[38]

Particularly dissatisfied were a slice of Fatah activists, numbering in the thousands, who possess more seniority than regional leaders – but less than most within the Revolutionary Council – and who felt that the election process was designed to exclude them from the Conference. Many participated in armed struggle outside of Israel during the 1970s. Others came of age in the 1980s during the first intifada and spent significant time in Israeli prisons, though perhaps not as much as their seniors.[39] Nurtured by the organisational structures set up by Fatah co-founder Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) during the 1980s and viewed as a threat by Arafat after al-Wazir's 1988 assassination, this group never was genuinely welcome in official Fatah circles. Given their backgrounds, they tend to emphasise the broad range of activities lumped under "resistance", an orientation, they say, from which the senior leadership sought to distance the Conference. Underlying this political assessment is a personal animus, since many of these resent their long-time sidelining from decision-making.[40]

[34] Crisis Group interview, Nablus, May 2009.

[35] Regional committees, initially supposed to comprise only nine to eleven members, ended with vastly more. Tubas – the most sparsely populated region in the West Bank – has nineteen, Jenin 27 and Nablus 33. Crisis Group interview, Mobilisation and Organisation Commission worker, Ramallah, July 2007. In Ramallah, an election organiser considered it a victory to limit the number to seventeen. "With too many members", she said, "the council becomes ineffective because there's too much dead wood and it's impossible to take a decision". Crisis Group interview, Haitham Arrar, Fatah activist and head of the Democracy and Human Rights Unit at the PA interior ministry, Ramallah, May 2009.

[36] Crisis Group interview, Mobilisation Commission worker, Ramallah, May 2009.

[37] Charges that influential leaders spread "political money" around the West Bank, especially its northern areas, and Gaza were legion. Election organisers alleged that spending on behalf of certain candidates far outstripped others, with campaign offices offering not only information but also financial inducements and medical, educational and employment assistance to would-be voters. Crisis Group interviews, Nablus and Ramallah, April-May 2009. A disillusioned member of Fatah's Higher Movement Committee said, "when I was in an Israeli jail in 1974, the interrogator described Fatah not as a movement but as a business, as a commercial enterprise. I argued with him vehemently then, but 35 years later, it's clear to me that he was right all along. The movement was founded on noble principles, but in practice it's anything but". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, May 2009.

[38] In Nablus, for example, a not inconsiderable number of delegates arrived to Fatah's regional conference with weapons. A scant eight hours before voting was to begin, a triumvirate of local leaders, fearful of violence, tried to postpone the elections or at least enlarge the size of the regional committee; senior Fatah officials, similarly anxious, cancelled their appearance at the event. Despite increasing the number of council members so that each Fatah faction could get its share, only 63 per cent of those eligible participated in the elections – a much lower rate than in any other region – and some local cadres announced a boycott. In the wake of the elections, the organiser said he considered them a success "because nobody was killed". Crisis Group interview, Nablus, May 2009. Jerusalem experienced tension as well: the first attempt to convene regional elections failed owing to a boycott; the second attempt a week later succeeded, though the proceedings were marred by a brawl. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem organiser, May 2009. Asked about these incidents and whether they cast doubt on the process as a whole, a Hebron regional council member said, "I'd say it's normal. What can you expect after twenty years? The General Conference is the crucible for the rebirth of the movement, it's where the men are separated from the boys". Crisis Group interview, regional leader, Hebron, May 2009.

[39] A Conference delegate referred to them as "the seven-yearers". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009.

[40] Crisis Group interview, Fatah activists, Ramallah, July 2009. One such activist – who fought Israel in Lebanon in the early 1980s and subsequently was imprisoned in Syria and Jordan, served on the West Bank Higher Committee and mediated between the PA and Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades during the second intifada – said, "if you check in the computerised membership lists, you'll find that my name has been deleted. They are not registering people like me with an elite background". Casting aspersions on the reform process, he called it a "joke", saying "the same leaders who failed us for decades are now claiming to reform us", and the new regional leaders, while "possessed of integrity", are young and naïve and therefore susceptible to manipulation by the movement's

In Gaza, local elections began before the 2007 Hamas takeover, and several regions quietly held elections afterwards.[41] At the regional level, support for the former chief of Preventive Security, Muhammad Dahlan, ran much stronger than many had anticipated after Fatah's routing by Hamas, for which many held him responsible. A Dahlan supporter explained: "In Gaza, one's perspective on the Fatah leadership has been deeply influenced by Hamas. It turns out that what Dahlan told us about Hamas – that it was an implacable enemy of Fatah and that he might have been the first but would not be the last target – was right. Even if he lost, he was the only one who stood up to them".[42] By contrast, Gaza's other traditional Fatah powerbroker, Ahmad Hillis (Fatah secretary general in Gaza), fared poorly.[43]

The elections, however controversial, produced a newly institutionalised leadership at the regional level. The process empowered some 250 individuals, all of whom are serving for the first time and – at least at the time the regional election process started, back in late 2007 – were under the age of 40. A Fatah leader argued that this would "make it more difficult for dissenters to manoeuvre, because it is hard to confront the legitimacy produced by elections".[44] The assessment appears to have been borne out. While some might have had legitimate grievances – there is reason to believe that the elections reflected a combination of bottom-up mobilisation, top-down control and highly local factors such as family and clan interests – they nevertheless produced a sense of momentum and progress toward the General Conference.

B. ABBAS TAKES CONTROL

While the new regional leaders pushed for the Conference, many at the top of the Fatah hierarchy, and especially the Central Committee and Revolutionary Council, showed no such eagerness. Cadres accused them of delaying tactics, claiming they were most intent on protecting their personal interests and positions. The benefits they had accrued were not insignificant,[45] though material considerations were not alone. Fatah's most senior leaders, including all former Central Committee members, are products of an age when elections meant less and historical leadership more. They led Fatah under the banner of democratic centralism, pursuant to which the upper echelons, seen as uniquely endowed with the mission of keeping the movement true to its principles, expect obedience from lower-ranking cadres. As Mehdi Abd al-Hadi, a Palestinian analyst, put it in the run-up to the Conference, the movement's senior leaders see themselves as the movement's "cardinals – impotent as they may be".[46]

For their part, neither Arafat (until his death) nor Abbas had been particularly interested in the Conference – the former because he preferred to perpetuate his personal style of rule; the latter because he preferred to devote his energies to the PA, where he felt more comfortable and more capable of making a difference and where his sources of strength (international support in particular) were of far greater relevance.

Initial preparations for the Conference seemed more an exercise in foot-dragging than leadership renewal. Upon the Revolutionary Council's recommendation, a Conference preparatory committee headed by Arafat was formed in 2004.[47] It met only twice before it was replaced, after Arafat's death, with a smaller committee, led by Mu-

well-established power centres. There is something self-serving in this complaint, since he admitted that he never filled out a new membership form. But that is precisely the point for him: his seniority was such that he should not have been called on to do so. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, May 2009.

[41] All regional elections were completed except for the northern Gaza Strip, where Conference delegates were selected from among the previous regional council. Crisis Group interview, Conference delegate, Gaza City, July 2009.

[42] Crisis Group interview, Gaza Fatah leader, Ramallah, July 2009.

[43] Hillis sat out the fighting during the Hamas takeover. See Crisis Group Report, *After Gaza*, op. cit., p. 14. Hillis sheltered Ahmad al-Jaabari, a senior figure in Hamas's Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, during the second intifada, yet his hospitality bought him no grace from the Islamists, who overran his family compound in August 2008, forcing him to flee to Israel where he was subjected to interrogation for months. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza, September-December 2008.

[44] Crisis Group interview, Gaza delegate, Gaza City, July 2009.

[45] For Central Committee members, privileges involved status and various perks including salary, office support and other benefits. For former Central Committee members, at the low end of the scale, these reportedly ranged from $5,000 to $20,000 per month. Revolutionary Council members, too, enjoyed significant benefits, including "respectable" monthly allowances, as a Revolutionary Council member put it, for "self-improvement" and office costs as well as a car and aide. Monies paid to Central Committee and Revolutionary Council members depend on their level of activity with the movement and the files they administer. Since the Conference in August 2009, newly elected Central Committee members have clashed with Abbas over budgets, which he reportedly intends to reduce due to a shortage in funds. Crisis Group interviews, Revolutionary Council members, May, October 2009.

[46] Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, June 2009.

[47] It was tasked with addressing movement membership, political program, economic and social development and administrative and financial structure.

hammad Ghnaym (Abu Maher) and composed of Central Committee and Revolutionary Council members.[48] Because the preparatory committee set the standards for, and judged the qualifications of, delegates to the Conference, it had, in theory, enormous influence over the Conference's outcome.[49]

In the wake of Hamas's Gaza takeover, which brought the level of recrimination within the movement to a new high, the preparatory committee met more frequently. In early 2008, Abbas's calculations began to shift. The Annapolis negotiations with Israel had begun, and he enjoyed support from the U.S. and the wider international community, but at home he was weak: he had lost control over nearly half his people, could not stop Hamas's rocket fire against Israel, faced a polarised Palestinian polity and relied on a technocratic government led by Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in which there was no role for his own movement, whose leadership and cadres were growing increasingly restive. Attempting to shore up his strength and legitimacy, as well as that of the PA in the West Bank more generally, he sought a clear endorsement of his agenda and leadership from Fatah. In addition to freeing himself from a leadership body that arguably was more intent on undermining than helping him, Abbas needed legitimacy from the movement to bolster his position as PA head.[50]

The U.S. – for whom strengthening the PA and improving its economic and security performance in the West Bank had been and remains a priority – also came to see the Conference as an important means of renewing Fatah's legitimacy and changing a leadership viewed as sclerotic and ineffective. A Fatah leader reported that President Bush told members of a Palestinian delegation, "I am strong because I have a strong party behind me".[51] The anecdote, while unconfirmed, has been retold among Fatah leaders as an indication of Washington's stance.[52] The Obama administration subsequently articulated the same conviction with at least equal fervour. U.S. Special Envoy George Mitchell urged Abbas to press forward with the Conference at their first meeting, as did Obama himself at the White House, and several U.S. officials made clear they viewed this as an urgent matter.[53]

While Abbas's stance imbued many Fatah members in the occupied territories with an unfamiliar optimism, hope gradually flagged over the rest of 2008. Preparatory Committee meetings became more frequent but made little progress on the three documents they were tasked with producing: the political program, a new internal organisation plan and a development agenda.

It was not until Operation Cast Lead that the process picked up steam. For all the difficulties it caused Abbas, the Israeli campaign spurred him to push harder and helped him turn the tables on foot-draggers. The war provoked enormous hand-wringing within Fatah and virtually unprecedented denunciations of its leadership, chiefly Abbas.[54] Most regions by then had completed elections, and their leaders became increasingly outspoken – "downright rude", a Revolutionary Council member put it.[55] Despite the fact that Abbas was the most frequent target of their anger, cadres paradoxically found common cause with him – arguably temporary and tactical – on the need to push ahead with a Conference that would renew leadership at all levels, the most senior included.[56] Added to these factors was the return of Hamas and Fatah reconciliation talks to the agenda,[57] raising the possibility of PA elections, in theory scheduled for January 2010. Even those who had been reluctant feared the prospect of going to the polls without first getting the movement's house in order.

[48] The committee's membership was never definitively specified. The most important members included Muhammad Ghnaym, Hakam Bilaawi, Uthman Abu Gharbiyya, Yahya Yikhlif, Sakhr Bisisu, Adnan Samara, Abdallah al-Ifranji, Azzam al-Ahmad, Ahmad Abd al-Rahman, and Nasir al-Kidwa. Al-Kidwa stopped participating in March 2008.

[49] One West Bank organiser said during the preparations, "to have the current leadership in control of the Conference is a blatant conflict of interest". Crisis Group interview, Mobilisation and Organisation Commission worker, Ramallah, May 2009

[50] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, June 2009. At the first gathering of the Central Committee after Arafat's death, Abbas wanted to chair the meeting as Arafat had, but Secretary General Faruq Qaddumi refused to acquiesce on the logic that Arafat had done so in his capacity as Fatah commander-in-chief. The resulting dispute prevented a Central Committee meeting for a year and a half until Abbas was elected commander-in-chief specifically so that he could chair, regardless of the fact that Fatah no longer had any military forces to command. Crisis Group interview, senior Fatah leader, Ramallah, July 2009.

[51] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, June 2009.

[52] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, July 2009.

[53] Crisis Group interviews, US officials, June-July 2009.

[54] Crisis Group Report, *Unfinished Business*, op. cit.

[55] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009.

[56] For instance, Haitham Halabi, Fatah secretary general in Nablus region, emphasised that Abbas – alone within the Central Committee – understood his "responsibilities at home", which Halabi attributed to his dual role as Fatah leader and PA president. Others on the Central Committee, he lamented, lacked the same breadth of vision. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, May 2009.

[57] The Revolutionary Council reportedly pushed hard for reconciliation at its February 2009 meeting, the first after the war. Crisis Group interview, Revolutionary Council member, February 2009.

Conference dates were set and missed, but momentum grew. Over time, the controversy focused less on whether to hold the Conference than on controlling its outcome. The tug of war crystallised around the possible venue – a neighbouring Arab country or inside the occupied territories (which, given Hamas control over Gaza, meant the West Bank). Both sides advanced material and symbolic concerns,[58] though in truth, the struggle was an early proxy for the battles at the Conference itself. Abbas wanted to hold the Conference on his home turf, in Bethlehem, where he would have more control; his opponents wanted to deny him any advantage. The controversy was essentially unblocked when Abbas convinced Muhammad Ghnaym, one of the Central Committee's longest-standing members, to switch sides.[59] He remains one of the most influential voices among Palestinians in the diaspora; even more importantly, he held the keys to the Conference as the head of both the Mobilisation and Organisation Commission and the Conference Preparatory Committee.[60]

The dispute continued for a while, but with newfound strength, Abbas eventually prevailed. His uncharacteristic decisiveness came as a surprise, provoked an uproar within some Fatah circles, but proved pivotal. In May, Abbas abruptly announced that the Conference would open in Bethlehem on 1 July. The next day, other Central Committee members issued a countervailing declaration, to which Abbas responded by cancelling the body's hotel reservations and cars. A Nablus leader usually sceptical of Abbas was impressed: "He is using the Conference to make himself into a real leader [*za'im*]".[61] With U.S. support and the prospect of the Conference finally tangible, a former adviser said, "it's as if he figured out that he is the president and that presidents can do things".[62]

While not everyone lined up behind him,[63] Abbas was in charge. In face of the opposition and demands to adhere to the movement's bylaws[64] – which grant the Central Committee the right to convene the Conference – Abbas called the opposition's bluff. He brought the issue to a Central Committee meeting. Although, after a stormy debate, its members failed to agree to the 1 July date, of greater long-term significance was the shifting balance of power. With Ghnaym having joined forces with Abbas, other committee members feared they would wind up on the losing end of the fight. Ultimately, as many as half lined up with Abbas, agreeing to convene the Conference in Bethlehem on 4 August, Yasser Arafat's birthday.

[58] Those arguing for holding the Conference outside recoiled at the prospect of a national liberation movement meeting under the auspices of its occupier, seeing it as a sign of submission. Several would-be delegates, especially from the movement's military wing, were wanted by Israel; they feared it might not honour its commitment to let them leave the West Bank after the Conference. They also emphasised that the decision had clear implications for diaspora refugees – as a former Central Committee member pointed out, some 70 per cent of Palestinians live outside the West Bank and Gaza – and thus could be read as a retreat from Fatah's commitment to them. Crisis Group interviews, Conference delegates, Ramallah and Hebron, July 2009. Advocates of holding the Conference in the West Bank countered that the balance within the movement had changed fundamentally since the fifth Conference in 1989. A presidential adviser said, "I would have refused to attend outside. It's an insult. We struggled for a long time to get here and build our home. We have built the PA, and the majority of the leadership lives here". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009. Moreover, holding the Conference outside would not have solved the problem of movement restrictions, since Israeli controls exit from, not just entry to, the occupied territories. Many claimed to be insulted at the notion that their freedom of expression would be compromised and their votes changed by proximity to Israeli troops. A delegate protested: "I sat in an Israeli jail for years and never once hesitated to speak my mind or stand up for my political convictions". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009. Israel, they argued, would not affect their votes any more than would Jordan or Egypt – which many Palestinians do not regard as great friends. Crisis Group interviews, Ramallah and Nablus, June-July 2009.

[59] Ghnaym has served on the Central Committee since 1968.

[60] Crisis Group interviews suggest that Abbas offered to support Ghnaym for Fatah secretary general as well as other inducements, but details are unconfirmed. Crisis Group interviews, Revolutionary Council and Central Committee members, June 2009.

[61] Crisis Group interview, Nablus, June 2009.

[62] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009.

[63] A regional secretary said, "the Conference has been in preparation for five years and overdue for fifteen. It's taken far too long, and the president needed to make a decision. The preparatory committee had its chance and failed. I respect their leadership, but they have not shouldered their responsibilities. What is needed now is a decision. The leader did the right thing by stepping forward to put an end to the movement's decline". Crisis Group interview, Haitham Halabi, Fatah Nablus region secretary general, ,Ramallah, June 2009. Others, including some of Abbas's would-be allies, protested his decision as premature and condemned his disregard of the movement's official bodies. A Revolutionary Council member at the time said, "Fatah is like driving in Cairo. To the outsider, it seems like pure chaos, that there aren't any rules. But that's wrong; there are. First, you can disagree, but don't burn bridges. Secondly, money can be used a reward, but not as a punishment. And thirdly, do not take unilateral decisions". Crisis Group interview, Revolutionary Council member, Ramallah, May 2009.

[64] A regional leader expressed displeasure with what he saw as Abbas running roughshod over the movement's rules when it came to the Conference: "We in the regions are strong backers of procedural rectitude, since it's all we have. I myself am nothing in Fatah. The only source of legitimacy I have is the system that elected me". Crisis Group interview, Hebron, June 2009.

In many quarters, Washington prime among them, eyes rolled at yet another postponement. But the gridlock helped shift the decision to a more favourable forum.[65] With the Central Committee obviously paralysed, Abbas took the matter to the Revolutionary Council for resolution. His opponents contested the legitimacy of the meeting,[66] but with Fatah's rules elastic enough for multiple interpretations and procedural propriety in any event secondary to political necessity, the meeting went forward. Sensing that the tide had turned, the Revolutionary Council did not want to oppose the president. The final vote was 66 to 11 in support of 4 August in Bethlehem.

This would not be the final obstacle, but the Conference took on an air of inevitability. When Fatah cofounder and secretary general Faruq Qaddumi realised that he had lost the battle in the Central Committee, he took his campaign public, brandishing on Al-Jazeera what he purported to be minutes of a meeting at which Abbas, other Fatah leaders and Israeli officials jointly plotted to assassinate Arafat. His accusations boomeranged, as even Abbas's sceptics doubted the veracity of the charges and looked askance on what seemed to be a transparent bid to split the movement. On the eve of the Conference, an Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades leader, himself highly critical of Abbas, declined to support Qaddumi: "I am with unity and Abu Lutuf [Qaddumi] is not".[67]

The final, last-minute obstacle was the attendance of Gaza's delegates, who could not exit the coastal strip without Hamas's permission. In the months before August, approximately 150 delegates came on other pretexts and remained in the West Bank,[68] but most of those trapped vehemently opposed the Conference convening in their absence. Subsequently, one said, "the issue wasn't just voting; it was being there, discussing, participating in the deliberations".[69] A week before the Conference, Fatah representatives in Gaza sent a letter to Abbas asking for his personal guarantee that the Conference would not be held without them[70] – that is, they asked that Abbas confirm what they felt was the spirit of his prior declarations that if any delegate from Gaza was denied passage, the Conference would not be held.[71] In the end, Hamas blocked not just one but some 480 Gazan delegates, demanding the release of Hamas detainees in the West Bank – an issue of huge importance to the movement's West Bank leadership – in addition to a supply of passports.[72]

As the Conference approached and mediation did not bear fruit, Abbas refused to submit to Hamas "extortion" or give it a veto over internal Fatah proceedings. As with Qaddumi, Hamas's move backfired and ended up galvanising support for the president since it was seen as an attack on the movement.[73] In the absence of most Gazan delegates, the idea of quotas for Gaza (six slots on the Central Committee, 30 for the Revolutionary Council) was floated at the Conference but quashed since it upset the calculations of the West Bank-heavy voting alliances.[74]

[65] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009.
[66] Crisis Group interview, Revolutionary Council member, Ramallah, June 2009.
[67] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 2 August 2009. Today, Qaddumi appears largely on his own. After the Conference, three new Central Committee members were dispatched to reconcile with him, though not much came of it. After the meeting, he was quoted as having said, "you have your beliefs [*din*], I have mine". *Al-Mustaqbal* (Jordan), 24 August 2009. He was stripped of control of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) political office and is even more isolated from Palestine than before, as Jordan has limited his political activities since his tempest with Abbas. In Syria, among both the resistance factions and the regime itself, Qaddumi found little support for an active challenge to Abbas. Crisis Group interview, Palestinian analyst, Ramallah, October 2009.
[68] Crisis Group interview, Gazan delegate, Ramallah, July 2009.
[69] Crisis Group interview, Fatah regional head, Gaza City, August 2009.
[70] Crisis Group interview, Revolutionary Council member, Gaza City, September 2009.
[71] On 11 May 2009, Abbas had announced in Ramallah: "The Conference will not be held if Israel prevents any delegate from Gaza or the outside from entering the homeland". Thus, while Abbas did not violate the letter of his commitment by moving ahead with the Conference – it was Hamas that blocked the delegates from reaching Bethlehem, not Israel – many Gazan delegates thought his words should have been interpreted more widely, to refer to any prohibition on passage. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, September 2009.
[72] Ramallah and Gaza have sparred over the passport supply since June 2007. Without a supply in Gaza, Gazans can only obtain official new passports from Ramallah. On the contest over passports, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°24, *Round Two in Gaza*, 11 September 2008, p. 11.
[73] Some in Gaza, despite their support, were critical of the process: a Gaza delegate who was not able to leave complained that Hamas recalcitrance should have been foreseen and taken into account earlier: "At the last minute, nobody wanted to give in to Hamas blackmail. Of course we had to line up with Abbas. But that's not the point. If the Conference had been held outside, in an Arab country, it would have been much more difficult for Hamas to say 'no'. When you put the whole picture together, Abbas sacrificed Gaza to get the conference that he wanted in Bethlehem". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, September 2009.
[74] Crisis Group interview, Revolutionary Council member, Gaza City, September 2009.

Revolutionary Council and Gaza leadership committee member Ibrahim Abu Najja quit the Conference and returned home in solidarity with those unable to leave, and at several points during the Conference, Gazan delegates threatened to walk out if a way for their absent colleagues to vote was not found. But these stands appeared to reflect electoral calculation as much as anything else, as those with significant support in Gaza were loath to sacrifice it. Ultimately, phone voting was allowed. On a broader level, however, the damage was done. Fatah in Gaza felt marginalised even before the opening gavel.

C. CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Abbas carried his newfound confidence to the Conference. Many were sceptical that he would be able to pull off a successful event, but any doubt about the leadership's ability to control the potentially fractious gathering quickly was put to rest. "The trick", a delegate presciently surmised before the Conference, "will be to let people vent to feel that they're getting their say, while maintaining enough control so that the proceedings don't get out of hand".[75] This is precisely what happened. Abbas and his allies steered the Conference to complete its business.

The conference was untidy, but this worked to the leadership's benefit. The proceedings lasted twelve days, three times as long as planned, owing to poor organisation and the controversial issues. The official schedule was scrapped after the opening session,[76] and thereafter was announced only day by day. During plenary sessions, considerably more than half the delegates remained outside the hall glad-handing to build electoral support; vote contractors – people charged with garnering support on behalf of particular candidates – worked the crowd on behalf of some twenty informal slates. For those who remained inside to participate, flaring tempers and the consequent screaming made it difficult at times to follow proceedings.

Despite the chaos, the leadership clearly was in control. On the first day, the atmosphere was celebratory and Abbas was king. He entered to a standing ovation, and his opening speech – which, despite its nearly 2.5-hour duration, received positive reviews – was repeatedly interrupted by applause. He was comfortable and jovial at the dais, justifiably taking pleasure in his accomplishments. Support culminated in his election, by acclamation, as movement chairman;[77] even those otherwise critical of the president rallied behind him, since as an oftentimes opponent said, "Fatah needs a strong leader".[78] He intervened several times and spoke elegantly,[79] but at other moments, the atmosphere in the hall was less congenial, even intimidating.[80] Abbas's successful exercise of control had its downside and its critics; one delegate complained: "This isn't a conference, it's a celebration of Abu Mazen. He only wants us here to legitimise him".[81]

Abbas's confidence largely was a reflection of his ability to manage proceedings. A senior Fatah leader explained: "We can't risk [undesirable election results]; the conference will be controlled".[82] The two levers the leadership had at its disposal were delegate selection and the voting process. When the Revolutionary Council approved the Conference on 23 June, it sanctioned 1,550 delegates; by the time attendance finally was fixed – after another 200 were added in the dead of the first night – this had grown to 2,372. The two official venues for adjusting membership were the "Injustice Committee" (*lajnat al-tadhalumat*) and the "Appeals Committee" (*lajnat al-tu'un*), though Crisis Group interviews indicated that the committee**s** ignored the membership criteria, packing the rolls with spouses, guards, drivers and friends of influential Fatah leaders.[83] This sharply de-

[75] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009.

[76] More than half the conference delegates had not received their credentials when the Conference president was to be elected, and thus there was no official quorum. Crisis Group observation, Bethlehem, 4 August 2009.

[77] This was a new appellation. Previously Abbas had been "commander-in-chief", as had Arafat before him. But with Fatah no longer having military forces, the new title was seen as more appropriate.

[78] Crisis Group interview, Bethlehem, 8 August 2009.

[79] A former Revolutionary Council member said, "Abu Mazen was at his height during the Conference. It was a very strong performance. It wasn't only that that he himself was strong, it was that he brought people along with him". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009.

[80] By tradition, no security is permitted in the conference hall since, according to the customary saying, "the Conference is its own master". Nevertheless Abbas's presidential guard occasionally entered the fractious hall and, in one instance, scuffled with another delegate's guards. Tensions between the rivals' guards culminated when shots were fired in the Conference parking lot. Crisis Group interviews at the General Conference, Bethlehem, August 2009.

[81] Crisis Group interview, Bethlehem, August 2009.

[82] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009.

[83] Only delegates and a few privileged observers were permitted inside the Conference hall, and they were required to display their credentials at all times, so there was no mistaking bystanders. Crisis Group staff interviewed members of other political parties – including the People's Party, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and independents – who were delegates. They claimed they had become members of Fatah within the past few months, but, even if true, the Fatah by-laws in place at the time of the Conference (Article 41(c)) required a minimum of five years' membership to

creased the share of elected delegates from the regions and professional offices. They had been expecting a strong voice, but as the general secretary of a West Bank region said, "we are marginalised. They've stolen the Conference from us; it's no longer ours".[84]

Voting was no more straightforward, which gave rise to accusations of cheating. While in certain cases the charges may reflect little more than the losers' frustration, the lack of transparency encouraged them. Voting was conducted without privacy.[85] Presidential guards circulated in the room and periodically peered over shoulders at ballots; a delegate told Crisis Group that while he was voting, one sidled up to him and identified a candidate as "the president's man".[86] Telephone voting from Gaza also lacked privacy. It was carried out in two stages: the identity of each Gazan delegate was confirmed by someone he or she knew in Bethlehem; then the call was transferred to the ballot room where votes were recorded. Thus while the Conference had confirmation of the delegates' identity, the delegates had no parallel confirmation that their votes were accurately recorded.[87]

The counting process also gave rise to questions. The Revolutionary Council election was particularly contentious. After the Conference administration discovered that its initial counting system led to massive fraud, all ballots were returned to the boxes; school teachers who had been trained in proper procedure and worked in the 2006 PLC elections were called in.[88] Conference workers say that the second time the count was reliable, though several candidates complained that their representatives were allowed to observe closely and keep track of the tally only until two thirds of the ballots had been processed, when they inexplicably were distanced from the counting. This understandably raised suspicions, especially among candidates who ranked well at the two-thirds mark but then failed to make the council.[89]

Transferring the hand-counted votes to computer also stirred controversy. Two observers monitored each of twelve computer stations. While the Conference administration insisted that every candidate was allowed a representative to witness the input,[90] several candidates were as insistent that theirs had been barred.[91] Further raising the ire of unsuccessful candidates was the denial of many recount requests; the Conference administration granted one recount for Central Committee (which changed the results and put Tayyib Abdel Rahim in a tie for eighteenth place, thus winning a seat) and seven for Revolutionary Council (none changed results); in the latter's case, "recount" is something of a misnomer since the Conference administration only recalculated the election workers' arithmetic, taking their initial hand-count as given. Requests to see the actual ballots were rejected.[92] In sum, while fraud accusations remain unproven, it seems that preferential treatment was given to some candidates, which raised suspicions among many.

True or not, the accusations have currency within the movement. But the fact that so much of the competition was personal and did not reflect substantial political differences lessened the ability of any one candidate to mount a challenge. Even if some complaints might have been justified, they ended up looking like sour grapes. Moreover nobody believes anything will be rectified,[93] so most want to move on and not dwell on the issue. There is more suspicion about the results for the Revolutionary Council than for the Central Committee, but as a Fatah member in Gaza said about the process as a whole, "I'm sure there was cheating at the margins, but

serve as a delegate. Crisis Group interviews, Bethlehem, August 2009.

[84] Crisis Group interview, Bethlehem, August 2009.

[85] Voting took place in a single large room. Delegates initially voted at a single station, but since the large number of candidates meant that each of the 2,372 delegates needed about 45 minutes to vote, the number of stations was increased to twelve. Crisis Group interviews, Conference delegates and Conference workers, October 2009.

[86] Crisis Group interview, Conference delegate, Ramallah, September 2009.

[87] Crisis Group interview, Gaza delegate, Gaza City, 8 September 2009. The votes apparently were not entirely confidential either. A delegate who had been stuck in Gaza claimed: "The person on the other end of the line told me who the last person had *not* voted for and asked me whether I planned to do the same", which the he interpreted as a not-so-subtle form of intimidation in that if he did not make the "right" choice, his vote would be publicly revealed as well. Crisis Group interview, Gaza delegate, Gaza City, 9 September 2009.

[88] Under the first system, a single Conference worker opened the ballot, identified the vote, and then marked a sheet according to a code that had been established for each candidate. The second time around, three workers functioned as a team: the first identified the name; the second marked a sheet based on the candidate's full name, not a code; the third verified the work of the first two. Crisis Group interview, election worker, Ramallah, October 2009.

[89] Crisis Group spoke with two. Crisis Group interviews, Ramallah, September and October 2009.

[90] Crisis Group interview, election worker, Ramallah, October 2009.

[91] Crisis Group interviews, Revolutionary Council candidates, Ramallah, October 2009.

[92] Crisis Group interviews, Revolutionary Council candidates, Ramallah, Nablus, September 2009.

[93] An unsuccessful candidate shared a detailed letter with Crisis Group that described voting irregularities, but he said he would not bother submitting it since it would not do any good. Crisis Group interview, Revolutionary Council candidate, Ramallah, October 2009.

the results as a whole probably reflected the will of the voters".[94] In addition to those who lost, the greatest disappointment probably was felt among the cadres at the regional level, who lamented that Fatah has yet to pass into a fully democratic era.[95]

III. OUTCOME

In the wake of the Conference, a Palestinian analyst seemed to damn Fatah with faint praise when he commented that the gathering's biggest accomplishment was that it "did not fail".[96] But one should not underestimate the achievement. With membership deeply contested, most Gazan delegates unable to attend, fears of schism and uncontrollable anger as well as a desire for sweeping change among many of the cadres, preventing a conflagration was no mean feat.

A. LEADERSHIP

Despite the unwieldy number of candidates[97] and heated atmosphere, the Conference elected a Central Committee and Revolutionary Council that were broadly representative of Fatah's major power centres and crystallised the existing order within the movement. Hisham Dibsi, the political adviser at the Palestinian embassy in Lebanon, invoked an Arabic idiom, saying, "Abu Mazen brought the 'roosters' inside the house", coopting them into the official leadership.[98] Most analysts surmised that, Abbas aside, the major Central Committee victors were Muhammad Dahlan (Abu Fadi)[99] and Jibril Rujub

[94] Crisis Group interview, Conference delegate, Bethlehem, August 2009.
[95] Crisis Group interview, Nablus, October 2009.

[96] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2009.
[97] With 100 running for the Central Committee and 617 for the Revolutionary Council, the average time spent voting was 45 minutes. In order to prevent the need for a run-off, the minimum threshold for election was reduced from 40 per cent to 15 per cent. Crisis Group interview, Conference organisers, Ramallah, August 2009.
[98] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 16 September 2009. A presidential adviser invoked a sports metaphor: "Fatah used to be like a group playing pick-up football without a referee. The strong players could do whatever they wanted, included punching and hitting. Now they are playing on a strong team and will have to work together to win. Watching over them is a referee: Abu Mazen". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009.
[99] Muhammad Dahlan's return to prominence, after the Hamas takeover of Gaza and the recriminations to which it led, was remarkable; as an analyst put it, "when you lose a war, you usually lose the next elections, just like Hajj Ismail was kicked off the Central Committee elections in 1989 after Fatah got kicked out of Lebanon". Crisis Group interview, Fatah activist, Ramallah, September 2009. At the Conference, Dahlan found himself on the defensive, especially as he sought in a speech to cast blame on others for the Gaza defeat. Even if his vote total in the elections was middling, he will exert considerable influence within the Central Committee, as indicated by his appointment to head Fatah's media department. Crisis Group interviews, Fatah leaders, Ramallah, September and October 2009.

(Abu Rami);[100] losers include Ahmad Qurei (Abu Ala),[101] who lost his bid for a Central Committee seat. Marwan Barghouti, seen by many as a potential future leader, achieved a mixed result, despite the fact that he captured the second highest vote total.[102]

Attempts to break down committee membership in terms of camps and political alliances are almost entirely speculative. Cross-cutting allegiances – political, personal, geographic and professional – render any coalitions mutable, making it difficult to calculate anyone's strength arithmetically. Nevertheless, certain trends are clear. Abbas emerged stronger, at least in the short run. A majority of the Central Committee appear ready to vote with him.[103] He parlayed his momentum from the Conference into a reactivation of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) Executive Committee;[104] invited most of his official advisers based in the PA headquarters to resign; announced that all ambassadors beyond their four-year terms will be recalled soon, as will anyone who stood for election at the Conference and lost; and declared that some governors are also slotted for change. An employee at Abbas's Ramallah headquarters said, "he's determined to get rid of everyone who's been hanging around since the Arafat days".[105]

But success came with some serious strings attached. The new Central Committee is, on the whole, supportive of Abbas, but it also is younger and politically ambitious; among its members are many with aspirations of their own, who will follow the president only as long as their interests dictate. Today, they share an interest in stability and in consolidating their own positions; they also have an interest in strengthening Fatah as a movement, a process that will be facilitated by empowering its leader. At the same time, many also are looking to position themselves as Abbas's potential successor and so will avoid stances that risk running afoul of a broad Palestinian constituency. The elevation of powerful figures thus may turn out to be dual-edged: just as the

[100] Jibril Rujub came back to politics after spending time running the Palestine Football League and Olympic Committee (very important political platforms in themselves). He continues to enjoy influence in West Bank security circles and has strong relations with fellow Central Committee members Marwan Barghouti and Mahmud Alul. Crisis Group interviews, Fatah leaders, Ramallah, September and October 2009.

[101] Qurei and Abbas have long been rivals, competing over who would inherit the Fatah leadership after Arafat. When the movement's longtime leader died in 2004, the "master tactician", as a former Qurei adviser described his boss, yielded to what he called "the movement's figurehead". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009. The tension between the two leaders grew in recent years as they jousted over negotiations with Israel and the dialogue with Hamas. Many regional and younger leaders, with whom Qurei had curried favour through his work at the Mobilisation and Organisation Commission, turned against him at the Conference, as he was rumoured to have been the "engineer" behind the precipitous rise in the delegate count that diluted the weight of the elected delegates. Crisis Group interview, general secretary of a West Bank region, Bethlehem, August 2009. But more significant in his loss, a Qurei supporter claimed, was that an alliance of influential Fatah leaders worked against him at the Conference. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009. Regardless of the truth of that particular accusation, it did seem that at the Conference, "the elections [were] not only about whom you wanted to win, but also about those whom you [wanted] to bring down at any price". Crisis Group interview, Bethlehem, August 2009.

[102] Marwan Barghouti's symbolic status clearly was reaffirmed. However, his practical ability to operate was partially constrained. He was unable to convert his popularity into victories for his allies on the Central Committee, while his longtime West Bank rival, Hussein al-Shaykh, claimed a seat. Qadura Fares, a Barghouti ally who lost his Central Committee bid, later said, "Marwan is twice disadvantaged by the elections", by which he meant that since his allies lost, there is nobody who can use Barghouti's legitimacy and speak in his name. "I lost", Fares said, "so I can't do it". Secondly, the fact that Barghouti was elected arguably means it will be more difficult for him to pursue an independent path, since Central Committee membership constrains the ability to disregard the movement's official positions. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009. In explaining the failure of Barghouti's allies, analysts pointed to his relative quiet over the past six months, the practical difficulties of running a campaign from jail and poor strategy. Three of Barghouti's close allies stood for the Central Committee and ended up splitting the sympathetic vote. This contrasted, for example, with the more disciplined approach of Muhammad Dahlan, whose closest allies did not contest top slots.

[103] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leaders and analysts, Ramallah and Gaza City, September and October 2009.

[104] Abbas convened on 24 August an emergency session of the Palestine National Council (PNC), shortly after the death of Samir Ghosheh (the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine representative to the committee), which had left it without a quorum. Only 272 of the 600 official PNC members attended. Some are deceased, others sick, still others simply politically inactive; since there was no accounting of members before the meeting, it is not clear whether there was a quorum. Crisis Group interview, regional PNC official, Nablus, September 2009. The PNC confirmed the appointment of four factional representatives to the Executive Committee and elected an additional two "independents", who might be more usefully described as "at-large" representatives, since they can hold any factional affiliation. The two were Ahmad Qurei of Fatah, and Hanan Ashrawi, the first woman to serve on the body, who was elected to the PLC in 2006 on the Third Way ticket.

[105] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2009. It is worth noting that many of these personnel changes have yet to occur. One adviser said that, as requested, he submitted his resignation, but it had not yet been accepted. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009.

Central Committee will offer Abbas backing, it could constrain him. The same process of institutionalisation that strengthened Abbas's, and Fatah's, claim to legitimacy could undermine his ability to act autonomously or take controversial decisions.

One of the most palpable changes is the decisive shift of the leadership toward the occupied territories and especially the West Bank. Most of those added as delegates in the run-up to the Conference were from that area, which skewed the voting in its favour. Of the nineteen elected to the Central Committee, twelve are from the West Bank, and most of the others now reside there. The question is not only one of geography but also political experience. Even those among the former leadership who returned to the West Bank and Gaza after establishment of the PA had come of age outside, so had life experiences quite different from those living inside. Not so with Fatah's new leadership, most of whom grew up under the occupation. In this sense, the new leaders are closer to the people among whom they live.

This can be an important asset. As some have remarked, it means that the new leadership will be more attentive to issues that at times had been neglected, such as settlement construction, and that its preoccupations will be closer to those of Palestinians living under occupation.[106] It also can be a burden, since many are known to the rank and file and are associated with Fatah's and the PA's less than stellar performance. As a Fatah activist remarked, "these are the same people who got us into this mess".[107] While Fatah clearly enjoyed a bump in public opinion after the Conference,[108] changes to the Central Committee might not be enough in the longer term to squarely turn the page and restore confidence.

If the mood is ambivalent in the West Bank, it is dark in Gaza. Only four elected members of the Central Committee hail from the Strip (Muhammad Dahlan, Nabil Shaath,[109] Nasir Kidwa and Salim Zaanun), none of whom was living there immediately before the Conference or has returned since; of the 80 elected to the Revolutionary Council, only sixteen are from Gaza, of whom only two reside there. Two additional members from Gaza and who live there were appointed to the Central Committee – Zakariya al-Agha and Sakhr Bisiso – but as a Fatah member in Gaza said, "that helps, but not much. We're not fooling ourselves. We don't have a major voice".[110] With six Central Committee members, the numerical comparison with the last Central Committee, which had eight Gazans when all were alive and active, is not particularly unfavourable.[111] But for many in Gaza, the relevant comparison today is with the number of members hailing from and residing in the West Bank; by this standard, Gaza's current total is much less impressive.[112]

Geographically motivated discontent aside, most are loath to stir divisions within Fatah ranks, especially in light of the conflict with Hamas. A Gazan delegate who was trapped in the strip and expressed dissatisfaction with the results nevertheless explained: "Hamas arrested me twice, and I've spent months in prison here. I can't attack the leadership. You need your tribe. We will accept the results against our will".[113] Gazan Fatah members grudgingly have accepted today's geopolitical realities; arguably needing their leaders in Ramallah today more than Ramallah needs them, they are choosing to cast their eyes on the future: "Gazans created Fatah, and the centre of gravity will someday return here".[114] In the meantime, local leaders have no other home and show no inclination to abandon the movement.[115]

The diaspora fared even more poorly. Only four candidates based outside were elected – Sultan Abu al-Aynayn, Muhammad Ghnaym, Abbas Zaki and Salim Zaanun;

[106] "The people are being represented by those who have triumphed as well as suffered alongside them. Fatah becomes relatable to rather than apart from its constituents". Khalil Shikaki, "Fatah Resurrected", *The National Interest*, November/ December 2009, pp. 5-6.

[107] Crisis Group interview, Fatah activist, Ramallah, October 2009.

[108] See below.

[109] Nabil Shaath is a refugee who fled to Gaza during the 1948 War.

[110] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 10 September 2009. Another did not hide his bitterness as he refused to comment on the Conference: "Go talk to Ramallah. That's where the leadership is". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 8 September 2009.

[111] The eight included four native-born Gazans and four refugees. Crisis Group was unable to confirm the birthplace of one member of the previous Central Committee.

[112] Gaza sees itself as the vanguard of Palestinian nationalism. Significantly, it lays claim to Fatah's three principle founders, Yasser Arafat (Abu Ammar), Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad) and Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad). Arafat's father's family is from Gaza, while the latter two fled to Gaza as a result of the 1948 war.

[113] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 9 September 2009. A leader of Fatah's armed branch, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, conditioned his support on the leadership's performance: "The leadership will win my commitment to them in accordance with the extent that they actualise the Fatah program". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, 9 September 2009.

[114] Crisis Group interview, Fatah member, Gaza City, September 2009.

[115] Some Fatah members, especially ex-security service personnel, have joined Islamic Jihad and Salafi Islamist groups, but in limited numbers. Crisis Group interviews, ex-security chief, Ramallah, July 2009; Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades leader, Gaza City, September 2009.

the latter two today remain in Ramallah.[116] The vast majority of previous Central Committee members had lived most of their lives in exile, even if many had returned to the occupied territories following Oslo. In contrast, the new Central Committee is made up largely of those whose formative experiences were inside. How this might impact Fatah's political standing among the diaspora and, should it become necessary, its capacity to market an agreement with Israel to refugees is untested.

Some of the movement's rivals see an opportunity to gain at Fatah's expense in the refugee camps and otherwise among the diaspora, claiming that the committee's composition and the Conference's focus on the "homeland" illustrate its weakening commitment to refugees.[117] Fatah disputes that, pointing out that the Conference reaffirmed the importance of the refugee question; a delegate from Lebanon acknowledged that diaspora influence had weakened but explained it had less to do with the level of commitment to the refugees' plight than with the "nature of the struggle. It is now centred on the Palestinian territories".[118]

Another notable trend is the heavy representation of security and military personnel, though its impact is unclear. Three former security chiefs (Muhammad Dahlan, Jibril Rujub and Tawfiq Tirawi)[119] were elected, plus three others with a Fatah military background (Mahmud Alul,[120] Muhammad Medani and Sultan Abu al-Aynayn). Some criticise this level of representation as excessive[121] and voice fear that it will lead to attempts to manipulate the security services and use former strongholds as personal fiefdoms to advance special interests.[122] But even if the temptation exists, it likely will be harder than previously to play that card. Whereas Arafat had encouraged redundancy within the security sector to augment his authority, the current leadership has centralised control.

The Revolutionary Council will need to prove itself. The body – which includes 80 elected members plus another nineteen to 24 nominated by the Central Committee and confirmed by the council – includes many groups neglected in the Central Committee, such as the young, women (20 per cent, fixed by quota), Christians (five in total) and a former Jew (Uri Davis). [123] The majority is comprised of activists from the 1980s, including Shabiba (the Fatah youth movement, founded in 1982) and first intifada activists, in addition to a smaller number of veteran militants. In theory, the council is a strong body, as it is invested with significant oversight responsibilities and is seen as the crucible of the movement's future leadership. But with the Central Committee now com-

[116] Abu al-Aynayn returned to Lebanon. Ghnaym left the West Bank in early November, when, according to press reports, Israel refused to renew his permit. Others contend his departure resulted from internal competition among Central Committee members. Crisis Group interviews, Fatah officials, Ramallah, November 2009.

[117] "Fatah is trying to organise and reach out", said a Damascus-based analyst, "but they just don't have the tools. The leadership doesn't seem to be focused on refugee concerns". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2009. This likely will pose less of a problem in Lebanon than elsewhere – in particular Syria. That is because of the election to the Central Committee of Sultan Abu al-Aynayn, who is popular among Fatah in Lebanon, especially in the south, and a forceful advocate for Lebanon's refugees. The leader of another faction said, "the factions have given up on the hope that Fatah could be saved from the inside, despite the grumbling that has been heard, especially in the camps and diaspora, about its current direction". Crisis Group interview, Khalid Abdel Majid, General Secretary of the Popular Struggle Front and the Alliance of Resistance Factions, Damascus, September 2009.

[118] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2009. A delegate from Lebanon pointed out that "practical decisions" were taken in Bethlehem to reinforce Fatah's presence in Lebanon, strengthen relations with the state and increase support to Lebanese refugees. Crisis Group interview, Amal Helou, Women's Bureau Secretary, Fatah Movement, Beddawi Camp, 14 September 2009. Other delegates noted that the Fatah budget for Lebanon is slated to be maintained. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2009.

[119] Central Committee member Hussein al-Shaykh, currently head of civil affairs (with the rank of minister), is sometimes put into this category. He has security experience and once was slated to be head of Preventive Security, but the appointment was cancelled at the last minute. Crisis Group interview, member of PA security forces, Ramallah, October 2009.

[120] Mahmud Alul (Abu Jihad) commanded the third highest vote total in the Central Committee elections, after Muhammad Ghnaym and Marwan Barghtouti. (Alul worked closely in Tunis with PLO co-founder Khalil al-Wazir in the Western Sector, where he built networks in Palestine and burnished his nationalist credentials.)

[121] Crisis Group interviews, Fatah supporters, Ramallah and Nablus, September and October 2009. Others take a more favourable view of the heavy security and military presence. In the words of a Revolutionary Council member, the election of the former chiefs "solved a problem" for the movement since it regularised the status of individuals who already were key powerbrokers by virtue of their position. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2009. In light of Hamas's Gaza takeover, the election of a "strong and stable leadership", as a Palestinian analyst put it, is not surprising. Crisis Group interview, analyst, Ramallah, September 2009.

[122] Crisis Group interviews, donor officials and security reform experts, Jerusalem, September and October 2009.

[123] Davis converted to Islam in 2008, when he married. nrg.co.il, 24 August 2008, www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/777/478.html.

posed of strong personalities, it will need to fight harder to assert its relevance.[124]

Regardless of popular perceptions, the Conference bought Fatah and its leadership a respite. But how long that space stays open depends on how well they play their cards. Not all are in their hands, and those they have already played have raised fresh doubt.

B. 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 ten or fifteen 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 longstanding 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".[125] 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".[126] 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, stoking the crowd's fervour 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".[127]

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,[128] 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,[129] 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.

[124] It has begun to do so, asking the Central Committee to "review" the list of 24 names it submitted for appointment to the Revolutionary Council, since it opposed five of them. A Revolutionary Council member said, "we wanted to show them that we are not going to be a rubber stamp". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009.

[125] Crisis Group interview, Washington, July 2009.

[126] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009.

[127] Crisis Group interview, Mustafa Abu Harb, media officer, Fatah Movement, Beddawi Camp, Lebanon, 14 September 2009.

[128] Crisis Group interview, Palestinian journalist, Ramallah, October 2009.

[129] The Conference did not specifically amend or abrogate the old Fatah Basic Law, which dates to the 1960s and includes highly contentious clauses. ("Complete liberation of Palestine, and eradication of Zionist economic, political, military and cultural existence" (Art 12); "Armed struggle is a strategy and not a tactic, and the Palestinian Arab people's armed revolution is a decisive factor in the liberation fight and in uprooting the Zionist existence, and this struggle will not cease unless the Zionist state is demolished and Palestine is completely liberated" (Art. 19)). A member of the Preparatory Committee explained that doing so would have opened the leadership up to enormous criticism, from both outside the movement and within. Instead, it decided to adopt a new political program, which superseded the old Basic Law.

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.[130]

The document was the product of the Conference's more defiant mood.[131] 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 Alul 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.[132] 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".[133]

Abbas opposed including the wording of Alul'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.[134] The Revolutionary Council approved the document, including the declaration, at its October meeting.[135]

[130] Fatah's political program, as provided by the Revolutionary Council Secretary General Amin Maqbul, p. 8. There is one other reference to armed struggle, on p. 16: "Fatah holds fast to the right of the Palestinian people to resist the occupation, with all legitimate means including its right to exercise armed struggle as conferred by international law, so long as the occupation, settlement and the deprivation of the Palestinian people of their immutable rights continue". Both translations Crisis Group's.

[131] "Before the Conference, there were two currents in Fatah: those who believed in negotiation and those who believed in armed struggle. But now, nobody can ignore armed struggle. We want a time ceiling on negotiations, and if they do not succeed, then we will go back to armed struggle". Crisis Group interview, Conference delegate denied entry by Israel, Beddawi Camp, Lebanon, August 2009. Khalil Shikaki, who polled delegates at the Conference, found that most believed in "the efficacy of violence". He wrote that "two thirds indicated support for the view that armed confrontations have helped Palestinians achieve national rights in ways that negotiations could not". "Fatah Resurrected", op. cit., p. 7. Of equal interest, he found "willingness to compromise on the various issues of the permanent status settlement" to be low.

[132] The five points of clarification are: "1. Fatah clings to its existence as a national liberation movement that aims to abolish and defeat the occupation and achieve independence for the Palestinian people. The movement is part of the movement of Arab liberation and of [the] front of global forces desiring freedom and independence for peoples. 2. Fatah emphasises that the essential fight (*tanaqqud*) is with the Israeli occupation. Other fights [ie, the division with Hamas] are secondary that will be solved by pursuing dialogue, while reserving the right to use all available means to defend national unity, Palestinian legitimacy and the independence of Palestinian decision. 3. Fatah will remain, as it has been, loyal to the martyrs and their sacrifices and will struggle for the freedom of prisoners. It emphasises that it sticks to the constants of the Palestinian people relating to territory and Jerusalem and their liberation, and settlements and their abolition, and the refugees and their return. 4. Despite our adherence to our choice for peace and our work to bring it about, we will not relinquish any of our options. We believe that resistance in all of its forms is a legitimate right of occupied peoples in facing their occupiers. 5. This announcement is considered an integral part of the political program that was issued by the Sixth General Conference of the Fatah National Liberation Movement".

[133] He has reinforced this message in the wake of the Conference as well. In an interview on Al-Arabiya broadcast on 1 November 2009, Abbas said that he was "against resistance", at least so long as the "peace process" lasted.

[134] Crisis Group interviews, Bethlehem, August 2009; Revolutionary Council members, November 2009.

[135] Crisis Group interview, Revolutionary Council member Amin Maqbul, Ramallah, November 2009. Illustrating the continuing confusion, Crisis Group received a printed copy of the program from the president's office in which the declaration was nowhere to be found.

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".[136] 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.

IV. CHALLENGES AHEAD

A. REORGANISING FATAH AND DEFINING ITS ROLE

If the goal was to reform Fatah so that it could better compete with its Islamist rival, restore its popular standing and chart a clear political purpose, the conference was a start but no more. As even Fatah's leaders concur, much still needs to be done to regain popular trust and renew faith that the movement can lead the national cause effectively. While a lot will depend on the actions of outside actors, the challenge clearly also is internal. Among the most pressing questions will be ensuring party unity, defining Fatah's relations vis-à-vis Abbas, the PA and Hamas, and, of course, articulating an effective political stance.

This is neither an abstract nor necessarily a faraway challenge. President Abbas has called for elections in January 2010, and while many believe they will be pushed back, they potentially could be held relatively soon. Based on polling and interviews in the West Bank and Gaza, Fatah appears to have gained significant ground relative to Hamas since the 2006 debacle. But neither the polls – as the experience of 2006 illustrated – nor anecdotal impressions necessarily are reliable. Hamas's image has suffered, particularly in Gaza, and the Conference may have given Fatah a bump,[137] but if so, it appears fragile, transient and at the mercy of events. Even in the brief period since Bethlehem, a series of developments – the trilateral meeting in New York; the Goldstone affair; and Israel's release of Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Hamas's delivery of a video message from Corporal Gilad Shalit – have dented Abbas's and, by extension, Fatah's image.

All agree that Fatah today is comfortably ahead in the polls, but that will not necessarily translate into an electoral win. With at least 40 per cent of respondents expressing a lack of faith in all factions, the unaffiliated will be decisive in any electoral contest, and according

[136] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, September 2009.

[137] According to a poll conducted by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research immediately after the Conference, support for Abbas increased while support for Gaza Prime Minister Haniyeh declined, with the gap between the two increasing from five percentage points (49 per cent versus 44 per cent) to 14 percentage points (52 per cent versus 38 per cent). Similarly, support for Fatah over Hamas increased from eight percentage points (41 per cent versus 33 per cent) to 16 percentage points (44 per cent versus 28 per cent). However, that only 27 per cent said that the new Fatah leadership would be better able to end the occupation. Palestinian Public Opinion Poll no. 33, www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2009/p33e.html.

to at least one pollster, their overall profile today is more in tune with Hamas than Fatah.[138] Fatah faces the additional problem of a traditionally undisciplined constituency, especially in comparison with Hamas's. Crisis Group interviews suggest that increasing numbers of Palestinians say they will not vote for a specific movement; instead, they will either stay home or vote on the basis of the individual candidates, not the faction.[139]

Organisationally, steps can be taken to shore up support and mobilise rank and file. Regional officials, like some senior leaders, feel the need to "get out into the streets".[140] A longtime organiser advocated rejuvenating Fatah's connection with popular organisations – including those that mobilise women, students, youth and workers – in order to "crystallise democracy within the movement".[141] Another added: "We need to return to our roots, to working among and reaching out to the people. Today Fayyad does that more than we do".[142]

Likewise, the movement is in a better position to establish discipline so as to avoid the costly divisions of the past, regain credibility and compete effectively. As Central Committee members acknowledged, however, working as a team in the face of continuing rivalries and, in some cases, personal animosity will not be easy. A newly elected member said, "we have become used to working alone, each one of us a one-man show, claiming to represent and speak for the entirety of the movement. This has become a part of Fatah's culture. We need to change that and re-learn how to work collectively and commit to a group decision". This requires adopting what he called "the principle of complementarity" – airing differences around the table but speaking publicly with one voice.[143]

To a certain extent this has begun to happen.[144] The Central Committee's messaging has been relatively consistent.[145] Regular committee meetings and communiqués have allowed the unified voice of the movement to be more frequently and consistently heard. Thus far, the competition is internal, with members jockeying for budgets and over the apportioning of commissions and positions. But while these are early precursors of a future and more fierce fight for power,[146] leaders for now have averted public disagreement on political issues. The Conference and regional elections pointed in that direction though, by militants' own admission, more needs to be done to create a genuine organisational structure with grassroots input and support.[147]

But Fatah's problems run much deeper. Organisational 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 organisation and charismatic leadership. What is more, these came together during a heady historical moment, at the height of the decolonisation era and amid successful Third World nationalist and revolutionary wars. Later, as Fatah's institutions broke down and its cadres were demobilised, the PA offered an alternative structure,[148] 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 re-

[138] Crisis Group interview, Jamil Rabah, Near East Consulting, Jerusalem, October 2009.
[139] Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City and Ramallah, September 2009. Fatah is pondering the inclusion of independents to appeal to voters who have grown tired of familiar faces. Crisis Group interview, potential PLC candidate, Ramallah, November 2009.
[140] Crisis Group interview, Fatah activist, Nablus, October 2009.
[141] Crisis Group interview, Mobilisation and Organisation Commission worker, Ramallah, October 2009.
[142] Crisis Group interview, Fatah activist, Ramallah, October 2009.
[143] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2009.
[144] Crisis Group interview, Mobilisation and Organisation Commission official, Ramallah, October 2009.
[145] Senior Fatah leaders have avoided public squabbling – for example on the Goldstone report – that almost certainly would have occurred in the past. A recent example occurred in March 2008 with the Yemeni initiative to resolve the Hamas-Fatah split, when Fatah parliamentary bloc head Azzam al-Ahmad and Abbas adviser Nimr Hammad assailed each other on an Al-Jazeera news broadcast. For details, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°25, *Palestine Divided*, 17 December 2008, p. 5.
[146] Crisis Group interview, Fatah officials, Ramallah, November 2009.
[147] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leaders, Hebron, September 2009.
[148] A former Arafat adviser said, "Oslo was not the solution for the Palestinians; it was the solution for the PLO". The same might be said of Fatah. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009.

storing Fatah to where it was in 1982,[149] 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.[150] 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 revitalising 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,[151] 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 defence that prompted scepticism among Palestinians.[152] 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.[153] 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,[154] 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".[155]

With Abbas under intense pressure – from Hamas on the inside; 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";[156] before the cameras, committee members spoke in terms of a "mistake" (*khata'*), while Hamas and some others, playing on the linguistic similarity in Arabic, called the postponement a "sin" (*khati'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.

[149] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2009.

[150] As a Central Committee members put it, they need to establish "a healthy and correct relationship" with Abbas for setting and implementing policy. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2009.

[151] A presidential adviser insisted that Abbas never said that he would refuse to meet Netanyahu, only that he would refuse to negotiate with him. Nevertheless, the public impression took root that the meeting would not take place unless Israeli agreed to a settlement freeze. Crisis Group interviews, Ramallah, October 2009.

[152] "Abu Mazen can say whatever he wants, but the picture on television of him shaking hands with Netanyahu said it all. Nobody pays attention to his excuses". Crisis Group interview, Palestinian journalist, Ramallah, September 2009.

[153] Crisis Group interview, Central Committee member, Ramallah, September 2009.

[154] A presidential adviser said, "in twenty years, this is the hardest moment I've ever experienced. You usually feel that you have 50 per cent of the people with you, or least a couple of factions, or at least a couple of Arab states, or the Arab public. With Goldstone, we had nothing, nobody, everyone was totally against us". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009. Palestinian officials fumed that Arab leaders had known about and had backed the decision to withdraw the resolution; however, as soon as they witnessed the outraged public reaction, they shifted course, claiming to have been taken by surprise by Abbas's move. Crisis Group interview, October 2009. A U.S. official confirmed this, saying Arab states had blatantly double-crossed the Palestinians. "As soon as they saw the Al-Jazeera headlines, they ran for cover". Crisis Group interview, Washington, October 2009.

[155] Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, October 2009.

[156] Crisis Group interview, Central Committee member, Ramallah, October 2009.

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"[157] 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.[158] As a committee member put it:

> Abu Mazen 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 Mazen 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 institutionalisation.[159]

How this will be implemented and to what extent Abbas's future diplomatic moves will be constrained remains unclear. Among the new leadership, there is little appetite for a head-on confrontation that risks destabilising 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,[160] 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 were 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.[161] 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.[162]

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 do to those things. What you have now is a situation in which one shock can bring the whole system down.[163]

[157] Crisis Group interview, Central Committee member, Ramallah, October 2009.

[158] Crisis Group interviews, Central Committee members, Ramallah, October 2009.

[159] Crisis Group interview, Central Committee member, Ramallah, October 2009. A confidant of Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) offered a more cynical interpretation of Arafat's brand of consultation: "When Arafat started the meeting at 8pm, he already had the decision written in his pocket. He would keep the group at the table for hours, talking. At 4am, he would pull the piece of paper out of his pocket, and everyone would gladly sign it just to get out of there". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, July 2009.

[160] Within days of criticising Abbas for the UN Human Rights Council vote, former PA ambassador to Egypt Nabil Amr lost his bodyguards and two cars. Maan News, 11 October 2007.

[161] Eight of the 24 ministers are Fatah members, but Salam Fayyad approached the ministers individually, not Fatah as a movement. Fayyad did coordinate with Abbas – who at the time was Fatah commander-in-chief – but Abbas did not take the names to the Central Committee for approval, per Fatah custom, nor did either win the approval of the Fatah parliamentary bloc. Crisis Group interview, Azzam al-Ahmad, then head of Fatah parliamentary bloc, Ramallah, June 2009.

[162] Crisis Group interview, Bethlehem, August 2009. The Fatah political program specified that the PA is a "body that is independent of the movement that Fatah has the ability to influence especially when it assumes its leadership directly. The movement must form a clear vision of what it wants from the PA". In an effort to limit the number of positions Fatah leaders can hold, the Conference resolved that only five Central Committee members could simultaneously hold additional PA or PLO positions (the PA president, PLC speaker, PLO chairman, PNC head and PA prime minister). This suggested both a desire to disengage from the government and determination to see continued Fatah control of central Palestinian organs. To date, the decision has not been implemented. The three committee members who serve as minister or governor have not yet resigned their PA positions.

[163] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2009.

Others point out that governmental authority carries its own constraints; the more closely Fatah is associated with the PA, the less it will able to adopt a confrontational strategy vis-à-vis Israel.[164] 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 official said, "the PA has reached the point where it has to decide whether it is working with us or against us".[165] 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". 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".[166] A senior PA official summed up the government goal: "To create the necessary conditions, within two years, for establishing a state such that the only impediment is the occupation". He added: "We don't want to be entangled endlessly in this interim condition, and we are looking for a way to get out of it. Negotiations are getting us nowhere".[167]

What precisely will happen two years hence should the occupation endure remains uncertain, though Fayyad himself apparently favours international recognition of Palestine within the 1967 borders.[168] Paradoxically, such a move would increase Palestinian dependence on the goodwill of those same actors upon whom Fayyad today is determined not to rely.[169] Still, for now, and in contrast with the diplomatic track, the government's approach at least can give Palestinians a sense that they can affect their destiny; from Fatah's standpoint, however, it appears to be dealing in the realm of political strategy and thus encroaching on Fatah's supposed domain.[170]

The government program is another step in Fayyad's increasingly pronounced political turn.[171] 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".[172] He is also taking advantage of the political void left by Fatah.[173] 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".[174]

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[164] See George Giacaman, "The Future of 'Fatah' and the 'Two-State Solution': Rule or Resistance?" (Arabic), *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, summer 2009.

[165] *Haaretz*, 27 October 2009.

[166] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2009.

[167] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009.

[168] "Salam Fayyad Explains His State-Building Project and Replies to Criticism" (Interview with Salam Fayyad – Arabic), *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, summer 2009.

[169] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009. Critics point out that even in the short term, the plan relies heavily on Israel. It include plans for the West Bank's Area C – which, under the Oslo Accords, are under full Israel control – as well as areas on the Israeli side of the Separation Barrier and in municipal Jerusalem over which Israeli claims sovereignty. A commentator noted that establishing a new water connection in a village was a positive development but asked how often the faucet can be turned on when Israel limits the water supply in the West Bank. "The fundamental issues are political". Crisis Group interview, newspaper columnist, Ramallah, September 2009.

[170] Responding to the criticism, a senior PA official said, "nature abhors a vacuum; it will be filled. If the PLO had wanted to make a move, it could have". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2009.

[171] A confidant described the prime minister as "developing his political mind and stances, creating a political framework around the technocratic ideas he has long had". Crisis Group interview, senior PA official, Ramallah, September 2009.

[172] Crisis Group interview, Revolutionary Council member, Ramallah, October 2009. By September, over 800 "micro-projects" had been completed around the West Bank. On the genesis of the projects, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°79, *Ruling Palestine II: The West Bank Model?*, 17 July 2008.

[173] When Abbas did not respond to Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech at Bar-Ilan University in June 2009 – itself a response to Obama's speech at Cairo University and followed by one delivered by Hamas's head, Khaled Meshal – Fayyad did: at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, he replied directly to Netanyahu and first set out his two-year timeline to statehood. Likewise, when the U.S. consul general met with Fayyad about postponing the presentation to the UN Human Rights Council, the latter reportedly refused to cooperate. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 8 October 2009; Al-Arabiyya TV, 9 October 2009.

[174] Crisis Group interview, Washington, October 2009. Even in the absence of inter-Palestinian reconciliation, Fayyad's premiership is not necessarily safe. For example, should Abbas choose to regularise the status of the West Bank government (which has been in existence without constitutional legitimacy since 2007), he could resort to the PLO, which created and remains the source of legitimacy for the PA itself. Should

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 mobilise 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.[175]

B. THE STATE OF THE PEACE PROCESS

Historically, Fatah's political standing has depended above all on the ability to promote its liberation agenda. With the signing of the Oslo accords, this principally has been a function of the diplomatic process. In this regard, the lack of tangible success in negotiations, coupled with widespread Palestinian scepticism that they eventually will succeed, represents a serious political burden. President Obama's energetic engagement and demand for an Israeli settlement freeze initially raised hopes. Yet, even prior to his call for an unconditional return to negotiations and Secretary of State Clinton's description of Israel's partial settlement moratorium as "unprecedented", Palestinians were raising questions. The Conference gave voice to their frustrations, and delegates demanded that negotiation parameters be redesigned. There was close to unanimity in judging that an open-ended process was a net negative for both the movement and Palestine. A Palestinian analyst noted that all the top vote getters at the Conference had been critical of the negotiating path launched at Oslo.[176]

Fatah's new political program specifies that negotiations ought to have a time limit; Israeli incursions, arrests and assassinations must stop; the siege on Gaza must be lifted and obstacles to movement in the West Bank removed; and a settlement freeze is needed, including in East Jerusalem. It likewise objects to deferral of any final status issue, rejects the notion of a state with provisional borders and refuses to recognise Israel as a Jewish state. Should Abbas abide by these principles and reject negotiations unless the conditions are met – thus defying the U.S. and Israel – his resolve might earn him domestic support, at least in the short term. As current developments indicate, however, this stance would be unlikely to get him to a peace process. In the longer run, it would not solve the dilemma that Fatah – whose political project remains tightly moored to the diplomatic option – now faces.

According to a U.S. official, the administration acknowledges the Palestinian president suffered mightily from recent events and is concerned that he might live up to his pledge not to run in presidential elections. It also is determined to help Abbas and understands his need to project a strong posture at home. But, he added, Washington's patience is not infinite. "When will Abbas realise that, without negotiations, he will have nothing to show and nowhere to go?"[177]

For now, the movement's leadership still holds out hope – however weakened – that Obama ultimately will deliver what it needs. As a result, its focus remains the here and now, not what the next stage might hold. But one barely has to scratch the surface to hear frank admissions of uncertainty as to where to go next should Obama's initiative wither. A new Central Committee member said, "Fatah does not have a strategy right now. We are improvising, and that's suicide".[178] Another added: "What are we preparing for if negotiations do not move forward? Nothing".[179]

Some within Fatah suggest that the movement ought to begin exploring alternative options in conjunction with negotiations. The political program itself offers several

that occur, Fatah and other PLO factions may demand a larger portion of ministerial posts or even the premiership itself. That said, opposition to Fayyad within Fatah appears less universal than sometimes assumed. No shortage of Fatah members appreciates the work he has done, which they contrast to what has not been done by their own leaders. A Revolutionary Council member cautioned that one should beware of "those who would like to unseat him and speak as if they were speaking for the entire movement". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009. He said further that unlike Fatah, Fayyad is free from party constraints. He does not have "restrictions from a faction on what he can say or do".

[175] The existing negotiating process, launched by the U.S. shortly after Fayyad took over, centres not only on negotiations, but also on the PA's performance on the ground in the West Bank. For the U.S., the best guarantee of the PA meeting its obligations is for Fayyad to remain in his chair. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, October 2009.

[176] Crisis Group interview, Hani Masri, Ramallah, September 2009. Muhammad Ghnaym (Abu Maher), who garnered the most votes, opposed the Oslo Accords, even though he joined forces with Abbas to bring about the Conference and today lives in Ramallah; Marwan Barghouti is the symbol of uniting negotiations with resistance; Mahmud Alul enjoys resistance credentials from fighting in Lebanon, his close association with PLO co-founder Khalil al-Wazir in Tunis and his patronage of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades during the second intifada; and Nasir al-Kidwa, with a strong reputation as diplomat and intellectual, is known as critical of the PA strategy vis-à-vis both Israel and Hamas.

[177] Crisis Group interview, Washington, November 2009.

[178] Crisis Group interview, Central Committee member, Ramallah, September 2009.

[179] Crisis Group interview, Central Committee member, Ramallah, September 2009.

possibilities, and voices within the movement can be heard supporting each. In addition to negotiations, the document mentions popular struggle similar to what occurs in the villages of Bilin and Nilin, which have become models of local protest against Israel's Separation Barrier; local boycotts of Israeli goods; civil disobedience to encourage international boycott; and the prospect of alternatives to negotiating a two-state solution, such as unilaterally declaring a state within the 1967 borders or calling for a single, binational democratic state.[180]

Today, these options remain essentially theoretical. The most concrete – Bilin and Nilin type resistance – repeatedly was mentioned at the Conference, and some activists urged Fatah to replicate it. As Wafa Abdel Rahman, director of a Ramallah-based media organisation, remarked, "this is what Fatah could offer, this is what would characterise Fatah. They would be the Fatah army, the Bilin Brigades as opposed to the Al-Aqsa Brigades. Hamas has resistance; the PA has negotiations; Fatah would have popular struggle".[181] But although nonviolent popular struggle is praised in the abstract, including by Abbas, Fatah has done little to encourage or emulate it. Bilin and Nilin stand as exceptions, the product of local initiatives in which other organisations, such as Mustafa Barghouti's National Initiative, have played a role.[182]

A Fatah activist and newly elected Revolutionary Council member admitted: "There was something artificial about the way we talked about Bilin at the Conference. It was marketed for public consumption. The truth is that we have been behind the curve in popular organising". He admitted that the movement has lost touch with the younger generation critical to any mass campaign.[183] Moreover, there is no consensus in the movement on whether popular struggle at this stage is desirable. Said a Central Committee member, "let's say we pursue the path of Bilin. The people go out and scream, then what? Israel can repress the demonstrations and absorb the cost".[184]

Even were there a political decision to pursue this course, it would face tremendous hurdles. The Palestinian public is not just in a state of despair. It is, for now at least, thoroughly demobilised; the grassroots political and social structures that nourished the first intifada withered during the Oslo years and no longer exist. Spontaneous flare-ups may yet occur, as some leaders foresee.[185] But isolated incidents notwithstanding, it is difficult to discern the harbingers of the next mass movement. There is anger among Palestinians, a lot of "tinder" as a security expert put it,[186] but the tinder is wet, and if a twig occasionally ignites, the PA security services are determined to keep sparks from spreading. The Palestinian population today is characterised by the West Bank idiom "*zhiqna*" (we're fed up),[187] which carries the implication of political weariness bordering on apathy. It is suspended between on the one hand, anger at the occupation and resentment at its leadership, and on the other, a passivity born of the sense that nothing ordinary people do matters.

C. RELATIONS WITH HAMAS

Over the past two or more years, both Hamas and Fatah appeared more interested in using their dialogue to play for time than to conclude an agreement. Abbas was intent on pursuing negotiations with Israel, hoping that diplomatic progress, improvements in the West Bank and the toll of Gaza's siege would weaken Hamas or even precipitate its collapse. With Obama engaged and

[180] There have been some discordant voices. Shortly before being elected to the Central Committee, Sultan Abu al-Aynayn said, "the principle of armed struggle needs to be revised. It shouldn't mean suicide. It has to have a political objective and go hand-in-hand with negotiations. In case other ways fail, we need a deterrent force to exert pressure on the Israelis if we are to take back our rights. Now the U.S. is putting some pressure on Israel to stop the settlements. We will wait and see if the U.S. has the means to stop Israel. If not, we should have other alternatives, and this should include all ways of resistance including armed struggle". Crisis Group interview, Burj al-Barajneh Camp, 22 July 2009. Abu al-Aynayn was less nuanced at an October meeting in Ramallah, when he called directly for a return to "martyrdom [suicide] operations". Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, Ramallah, October 2009.

[181] Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Ramallah, September 2009.

[182] Barghouti, like PLO Executive Committee member Hanan Ashrawi, also advocates some form of boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel. Crisis Group interviews, Mustafa Barghouti and NGO representatives, Ramallah, October 2009.

[183] Crisis Group interview, Revolutionary Council member, Ramallah, October 2009.

[184] Crisis Group interview, Central Committee member, Ramallah, September 2009.

[185] A Central Committee member worried that if Obama's initiative fails, "things will become very dangerous. If reason and logic cannot bring peace, what will come after? The negative forces of political Islam – as opposed to positive forces of Islam, of which there are many – will come to the fore, and we will enter a very frightening period". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2009.

[186] Crisis Group interview, international security sector reform expert, Jerusalem, October 2009.

[187] Crisis Group interviews, West Bank, 2009. See also Lori Allen, "Getting by the Occupation: How Violence Became Normal during the Second Palestinian Intifada", *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (2008), pp. 453-487.

conditions in the West Bank improving – albeit slowly – he felt emboldened. Hamas was equally adamant that it would outlast Abbas, who, the Islamists believed, would achieve nothing from negotiations. Even if international recognition did not come as quickly or as fully as Hamas had hoped, the movement scaled down its expectations and prolonged its clock for the engagement it was sure eventually would come. As for the siege in Gaza, it is harsh but survivable.[188]

September 2009 witnessed a short-lived burst of optimism that the seventh and most recent round of Egyptian-sponsored reconciliation talks might yield a breakthrough. But with the mutual recriminations that followed the postponement of the vote on the Goldstone report, Cairo's mediation once again seems to have reached an impasse. Fatah signed the Egyptian document despite deep reservations, because it was convinced Hamas would not; Hamas refused to sign the document even though it met many of its demands, because it was persuaded that time would further weaken Abbas.[189]

At this point, as a presidential adviser admitted, "we don't have a unified strategy on Gaza".[190] Among Fatah officials, disagreement touches fundamental questions, such as whether reconciliation under current circumstances is in the movement's interest. Some believe that, without some form of reconciliation, and until Abbas can speak in the name of the Palestinian people as a whole, prospects for fruitful negotiations with Israel are nil. In contrast, others argue that bringing Hamas back in (without it having accepted the three Quartet conditions of recognising Israel, renouncing violence and accepting past PLO agreements) would provide Israel with the ideal reason to suspend talks, while depriving the U.S. of any countervailing argument.[191] Most delegates to the Conference harboured hardline views toward Hamas.[192] These included imposing "real sanctions" on Gaza, such as cutting the 77,000 salaries still paid by Ramallah to PA employees there.[193]

[188] Both the amount and variety of goods available in Gaza has increased since Operation Cast Lead; tunnels are flourishing, with some variation depending on Egypt's policies. Overall, a businessman reported a more "confident reliance" on the tunnels, and investors are putting more money into the trading sector, which, while not "hitting its targets", is making money. Goods are no longer paid for with bags of cash; financial transfers through money changers have been regularised. Crisis Group interviews, businessmen and bankers, Gaza City, September 2009. But even if some traders might be doing better, producers are not. The price of cement has dropped precipitously in the past year, though still so expensive that only small, urgent repairs are possible. There is no construction to speak of, though there are a few small municipal street paving projects in Gaza City and Khan Yunis. Crisis Group interviews, merchants, Gaza City, October 2009.

[189] Crisis Group interviews, Ramallah, Gaza City, October 2009. Fatah took a gamble, since the U.S. almost certainly would not have accepted reconciliation on the basis of that document. The most problematic provisions were those that would have placed aspects of governance in the West Bank under some form of joint committee, jeopardising (in Washington's view) the efforts of Fayyad and the U.S. security coordinator, General Keith Dayton. In particular, the clause calling for a "mutually agreed upon" security committee, under Egyptian and Arab auspices, to oversee security reform in the West Bank and Gaza arguably would have forced, under U.S. law, a cessation of all assistance to West Bank security forces, including the training program led by General Dayton – arguably the flagship of U.S. activity in the West Bank. West Bank governance, and especially security sector reform, remains a top priority in Washington, and moving responsibility for security out of Prime Minister Fayyad's office and into a security committee – staffed only by professionals that Hamas would agree to and operating under Egyptian and Arab auspices – with responsibility for both West Bank and Gaza, would have met with strong resistance in the U.S., not to mention in Israel. A copy of the Egyptian document that Fatah signed can be found in *Al-Ayyam*, 14 October 2009. U.S. officials made clear to Abbas and Egyptian leaders that security cooperation would cease if the reconciliation agreement was put into effect. Egyptian officials sought to reassure Washington, telling the administration not to worry, but without fully explaining why – suggesting either that the agreement would be amended or that it would not be implemented. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, October, November, 2009. Officially, Hamas argued it refused to sign because of changes to the document that gave Abbas more power and removed the requirement of consensus on certain key issues. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza, October 2009. Yet, there is evidence suggesting that Hamas leaders were sharply divided between Gaza and Damascus. Those in Gaza appear to have been pushing the movement to sign, while Damascus-based leaders (backed by Qassam militants in Gaza) objected and, ultimately, prevailed. Crisis Group interviews, Gaza, October 2009.

[190] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, October 2009.

[191] Crisis Group interviews, Fatah officials, Ramallah, October 2009.

[192] See Shikaki, "Fatah Resurrected", op. cit., pp. 6-7. While PA policy toward Hamas in the West Bank since June 2007 has been marked by torture, arbitrary arrests and the suppression of political activism, instances of torture in PA jails have greatly diminished in the past several months. Crisis Group interviews, human rights activists and Hamas PLC members, Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron, October and November 2009.

[193] Crisis Group interview, Fatah leader, October 2009. When the idea of cutting off salaries was put forward in the past, it was quashed by Abbas and Fayyad. Crisis Group interview, Fayyad adviser, Ramallah, August 2009. Several more influential voices are again arguing for this, but the idea has yet to achieve critical mass. Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Ramallah, October 2009.

Likewise, Fatah appears split over Abbas's decision to call for presidential and parliamentary elections in January 2010. There is widespread suspicion, in Palestine and abroad, that these will not take place at that time; holding them in the West Bank only, without participation by Hamas and potentially other factions[194] could deprive them of the required legitimacy.[195] Still, a number of Central Committee members approve of the president's announcement, arguing that elections should be held in the West Bank even if Hamas blocks them in Gaza; [196] Fatah, they say, ought not give in to Hamas "blackmail",[197] and the Islamists should be seen as impeding the popular will.

In contrast, more hold that elections should happen only in the context of an agreement with Hamas; holding them in the West Bank alone, they maintain, would crystallise the division, and in the words of a Central Committee member, "turn the West Bank and Gaza into Pakistan and Bangladesh".[198] Among elections opponents are those who fear Fatah simply is not ready and that Bethlehem was at best an incomplete start. According to another Central Committee member:

> We shouldn't build the case for ourselves on the argument that the other guy is worse. Elections can only be held after people understand what we stand for. It doesn't make sense to hold them now. We haven't put forward a convincing case for why people should vote for us.[199]

Further complicating the picture is Abbas's 5 November 2009 announcement that he will not run in the elections. The decision might never be carried out. The threat likely was made in order to send a message to the U.S. that he was losing faith and to spur it into action; it is widely assumed that elections in any event will not take place in January 2010; and Abbas still could remain at the helm of the PLO and Fatah. Still, the possibility he might soon retire aises the troubling issue of his succession, for which, notwithstanding Bethlehem, Fatah is not prepared. An observer noted: "Arafat's last gift to Fatah was to bequeath the national movement – in all its parts, Fatah, PA and PLO – to a single successor. Abu Mazen will not be able to do that".[200]

Not surprisingly, discussion among Fatah members in Gaza is of a highly different sort. There, the desire for quick reconciliation is far more palpable and urgent. The movement is unable to meet or organise in the Strip, so any talk of getting its house in order seems illusory. In Gaza, virtually every Fatah member interviewed by Crisis Group said he or she will judge the new Central Committee on whether it is able to normalise their situation in Gaza. For most, this means the ability to bring about reconciliation. For movement hardliners, it means finding a way to displace Hamas.[201] Today, both remain distant prospects.

[194] A Fatah leader said that even some within the movement would boycott the vote if it were West Bank-only. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, November 2009.

[195] Even some of Abbas's close advisers privately conceded the elections would not take place in January 2010, viewing the announcement essentially as a political ploy to shift conversation away from the Goldstone report and put the ball in Hamas's court. Crisis Group interviews, Ramallah, October 2009. A senior Israeli official asserted that "elections will not take place", arguing that Abbas would have no choice but to resume negotiations. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, November 2009. A U.S. official was more circumspect, but worried that elections would mean putting negotiations into a deep freeze. He added that Washington had expressed no views on the matter to the Palestinian president. Crisis Group interview, Washington, November 2009.

[196] Two proposals are circulating on how elections could be held in January 2010. The first would be to consider the West Bank and Gaza a single electoral district and conduct elections according to a proportional representation system with electoral lists that include candidates from Gaza, thereby enabling the creation of a unified PLC. The second would consider the West Bank and Gaza as separate districts, with their elections not necessarily simultaneous. Crisis Group interview, potential PLC candidate, Ramallah, 2 November 2009.

[197] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, November 2009.

[198] Crisis Group interview, Central Committee member, Ramallah, October 2009. Abbas's advisers themselves are divided. Crisis Group interviews, presidential advisers, Ramallah, October 2009. Elections also would make reconciliation more difficult, as Hamas would insist that the results be nullified. An Islamist leaders asked: "What will elections change? We will still be here; Fatah will still be there". Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, September 2009.

[199] Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, September 2009.

[200] Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, November 2009.

[201] Crisis Group interviews, Gaza City, September 2009. Some go so far as to talk about a military option against Hamas, but few give credence to such a scenario. Crisis Group interview, Gaza City, September 2009.

V. CONCLUSION

August 2009 was a good month for Fatah. Mahmoud Abbas convened Fatah's General Conference; the conference elected a new leadership; and it approved a new political program. Fatah and its leader appeared confident; indeed, Abbas was described as more powerful than ever and his legitimacy stronger. Overseas, and particularly in Washington, the step was seen as a mere beginning, but an auspicious one nonetheless.

What a difference a couple of months can make. In September 2009, the U.S. demand for an immediate resumption of negotiations without preconditions undercut the Palestinian leadership. Abbas's reluctant agreement to attend a trilateral meeting with Netanyahu and Obama in the absence of a settlement freeze eroded some of his newfound credibility. The decision to postpone consideration of the Goldstone report erased any possible gain and then some. In November, with the U.S. administration warmly welcoming Israel's less-than-full settlement freeze and still pressing Abbas to resume talks, the Palestinian predicament seemed as daunting as ever. By then, Abbas had announced he would not participate in the scheduled presidential elections.

That their fortunes could swing at such a dizzying pace says something about the state of the Palestinian president as well as of the movement he leads. It says something, too, about their dependence on and therefore vulnerability to external developments. Reforming Fatah, building up its institutions, revamping its leadership: these are all changes that point to future possibilities. But they can do little more than that in the absence either of an effective diplomatic effort or, barring that, of a clearly articulated political strategy on which the nationalist movement can rely.

Today, the former (a peace process that yields results) seems a distant prospect at best. The gaps between the two sides, the character of Israel's government, entrenched divisions among Palestinians and a U.S. diplomacy that appears more captive than master of events – these and more have deflated the hopes of an Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough to which Obama's election had given rise. For Fatah, that puts the onus, squarely, on taking up the second challenge, namely to come up with a coherent agenda and answers to fundamental questions about how to achieve its goals, with what means and with whom.

Ramallah/Gaza City/Brussels, 12 November 2009

APPENDIX A

MAP OF ISRAEL/WEST BANK/GAZA

Map No. 3584 Rev. 2 UNITED NATIONS
January 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section

APPENDIX B

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