

Palestinian Power-Struggle: Siege Within

By [Ramzy Baroud](#)

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It is no secret that the Palestinian people have always struggled with the problem of impotent, self-seeking leaderships, who have historically invested far greater time fending for their own status and position at the helm — however worthless — than representing the legitimate rights and aspirations of an occupied nation. Alas, the present fails to deviate from that role, although it offers an unprecedented lesson.

To differ is only human, indeed. But when political and ideological differences within the Palestinian leadership milieu turn into wide chasms that split further an already weakened and oppressed society in urgent need of national cohesion — amid incessant and sadly successful attempts to splinter its national identity — then one must dare question the wisdom and merit of such leadership that would allow for, in fact, instigate such a travesty.

The current leadership struggle in Palestine is an illustration of the misguided priorities of Palestinian leaders, and for once, Palestinians must possess the courage to realise and confront it.

It has been well established that the current Hamas-led government was a direct manifestation of the democratic choice of the Palestinian people; a choice that was fought resolutely by an alliance that encompasses the United States and other Western allies, Israel and a few Arab governments. It was not the transparency of the elections they have rejected, rather the outcome. Each party in that alliance had good reason to disallow genuine Palestinian democracy — from their own self-absorbed viewpoint.

Of course, that rejection was not a mere political position, but quickly translated to the withholding of aid to the Palestinian government, needed to run the affairs of an occupied nation, robbed blind and collectively punished by Israel, a nation that lives, for obvious reasons, under utter economic dependency. With over 160,000 civil servants not receiving their paychecks, however meagre, or the last seven months, the Palestinian economy has descended into chaos.

The UN special rapporteur on human rights in the occupied territories told the UN Human Rights Council on September 26 that the Gaza Strip — ironically the ‘liberated’ part of the territories — has sunken into the most severe crisis in 13 years. “The Palestinian people have been subjected to economic sanctions — the first time an occupied people has been so treated,” he said. He also warned that the West Bank is also on the verge of an imminent humanitarian crisis because of the 700km-long Israeli Separation Wall. What is taking place in the West Bank is ethnic cleaning, he said, “but political correctness forbids such language where Israel is concerned.” Dugard’s heart-wrenching view is wholly in line with similar reports coming out from the occupied territories.

While Western media reports tend to focus on the political scuffling between the Hamas government and Fatah, the once dominant party of President Mahmoud Abbas, the humanitarian crisis is duly ignored. If not for the sensitive and perceptive reporting of a few individual journalists such as Amira Hass of the Israeli daily Haaretz and Donald Macintyre of the British Independent, the untold suffering of the Palestinian people would have gone completely unnoticed. (Raja Khalidi's September 22 piece in the British Guardian, 'It Can Only Get Worse' revealed most devastating statistics regarding the direness of the Palestinian economy. Gaza however remains the most intense example where, according to Dugard, three-quarters of its 1.4 million residents are now dependent on direct food aid).

However, it must be admitted that while the inhumanity and apathy towards the plight of the Palestinians is part-and-parcel of the West's general attitude toward that historically ill-treated nation, thanks to internal Palestinian division and ineffectual power-struggles, Palestinians are being reduced and humiliated with the full cooperation of their own leadership.

History is rife with examples, starting with the Palestinian failure to devise a legible strategy to face the Zionist colonial project in the early half of the last century: with a dirty power-struggle quickly surfacing between the Husseini and Nashashibi families, both claiming to be true representatives of Palestinians, the latter labelled a 'moderate' while the rest were designated extremists and terrorists. History has repeated itself, many times and so cruelly since then, and many segments of the Palestinian people, whether in Palestine or outside either willingly or out of desperation for a platform to resist, fell victim to factional and sub-factional divisions. Dissension, disunity and discord had indeed become Palestinians' worse enemy. While Israel cleverly capitalised on these divisions, various Arab capitals played a similar game, buying political allegiances with hard cash.

Facing an endless campaign of military violence and all sorts of collective punishment, Palestinians in the occupied territories and the equally wretched dwellers of refugee camps in Diaspora, had little choice but to hold on their straw-man leaderships, which grew incredibly wealthy, detached and hardly representative of the people and their true aspirations.

In recent years, particularly under the Oslo dictates, the Palestinian leadership upgraded its status to that of Israel's iron fist and most faithful prison guard, in exchange for special privileges to its members of old and emerging elites. Though this episode presumably came to an end in the legislative elections that brought a new government to power in March 2006, the Palestinian people are being pressured to repent and return to the status quo, corrupt or not, so long as Israel is satisfied with the outcome.

Mainstream Fatah is desperate to reclaim its past position, even if unity with Hamas means the sparing of the Palestinians further humiliation and misery. Hamas, wrangling with the taxing nature of politics, is sending mixed messages, injudicious ones from abroad, and more realistic, yet often indecisive ones at home. Both Fatah and Hamas are allowing their desire for self-preservation and advancement to supplant the self-preservation of the Palestinian national unity, or whatever remains of it.

It's most poignant that such a reminder is hardly emanating from among Palestinian leaders and intellectuals — many of them immersed in the illusive power struggle — but from journalists like Amira Hass, who concluded a recent article (Missing the Government of Thieves) with a distressing reminder: "Apparently both movements are now competing for

power and are forgetting that their job is to shorten the days of foreign Israeli rule over their people.”

Palestinians are long used to betrayal and indifference; but being let down by one’s own leadership is most painful, indeed.

Ramzy Baroud’s latest book: The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People’s Struggle (Pluto Press, London) is now available on Amazon.com. He can be reached at ramzybaroud@hotmail.com

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