

The Next Palestinian Struggle

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Global Research, September 22, 2006
22 September 2006

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

LONDON – An expert in international law and an old friend of the Palestinian people wrote me with utter distress a few days after Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ismael Haniyeh were reported to have reached an agreement Sept. 11 to form a national unity government. The content of his message was alarming, especially coming from an objective American academic who was involved in the drafting of past Palestinian national documents. “The Palestinian people were being set up,” was the underlying meaning of his message. To know why, here is a bit of context.

The Palestinian declaration of independence of 1988 in Algeria was structured in a way that would allow the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Executive Committee to devise foreign policy, thus representing the Palestinian people in any future settlements with Israel. The signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993 and onward demoted the function of the Executive Committee and eventually undermined the import of the PLO altogether, concentrated the power in the hands of a few at the helm of the Palestinian Authority (PA): the late President Yasser Arafat and a clique of business contractors and ex-revolutionaries turned wartime profiteers.

That combination destroyed the achievements of the first Palestinian uprising of 1987-1993 in ways that Israel could only dream of: It cemented a faintly existing class society, destroyed the impressive national unity achieved by the Palestine-based leadership of various parties, hijacked the people’s struggle, reducing it to mere slogans, and damaged Palestinian credibility regionally and internationally. Israel, of course, enjoyed the spectacle, as Palestinians bickered endlessly and as the PA’s security carried out daily onslaughts against those who opposed the autocratic methods of the government, desperately trying to demonstrate its worthiness to Israel and the United States.

The PA, itself a political construct of various Fatah blocs, had its own share of squabbling, which culminated at times in street fights and assassinations. Abbas, then, was of the opinion that if Arafat refused to share power, the Fatah dispute would exasperate and could lead to a failed government. Both the U.S. and Israel backed Abbas, hardly for his democratic posture, but with the hope that Abbas would hand over the little remaining political “concessions” that Arafat wouldn’t, a sin that cost Arafat his freedom in his later years.

But events in the Middle East often yield the exact opposite of what the U.S. and Israel push for. Though Abbas was elected president a few months after Arafat’s passing in November 2004, he needed some political legitimacy to negotiate or renegotiate Palestinian rights with Israel. That hope was dashed by the Parliamentary elections of January 2006, which brought in a Hamas-led government two months later. The U.S., Europe and Canada responded with

a most inhumane economic siege, and a promise to punish anyone daring enough to aid the Palestinian economy in any way. Succumbing to pressure, even Arab neighbors helped ensure the tightness of the siege. Some in Fatah seemed also determined to ensure the collapse of the government even if at the expense of ordinary Palestinians. The so-called liberated Gaza, once hoped to be the cornerstone of Palestinian independence, was deliberately turned into a hub of lawlessness and violence, where hired guns ruled the streets, threatening the safety of an already crushed people.

Palestinian morgues mounted with bodies when Israel unleashed its tactlessly termed Summer Rain, an intensive military onslaught that killed 291 Palestinians in the months of July and August alone. The atrocious one-sided war was justified to the Israeli public as a humanitarian endeavor to save the life of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier captured in June by Palestinian militants wishing to exert pressure on Israel to ease its deadly economic siege.

Palestinians, though browbeaten and fatigued — denied salaries, physically besieged, politically isolated — were desperately trying to shield their democratic choice. The issue by then had transcended to that of Hamas, Fatah and their ideological differences, to that of a nation denied the right to make its own choices, to choose its representatives and hold them to account.

But Hamas, too, was learning the harsh reality of being in the position of leadership. Unlike Arafat, Hamas wanted to seek support from its Arab and Muslim milieu, the devastatingly unexplored strategic alliances undermined by the PA's reliance on the West. But even Hamas itself seemed unaware of the extent of weakness and political deficiency of the Arabs and Muslims, who could barely assert their own rights, much less that of the Palestinians. Hamas learned, the hard way, that the U.S.' rapport with Israel would hardly weaken even if an entire nation must go hungry and hospitals run out of badly needed medicine. That hard lesson in real politic is what the Palestinian government is now scrambling to learn, amid dismay and confusion.

It was within this context that Abbas and Haniyeh convened in intense discussions to form a coalition government. Abbas — and mainstream Fatah behind him — must have realized that the harder Hamas is hit, the stronger its popular support grows, thus undermining Fatah's own chances of political recovery. Although Hamas has called for a national unity government from the start, it did so from a position of strength, and with a hint of arrogance. Now a national unity government is its only outlet to the world: without it, neither its survival, as a relevant political movement, nor achieving any of its declared objectives are as secured as it may have seemed in the heat of victory. Moreover, a generation of already malnourished children are facing a formidable humanitarian crisis; something had to be done.

But amid the rush to form a government, key questions won't be laid to rest: Who will speak on behalf of the Palestinian people internationally? Who will formulate their foreign-policy agenda? And who will be entrusted with the task of defending or redefining their national constants — the refugees' right of return, the end to the Israeli occupation, preserving their water rights, removal of all settlements, borders, etc? Will it be Abbas, chairman of the PLO, or the elected legislative council and government?

This quandary was the cause of distraught for my friend, and should be for anyone who wishes to see a real and lasting peace. If any peace settlement fails to adhere to the democratic concept, according to which Palestinians wish to govern themselves, then

Palestinians should ready themselves for another Oslo-style agreement, imposed from the top and rubber stamped by the PLO's Executive Committee, long-devoid of its democratic principles and dominated by the elitist few.

I, too, am worried. The Palestinian democratic experience should not be squandered again.

Ramzy Baroud's latest book: "The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle" (Pluto Press, London) is now available.

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