

The Palestinian Political System at a Crossroads

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CHOREV: Could the success of Hamas in the January legislative elections have been avoided, or was Fatah's demise inevitable?

RABBANI: Under the circumstances, I suspect not. Much has been made of the fact that this was largely a vote against corruption within the Fatah movement and within the Palestinian Authority and so on. I would say this is both accurate and misleading. Public opinion polls do show a large majority of Palestinians who did not vote for Fatah, identifying corruption as the main issue. But one question that wasn't asked was the following: "If Abu Mazen was the president of an independent Palestinian State that was sovereign, who would you vote for?" I suspect that if Fatah had been able to achieve its political program of ending the occupation and establishing a sovereign Palestinian state, these issues of corruption and good governance, which tended to dominate the current election, would have been secondary

and could have made for a very different election result.

Why did people who did not vote for Fatah vote for Hamas? I think this shows to a certain extent what you see in a lot of other political systems. The protest vote tends to gravitate towards the largest opposition party, rather than to smaller and more marginal ones, even if those smaller and more marginal parties are those that more accurately represent many of the voters. When you want to give the ruling party a bloody nose, you vote for the strongest opponent – I think that is what happened here.

Hamas' victory surprised Hamas, perhaps more than anyone else. It's quite clear, some of their claims notwithstanding, that they had no idea that they were going to do this well, certainly not that they would win more than fifty percent of the seats. I think the result which really has significance is not so much that Hamas got more seats than Fatah, but that it got more than half the seats in the legislature. They are clearly unprepared for it, because I think if you look at their strategy of political integration, the dominant trend within Hamas was one of gradual integration as an opposition party. You contest

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the elections, you hope to enter the legislature as a powerful opposition, you probably avoid taking a government seat and formal responsibility and power, and you spend a year looking at the pros and cons, benefits, advantages, and disadvantages of being within the Palestinian political system. Once that period is over, then you begin looking at the next phase. Has it been positive and rewarding enough that you begin

to enter government or has it been such a disappointment that you should take a step back? Now all these considerations are off the table. They are no longer in a position not to enter government. That would be a betrayal of their constituents, first of all, to have gotten more than half the seats and then continue to act like an opposition party. Results do have influence on such debates.

I think another thing that this election showed was that in Palestinian politics, at least for the time being, there is no third force. It essentially has become a two-party system.

CHOREV: What have been the reactions to the election results in the Arab and Muslim world?

RABBANI: There are different responses in different states and in the different constituencies within those states. On the whole, the fear of the regimes on the official level is that the next time you have elections you could get these opposition parties (like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) much more emboldened and demanding perhaps to contest all the seats. I think the short answer to your question is that the attitude is very much of wait and see. You have many people who on the one hand don't want to see the Islamic democratic model in the Arab world succeed, for any number of reasons. At the same time they feel the key issue is to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the integration of Hamas into politics offers a unique opportunity to do so. That may trump their personal feelings.

CHOREV: Has the Palestinian public turned towards Islamism? Does this election result represent a growing trend toward Islamism in the Muslim world, or can Hamas' election be perceived as, in fact, the more pragmatic choice rather than one related to an ideological shift?

RABBANI: As far as the Palestinian public is concerned, there has been an "Islamicization" of Palestinian society. It coincided with the rise of Hamas since the late 1980s. I would say to a significant extent this also reflects the realities of, first of all, the occupation, and second of all, the frustration of Palestinians with the failures of the Oslo process. These issues are all extremely contextual – you can't make general statements without looking at what is the environment in which these developments are taking place, and also concluding that in a different environment, in a different context, these things may either not have happened, or would have happened differently, or may in fact have proceeded in an opposite direction.

CHOREV: What will success mean for Hamas?

RABBANI: From Hamas' point of view, success will be defined by their ability to win the next election. That will mean pursuing policies in the next four years, or until the next election, so that they can demonstrate to their electorate that they made true on their promises. From the point of view of their electorate, it's more complicated. I think because of the very restrictive political space that exists, because there is no peace process, because there is no expectation that things are going to move, and because Hamas is not seen as responsible for that, it will not be held responsible for the absence of the peace process. I think expectations of Hamas are not extremely high. The challenge for Hamas from the point of view of their electorate is to

demonstrate that a Hamas-led Palestinian Authority will be a different one than the Fatah-lead PA. Issues of good governance are likely to dominate.

CHOREV: What will be the relationship between the Hamas leaders in exile and those in power?

RABBANI: This is a difficult question to answer. In general, I would say that the political differences that exist within Hamas tend to not neatly reflect organizational location, i.e. whether you are in the military wing or political wing, inside or outside. In Fatah, the politics of location seem to be playing a central role in political discussions. If you look at how Hamas played it since the election victory, it shows that it remains on the whole a much more disciplined and coherent movement than Fatah. For example, there seems to be now a clear division of labor within Hamas, where the inside leadership is responsible for the PA and the outside is responsible for foreign relations. If you look at these visits that this organization has been making to Egypt, Turkey, Russia, the Gulf states, and the like, these delegations tend generally to be led by the leading members of the politburo who are based in Syria. If you look at negotiations about the composition of the Palestinian government, those are being led by the leadership inside, particularly in the Gaza Strip. This suggests a level of coherence we haven't seen in Palestinian politics for quite some time.

CHOREV: What do you expect the relationship to be between Hamas and other Islamic parties in the region now that Hamas is in power?

RABBANI: If you look at this historically, especially with Iran and Hezbollah, the primary relationship has tended to be with Islamic Jihad (IJ) rather than with Hamas. There are a number of reasons for this. Both Hamas and IJ emerged out of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, but Islamic Jihad emerged first, in the early 1980s. This was largely out of opposition to the political strategy being pursued by the Brotherhood at that time, which was one of general political passivity. To a certain extent, IJ modeled itself after the Iranian revolution. It was established very much as a revolutionary movement, and its relationships, especially with Hezbollah, have on the whole been closer than the relationship between Hamas and Hezbollah. But what you've seen, I think, in the last decade, is that Hamas has become a much bigger movement. IJ is almost a revolutionary vanguard movement; it pays, at best, limited attention to issues such as political mobilization and to building a mass popular base, social services, and so on. Hamas on the other

hand, is a mass political movement and is much more powerful.

I think you now see Iran and Hezbollah paying much more attention to Hamas and providing it with significantly more support. One of the rumors during the election campaign was that Hezbollah was making financial transfers to various Al-Aqsa Brigades' cells affiliated with the Fatah movement, with the simple message, "Do not sabotage the elections!" Very clearly, in that way, they came out in support of Hamas.

CHOREV: Would you expect to see Fatah fracture along an old-guard/young-guard divide?

RABBANI: Is there a generational conflict in Fatah? Of course there is. There is no political organization on earth that does not have a generational conflict. We've heard about old guards and new guards in Syria, Iran, and even in the US Republican party. The question, I don't think, is whether there's a generational conflict within Fatah; the question is if this defines the nature of political competition within Fatah. I would say, if you look at Fatah today, it has become so fragmented that you can't identify or divide the political and institutional constituencies into just two, and certainly not an old guard and a young guard. I think perhaps it is more useful to conceive of Fatah as a pyramid where you have different levels and different blocks within each level. Not only is each level more or less in competition with every other level above or below, but you have every block within every level capable of

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making competing alliances with any number of other blocks in any of the other levels. That means that the alliances that exist today are not necessarily the same ones that you had yesterday or that you will have tomorrow.

CHOREV: What do you make of Fatah's younger elements' tacit alliance with Hamas in the second *intifada*?

RABBANI: Well again, if you insist on characterizing Fatah in terms of generations, there are in fact at least three if not four. You have the founding generation of Arafat; the second generation of people who joined the movement in the 1960s and 1970s, who mainly experienced the movement

in exile, particularly Jordan and Lebanon; and the third generation of people who cut their political teeth in the Occupied Territories, like Marwan Barghouti, Mohammed Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub. The latter are almost without exception described as the leaders of the first uprising in the Occupied Territories. But excuse me, Barghouti, Dahlan, and Rajoub. spent the first uprising – certainly the last five if not all of its six years—in Tunis because they were deported by the Israelis! To say that somehow these people were field commanders of the uprising is factually inaccurate. The alleged young guard are people who have an average age well into their forties in a society more than sixty percent of which is below thirty, so the phrase ‘young guard’ does not really resonate with reality. And then you have a fourth generation that was formed by the years of Oslo in the 1990s. Its institutional expression, if you want to give it one, is the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades [which was] established during the current uprising.

There are alliances between elements in Fatah and elements in Hamas. I don't think you can characterize those within Fatah that have engaged in such an alliance as representing a particular generation. But what it comes down to is that there are two agendas, one of which seeks greater political power within the Fatah movement at the expense of those who currently hold it. They see an alliance with Hamas as perhaps the most effective method of reducing the powers that be in the Fatah movement. Then you have others who support a tacit alliance with Hamas in the context of what you may call a “project for a new national movement,” meaning you have an alliance between those who would like to have a more militant content within Fatah and those that would like to see more nationalist content within Hamas.

If you are going to talk about alliances between elements within Fatah and elements within Hamas, the most obvious one, at least in my mind, has been the tacit alliance between Abu Mazen and Hamas. Abu Mazen's strategy, apart from his general strategy of accommodation with Israel, rebuilding the relationship with the US, implementation of the road map, and seeking legitimacy for the new Palestinian leadership after Arafat by means of elections, quite clearly, was one of using the strength of Hamas to demolish power centers within the Fatah movement obstructing his agenda. He has been perhaps too successful. At the end of the day, Abu Mazen is not a Fatah organizational man, and he may well be much less bothered by Hamas' electoral victory than many others within Fatah are, because to him whether the Prime Minister is from Hamas or Fatah does not matter, as long as it is a cooperative person. He probably feels that whoever will be the next prime minister could never be worse than Abu Ala.

CHOREV: The most prominent voices calling for reform, accountability and democratization in the Muslim world today are coming from Islamist groups. Do you believe this is simply a tactic to gain power, whereby the Islamist parties will dismantle the democratic process once they have come to power, or do you think this growing movement reflects a genuine shift in Islamist ideologies towards greater integration of democratic ideals with Islam?

RABBANI: It depends. I tend towards the view that the way in which people achieve power tends to determine, or at the very least significantly influence, the way they deal with their removal from power. That probably has a greater effect than ideology. If you look for example at Iran, the Iranian regime has elections, but the Islamic regime in Iran achieved its position through a popular revolution, and therefore it's unlikely to relinquish power and to allow for a constitutional transformation of Iran through the ballot box. People who tend to achieve office through coups tend to leave only

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because of coups or natural causes. People who tend to achieve power through democratic elections tend to accept being voted out of power by democratic elections as well. My suspicion is that there is an added complication in Palestine. Palestinian politics has historically been very pluralistic. There are many reasons for this, but one important one is that

we are not talking about a sovereign state, where you have a regime that can basically impose a dictatorship on the people. The only time you had anything approaching that was in the 1990s in the Occupied Territories. It is going to be very difficult, I think, for Hamas to play the same tricks as Fatah, like postponing legislative elections for half a decade, unless they also have solid international support.

CHOREV: How do you explain the underwhelming performance of the “Third Force”, or civil society groups, in these elections?

RABBANI: One thing that this election showed is how damaging the transformation of Palestinian civil society during the 1990s has been. If you look at the way Palestinian civil society was organized in the 1970s and 1980s, you had mass popular organizations affiliated with the various Palestinian political movements. For example, you had women’s organizations affiliated

with the Popular Front, with Fatah, with the Communist Party. These were basically popular organizations with grassroots constituencies, although it is true they tended to be more involved in national politics than in the agendas and interests of their sectoral constituencies. In the 1990s we saw the so-called “professionalization” of the NGO sector which has meant that they more or less lost contact with their constituents and responded more to the priorities of the development industry of Northwest Europe. And who stepped into the fray very effectively? The Islamist civil society affiliated with Hamas. They were the genuine grassroots organization. So I don’t think that you can say as a result of these elections that civil society did not play a role. It did, it just wasn’t the civil society everyone expected.

CHOREV: If you had the ear of the Israeli PM what would you say?

RABBANI: I don’t. I’m also of the opinion anything I might say would go in one ear and out the other, at the speed of sound. My view is the following: I think you have an emerging, broad Israeli political consensus in favor of unilateralism. Unilateralism means, at least to many of those viewing it from the West, the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. This is certainly a part of it, but it’s part of something much more significant, and I would say much more dangerous. Unilateralism means you do not negotiate your borders with your neighbors, you impose them. Now if you think about this happening in Europe or Southeast Asia, the idea that one state can simply draw its own borders by force of arms, without so much as sending a postcard to its neighbors to inform them, would be considered an outrageous and thoroughly unacceptable idea, if not an act of war. Yet that is precisely what is happening today in the West Bank. With the construction of the separation barrier, Israel has taken over more land in the West Bank over the past two years than it has evacuated in the Gaza Strip.

The real issue now is if we are heading towards the demise of the two-state settlement as a result of the implementation of the unilateral approach. My fear is that with a combination of a unilateralist government in power in Israel, and Hamas in power in the PA, you could potentially have a dangerous development, because Hamas’ ideological approach is to distinguish between what they call the interim-solution and what they call the long-term solution. The interim solution is a two-state settlement and the long-term solution is an Islamic Palestine. I think they have, in practice, given up on the idea that they are somehow going to turn all of historic Palestine into an Islamic state. That notwithstanding, if you are not committed to a two-state settlement as the permanent settlement of this conflict, then you are

likely to attach less importance to where the borders of such an arrangement are going to be. If it's an interim stage, who cares if it's the Green Line, or the wall, or whatever? If this does indeed happen, it is then in my view only a matter of time before the conflict starts again. And we are not talking about a conflict where your alternatives are limited to a two-state settlement or a bi-national state. The more likely alternative would be an existential conflict. At that point, we are back to where we were before 1967. That is where I see things heading. I think Israel, at the end of the day, has to make its choice whether the occupation is going to end or not. Perhaps more importantly, the international community needs to make this choice as well. I see few if any positive signs in this regard. If the occupation is not going to end, there are going to be consequences.