

Fatah Resurrected

By Khalil Shikaki

For the last nine years, the Israelis have argued that the peace process could not move forward because the Palestinian leadership was weak, governance was dysfunctional, and the capacity and willingness to deliver security were absent. Moreover, there was no clear honest broker willing to trade in peace. Now, all that may be about to change.

The Palestinian nationalist old guard has been democratically ousted from power; the day of the young guard has finally arrived. Fatah, the largest nationalist group, held its sixth party congress in August—the first such meeting in twenty years—and elected a new leadership. The new leadership is much stronger than the old one, made up of more powerful and more popular figures. They are younger. They are educated. They were born and raised in the Palestinian territories. They are determined to push for a more moderate Hamas and to work toward peace with Israel. Security and governance in the West Bank has never been better. The current Palestinian leadership enjoys full control over the security services, something that has not happened since the 1993 Oslo accords. This is no longer the fragmented, dysfunctional Palestinian Authority of old.

Sitting atop this new Fatah is Mahmoud Abbas. The question now is can this old-

guard politician lead the party and the Palestinian Authority (PA)¹? Will the young leadership serve as a challenge rather than a bolstering force? And as the Palestinians approach a presidential and parliamentary election in 2010, will this reinvigorated party be able to wrest some control from Hamas in the Gaza Strip and reunite the Palestinian territories? With a functioning leadership so key to the peace process, Israel and the United States have a role to play in either undercutting the power and legitimacy of Abbas or finally securing a negotiating partner. Abbas and the new leadership of Fatah are the best chance for peace in a decade, and if the opportunity is squandered, we may well not see another one for the next ten years.

President Abbas understood that Fatah was facing a crisis of legitimacy. Plagued by accusations of corruption, incompetence and mismanagement, the older leadership of Fatah took the movement from one fail-

¹ The Palestinian Authority is an interim body set up by the Oslo accords to manage security and civilian affairs in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip until negotiations with Israel are completed. Abbas is also chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Executive Committee. The PLO is the umbrella organization for all Palestinian factions with the exception of the Islamist Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The PLO declared the establishment of a Palestinian state in 1988, and since then, its Executive Committee has served as the de facto government.

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ure to another. Fatah's inability to transform the Gaza Strip's chaos and lawlessness into order and prosperity in the aftermath of the unilateral Israeli withdrawal in September 2005, its electoral defeat at the hands of its Islamist rival Hamas in January 2006 and its subsequent loss of the Gaza Strip to Hamas's armed militia in June 2007 exposed what seemed to many to be a spent political force. The younger generation began calling for a fundamental change in direction—they were, and still are, seeking to reface the party, claiming to want to do this by solidifying it as a highly functioning, democratic, economic and social movement committed to peace with Israel. If these calls went unheeded, a revolt within the party was imminent. For Fatah to become a unified force once again and have a chance against Hamas in the 2010 elections, change was necessary. The time was ripe for a party congress.

The main goal of Abbas and the congress was to vote in eighteen new members to the Fatah Central Committee (FCC), the organization's executive body. Infighting ensued. Struggling to maintain their grasp on power, members of the old guard wanted the delegates at the congress (who would vote in the new leadership) to be members of their ranks, pushing to cap the number of invitees at around six hundred fifty. The younger generation called for thousands of delegates to be in attendance, in the hopes that new voices would push out the antiquated leaders. Abbas knew he needed a compromise or faced a coup. In the end, the FCC was voted on by some two thousand three hundred delegates, and the up-and-

comers wrested control from the old guard.

The very nature of these delegates shows how different Fatah is today as a representational force; indicative of the future of the Palestinian territories, and what Fatah perceives itself to be. A survey conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR, an organization I head) found that in polls of the majority of the delegates during the August meeting, the new leadership was elected by a congress unlike any other in the history of the movement. It was this development that allowed the dramatic shift in power. Delegates to all previous congresses came almost entirely from the diaspora. This time, more than three-quarters of the delegates came from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (WBGs)—in fact, 64 percent were born in the WBGs while about 14 percent became residents of the WBGs after 1993 when the Oslo agreement, the first direct accord between Israelis and Palestinians, was signed—and less than a quarter came from abroad, mostly from Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Only 9 percent of all delegates came from refugee camps.

The change marks a significant transformation of the movement, long in the making, away from the interests and concerns of the diaspora to those of the insiders, those who reside in the Palestinian territories themselves. Greater focus can now be expected on issues related to ending the Israeli occupation (such as freezing settlement construction) and state building (such as strengthening institutions, growing the economy and increasing good governance). It also means that now 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. And this applies too to the demographic makeup of the new power players.

The median age at the sixth party congress was fifty for males and forty-five for females. Although no women were elected to the FCC, about 13 percent of the delegates were female. This is a significant change from the past when very few women were able to take an active role in the movement's politics. And almost all the delegates had previous political or security experience in-country. In past congresses, delegates were mostly members of or linked to the movement's armed wing. Many also had connections to Fatah's military and political infrastructure in its days as a guerrilla group. This time, only 20 percent came from a military institution, and mostly from PA security services deployed in the West Bank, which are distinct from the armed wing of the movement's guerilla days. Another 30 percent worked in PA civil institutions while 8 percent worked in Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) institutions abroad. In other words, only 40 percent did not work for PA or PLO civil and military institutions. For these delegates, the future well-being of these institutions is a matter of personal, not just national, commitment. Delegates were highly educated; over 80 percent had a BA degree or higher, a level never obtained in any of the previous congresses. In a society that places a high value on education, Fatah can now present the public with a much more attractive leadership, one that can more easily win elections.

Since most of the delegates have been socialized in a context of pluralistic Palestinian politics under occupation, belief in democracy was significant. When looking at the appropriateness of various Middle Eastern political systems for application to

Palestine, the overwhelming majority of the delegates (91–95 percent) rejected—saw as inappropriate—arrangements like those in Iran (where only religious parties compete in a parliamentary system), Saudi Arabia (where Islamic law is applied and no political parties or elections are allowed), and Syria (where a strong president rules with the support of the military and party competition is limited or irrelevant). Instead, close to two-thirds selected as appropriate (and 12 percent selected as somewhat appropriate) a democratic political system, like the ones in Israel, Turkey and Lebanon, in which all types of political parties compete in free elections. The overwhelming majority of those who chose none of the Middle Eastern political systems selected instead a European or North American model. While delegates felt free to criticize and point out the existence of corruption in their movement, the majority expressed the belief that Fatah practices democracy inside its institutions. This is probably one of the most significant changes in Fatah. For the old guard, socialized in authoritarian Arab political culture, an Israeli model would have been rejected out of hand and a Syrian, or a similar Arab model, would have been embraced. Support for a democratic system is deepening.

Interestingly, neither support for peace nor commitment to violence was important in electing candidates to the Fatah leadership. The overwhelming majority of delegates indicated that the motivation for their vote was instead historic record, reputation, education, and known support for reforms and the fight against corruption. But the conflict with Hamas made a huge impact on the perception of the delegates and influenced their votes—hawkish opponents of Hamas did very well. While the official statement issued by the congress affirmed the commitment to a speedy reconciliation with Hamas and reunification of the

WBGs, the PSR poll found an overwhelming majority expressing concern that Hamas's control over the Gaza Strip is entrenched and that geopolitical separation will become permanent. An overwhelming majority supported Abbas's demand that Hamas agree that a national-unity government must accept all agreements signed with Israel, a demand Hamas has steadfastly rejected. Ninety-three percent viewed Hamas as a coup d'état movement; only 5 percent viewed it as a "resistance movement" or a "partner in the struggle." The perception that Hamas is such a significant threat to Fatah did not lead the young guard to reject the movement as a political actor, but it does reduce the chances that Fatah would willingly allow Hamas to rebuild its armed militia in the West Bank. Fatah's determina-

tionist tendencies of the old guard would probably have denied Hamas a viable role in Palestinian politics regardless of its views on the peace process. Under such conditions, it would probably have been impossible to create a stable and democratic political system. This is no longer the case.

But there is a push and pull in the movement: while the congress fully supported diplomacy and the two-state solution, belief in the efficacy of violence was high. And this means the future of the peace process—and the current calm—remains very much in the balance. Two-thirds indicated support for the view that armed confrontations have helped Palestinians achieve national rights in ways that negotiations could not. Moreover, willingness to compromise on the various issues of the per-



tion to convince Hamas to accept existing peace agreements as a precondition for its integration into the Palestinian political system might eventually push Hamas toward moderation. The nondemocratic and exclu-

manent settlement were low; for example, only one-quarter was willing to endorse the Geneva Initiative, the only joint, non-governmental permanent-status agreement reached between moderate Palestinian and

Israeli activists. But while the official statement of the congress indicated a rejection of the Israeli demand for recognition of Israel as a state for the Jewish people, many (43 percent) of the delegates were in fact willing to accept that demand, but only after all issues of the conflict, including the status of Jerusalem and refugees, have been resolved. In other words, if the Israeli demand is not presented as a precondition and if it is not meant to preempt the resolution of substantive issues of the conflict, many seem willing to accept it. The potential for resolution is high.

In the end, the delegates voted in leaders who reflected their beliefs, beliefs that are centered around building democracy, stemming corruption and moving toward a permanent peace agreement with Israel.

Like the delegates who voted them to power, most of the new leaders were born and raised in the WBGs; they derive their legitimacy and popularity from home-grown, grassroots support, something the older leadership lacked. The new group is much younger, no longer made up of politicians in their seventies. Some of the new members are in their forties, and most are now in their fifties and sixties, representing those who led the struggle in the WBGs of the 1980s rather than the diaspora leaders of the '60s and '70s. In other words, rather than being diaspora commanders of armed struggle, many of the new members have been leaders of both the first and second intifadas, as well as builders of local civil and political institutions and NGOs.

The most well-known of these new leaders may well be the imprisoned Marwan Barghouti, a top political leader active in both the first and second intifadas and member of the Palestinian parliament who is currently serving five life sentences in Israel on terrorism charges. As a fifty year old with a master's degree in international rela-

tions, he is like many members of the new guard; Barghouti has gone through all of this and is now more of a pragmatist, supporting the two-state solution.

Negotiators from rounds of talks with Israel—from the days of the Madrid conference in 1991, the Oslo accords in 1993–99, Camp David in 2000 and the Annapolis process in 2007–08—such as Saeb Erekat, Mohammed Ishtayeh and Hussein al-Shaikh also find themselves in leadership positions. Indeed, Erekat, with a PhD in political science, is the head of the PLO Negotiations Affairs Department. Ishtayeh has contributed to Palestinian-Israeli economic agreements since Oslo. And al-Shaikh has experience managing PA-Israel civil affairs. This is a positive in the likelihood-for-peace column.

There are also former heads of the security services like forty-eight-year-old Muhammad Dahlan, who was born a refugee in Gaza in 1961 and became Abbas's erstwhile national-security adviser and an outspoken critic of Yasir Arafat, Fatah's former head. Dahlan, a current member of the Palestinian parliament, served as head of the Preventive Security Service in the Gaza Strip in the mid-1990s when Arafat ordered a comprehensive crackdown on Hamas for carrying out suicide attacks inside Israel in February and March 1996. Jibril Rajoub, born in the West Bank, has a master's degree in Israeli studies and is currently head of the Palestinian Olympic Committee. He served as the chief of the Preventive Security Service in the West Bank while Dahlan was in the Gaza Strip, implementing similar measures against Hamas's military infrastructure in the West Bank. Tawfik Tirawi served as head of the General Intelligence Service in the West Bank and has been known for taking highly hawkish views regarding Hamas. It is these types of leaders that will make certain that Hamas's reintegration into the Palestinian political system will contribute

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to its moderation and ensure it is disarmed.

In rejuvenating Fatah, the congress helped it deal with its two most critical internal threats: weak leadership authority and fragmentation. These two defects were responsible for Fatah's decline. The weak standing of Fatah's leadership allowed open dissent—indeed, rebellion—widespread corruption, distrust and incompetence to dominate its politics, its management of the Palestinian Authority and its handling of relations with Israel. Fatah's old leadership lacked credibility and authority, not only among Palestinians but also among Israelis. With a united leadership that enjoys popular support, Fatah is finally in a position to reengage Hamas, regain control of the Gaza Strip, and work toward peace.

A strengthening of the leadership is not the only major change in the PA. The West Bank has been pulled back from the brink of chaos.

Serving under Abbas is a new, popular, young-guard prime minister, Salam Fayyad—an ally who has created a better functioning, better governed PA. And this is of course the Israelis' second precondition for peace.

Abbas could not have been luckier in finding Fayyad; had he instead selected one of his own old-guard colleagues for the job, the situation in the West Bank today would be a sad one, with the government's performance not much better than that of Hamas's dreadful showing in Gaza. Corruption, mismanagement, incompetence and a lack of control over security services would probably have continued as in the

past. Although Fayyad's performance is not without flaws, the progress made cannot be overstated.

Since June 2007, when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip by force, Prime Minister Fayyad, a political independent, has become the second-most important figure in Palestinian politics. Born in the West Bank in 1952, Fayyad earned his doctorate in economics from the University of Texas at Austin and worked as the IMF's resident representative in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Even though most Palestinians see him as a technocrat rather than a politician, he has emerged over the past two years as a first-rate professional, a doer, and a man who takes matters into his own hands and does not run away from responsibility. While most of Abbas's old-guard colleagues never stop whining about their Palestinian victimhood, always blaming Israel and its supporters in the international community for the misery of their people, Fayyad sees Palestinians as having the power to change their own conditions, if only they put their minds to it.

Internally, the government of Fayyad, fully supported by Abbas and Fatah, has deftly managed Palestinian public finance and strengthened public institutions. Service delivery in the West Bank has never been better. Taxes are collected and economic activities are thriving. Courts are doing better than ever before, and people who avoided the justice system in the past are turning to it to resolve disputes. Order has been restored to levels never before seen in the PA. Police investigate crimes, and the perception of personal and family safety



and security is showing considerable improvement, probably better than ever. Public perception of corruption, which in the past doomed Fatah's chances of winning parliamentary elections, is going in the right direction.

And on security too, Fayyad and Fatah have improved the on-the-ground situation by leaps and bounds. Palestinians in the West Bank now have better-organized, -managed, -trained and -led forces. There is a clearer chain of command in the security services with visibly stronger and fuller control by Abbas and Fayyad. And forces are better confronting and disarming elements from within Fatah, as well as launching more effective and sustained crackdowns on the military infrastructure of other groups, most notably Hamas. In fact, the newly structured and trained forces have moved

against at least three of Hamas's four infrastructures in the West Bank: the military, the financial and, to some extent, the social. Hamas's West Bank political leadership, however, has been spared, not only because of the young guard's inclusionist tendencies and the huge electoral legitimacy the group enjoys, but also due to the desire to prevent a similar crackdown by Hamas on Fatah's political leadership and networks in the Gaza Strip.

Moreover, there is greater security coordination with the Israeli army than at any time during the past decade. The outcome of all of this is not only greater enforcement of order in the West Bank, but also a level of calm never before seen in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Perhaps as important, the language of the Palestinian leadership regarding violence is no longer circumscribed: there is no

more doublespeak—or "Arafatspeak," the term favored by the Israelis when referring to Arafat's position on violence. Indeed, a review of the Palestinian media shows little of what the Israelis consider incitement to violence compared even to the best days of Oslo. Americans and Israelis acknowledge the change.

Now the Palestinians need to extend this success to the Gaza Strip by uniting the territories. This can only happen if the Fatah leadership stays united and wins the elections in 2010.

And this is where we come to the question of whether Abbas's current political strength is only temporary or whether he can consolidate his gains. While Abbas has strengthened his leadership position of late, he still confronts the ambition of two

competing centers of power: Prime Minister Fayyad from outside Fatah and Fatah's top leaders of the young guard, most notably Marwan Barghouti and Mohammad Dahlan.

Fayyad has performed splendidly. He is a man positively perceived by the public and greatly admired by the international community. Framing a recently announced two-year governmental program that focuses on institution building and the enforcement of security and order as the road map to Palestinian statehood, Fayyad managed to present himself to the public as a state builder, rather than another bureaucrat doing what Abbas, and most gravely the Israelis, want. During the past few months, Fayyad reached out to the public like never before, visiting dozens of towns and villages to inaugurate various development projects. The image he is cultivating is that of a man of the people, someone who truly cares and always delivers.

But Fayyad poses no political threat to Abbas whatsoever: despite this performance in office, Fayyad's popularity is low. Without a record in the national struggle, he can never hope to challenge Abbas, or any other Fatah leader for that matter; he can only govern on behalf of someone else, someone who has the necessary credibility. Moreover, if he ever wanted to break away from Fatah, he couldn't. His ability to build a bloc of third parties capable of challenging Fatah in elections is restrained by the fact that many of those third parties see themselves as closer to Fatah (such as the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, DFLP) or Hamas (such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, PFLP) than to him. Ironically, Fayyad too finds himself closer to Fatah, both in positions related to the peace process and governance, than to most other potential partners.

Moreover, the challenge to Abbas's leadership from the young guard is not immedi-

ate. For now, the young guard remains divided and leaderless. Of the two top young-guard leaders, Barghouti and Dahlan, it is the former who enjoys national stature. For the moment Dahlan's strength remains Gaza-based and will not easily spread into the West Bank, at least not until Fatah's control over the Gaza Strip is secured.

While in jail, Barghouti cannot compete effectively against Abbas and most of his other colleagues in the FCC. While surveys conducted by PSR since 2005 indicate that Barghouti is Fatah's greatest asset in its fight against Hamas—he is the most popular Palestinian leader and the *only* one who can easily defeat *any* Hamas candidate for the presidency—he nonetheless lacks effective party machinery. Indeed, in the FCC elections in which he was elected, Barghouti could not secure a single seat for his closest friends and loyalists.

Abbas has consolidated his control by preventing Fatah members from holding too much power. By allowing the passage of a resolution in Fatah's recent congress that bars members of the FCC from becoming members in the PA cabinet or the Executive Committee (EC), Abbas managed to strengthen Fayyad and his team (which he can risk) by reducing potential rivalry from members of the FCC (which he cannot afford). In signaling his preference for separating the PA government from Fatah, Abbas puts himself in a highly comfortable position whereby he can now manage the affairs of the PA, in agreement with Fayyad, without having to worry about the internal rivalries and scheming of his own colleagues. In doing so, and assuming he succeeds in enforcing the FCC decision, he also weakens his own colleagues and diminishes their ambition while leaving himself the only one among them in charge of the PA, its bureaucracy and security services. Now this by no means makes him an all-powerful dictator. It is the FCC that must give Abbas

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the nod to sign any deal with Israel, the EC that must give the formal approval and the PA cabinet that must implement it. And, of course, only the cabinet has the resources needed to govern and deliver services. But it certainly strengthens his position more than any move since he first took power five years ago.

The potential for an internal power struggle is still great; but not in the short run. For now, Abbas will be Fatah's candidate for the presidential elections and will remain, probably for the next few years, the dominant nationalist figure. The idea that Abbas is a spent force is unfounded.

Abbas clearly emerged from the congress a formidable political force. He won in part because he, as the elected president of the PA, provides Fatah the legitimacy it needs to govern the West Bank at a time when it lacks a parliamentary majority. Moreover, his international and regional standing puts Fatah in a privileged position vis-à-vis Hamas, which finds itself isolated. But perhaps more importantly, he won because Fatah, despite disagreeing with him on whether violence has ever been efficacious (Abbas believes that violence has been uniformly destructive to Palestinian interests), still shares his vision—for now. Abbas told the congress that diplomacy, not violence, is the Palestinian choice, and that it will bring an end to occupation and help build a Palestinian state. He argued that resorting to violence, while a right granted to Palestinians by international law, has been destructive to the Palestinian cause.

Still, to remain in power, Abbas must win the elections in 2010.

With the electoral term for the president and parliament expiring on January 25, 2010, there is an opening to rejoin the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, giving Fatah and Abbas the popular mandate they need to govern and make peace.

But the dilemma for Fatah comes from the very fact that the territories remain divided. It goes without saying that it is near impossible to hold elections when you need the cooperation of a military and political rival that does not want to see you return to power in an area they now control. In theory, Fatah and Hamas must come to some sort of reconciliation so that both parties participate in an open democratic election in the WBGS. This is certainly not a foregone conclusion. Talks are taking place but they are far from finalized, while the clock continues ticking. Abbas is thus faced with a host of unpleasant choices.

The first is simply to forego a vote, claiming that the president and the parliament can stay in office until such time as the conditions for reconciliation and reunification permit holding elections. Hamas might welcome such a step, as it buys them time to improve governance in Gaza and regain a stronghold. The Palestinian public however will not be happy, but there is little they can do in the short run to force a vote, particularly if reconciliation talks between Fatah and Hamas continue.

The second option opens up even more problems. Abbas can go ahead and hold elections without reaching any agreement with Hamas beforehand. Hamas might well boycott that election and retaliate by holding a vote of its own. Of course this, in



turn, would be boycotted by Fatah. With two parliaments, two presidents and two governments, each declaring its own legitimacy while denying it to the other, the separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip might become complete and permanent. Luckily for Abbas and the Palestinians, some sort of reconciliation agreement, while not certain, is possible; canceling elections or holding a separate West Bank vote are not Abbas's only choices.

That is because both Fatah and Hamas realize that what they may need to do is abandon the idea of getting to a reconciliation before the vote, but rather allow the vote to mold the reconciliation.

In the past, building a unity government was a prerequisite for holding elections. This would require Fatah and Hamas to agree on a host of potentially deal-breaking issues, not least of which is the status of Israel. Now, it looks like the two sides understand that a reconciliation, if it ever happens, will come *from* elections. So this means Fatah and Hamas may agree to a national vote in which both parties compete for seats in parliament. How that vote turns out will indicate who holds power,

and how much—a democratic election in which the Palestinian people decide their leaders.

It is important to understand Hamas's endorsement of this new approach reflects the triumph of a middle ground in a clash of two dynamics. On the one hand, the violent takeover of the Gaza Strip helped strengthen the more hawkish groups in Hamas's leadership. On the other hand, many in Hamas realize the devastating blow that coup dealt to Palestinian unity and to the ability of the Islamist group to gain regional and international acceptance. The Islamist leadership inside and outside Gaza recognizes that for Hamas to have any hope of improving its dismal performance in the Gaza Strip, of restoring some presence in the West Bank and of having any chance of real integration into the Palestinian political system, it must seek a new public mandate.

With the potential for Hamas's moderation and an election that will likely result in a reunified WBGS under Fatah, now is not the time for missteps. Now that Fatah has been rejuvenated and its PA performance significantly improved, to win a unifying election most likely in June 2010, Fatah

must fix the foolish flaws of its governance in the West Bank. For the last thing it can afford to do is behave against type because it is threatened by its Islamist rival.

Today, in the West Bank, hundreds, mostly Hamas members, are detained for months without charges; torture is routinely used—several detainees have died as a result, and no one has been charged for their deaths. Most people either do not trust the police, and therefore do not go to the police with complaints, or, in the case of those who do, they are highly dissatisfied with the police's performance; the ability of people to demonstrate has been severely constrained; and the capacity of some political groups, most notably Hamas, to function freely in the West Bank is hindered. Some human-rights activists worry that the West Bank might eventually turn into a police state. While the situation in Gaza under Hamas's control is much worse, blurring the difference between Fatah and Hamas in governance issues can only serve Hamas's interests. Needless to say, an agreement with Hamas on holding a unifying election will clearly force Fatah to abandon many of these practices. Fatah must convince the public that these practices are gone, forever, and not only because it has been forced to do so.

Let us not fool ourselves into believing this is just an internal Palestinian issue. The future of the Palestinian government has everything to do with the prospects for peace. Bottom line, if Fatah and its new guard handle this next round of elections deftly and gain control of the WBGS with majority support in an open popular vote, chances for long-term reconciliation with Israel improve. If Hamas is able to consolidate its power through a poorly handled election, a permanent peace settlement with Israel will be virtually impossible.

What Americans and Israelis do and say

in the next few months could alter the outcome.

There is no question that miscalculation on the Israeli and American sides can help boost Hamas's popularity. In forcing Abbas to abandon his recent efforts to censure Israel at the UN Human Rights Council for its human-rights violations during the December 2008 Gaza war, as depicted by the Goldstone Report, without any tangible achievements in return—like removing the Israeli-imposed blockade on the Gaza Strip—the United States and Israel gave Hamas the perfect ammunition for challenging the nationalist credentials of the Palestinian president.

In releasing twenty female Palestinian prisoners in early October in return for a videotape of its kidnapped soldier, Gilad Shalit, Israel handed Hamas a publicity stunt that boosted its public standing.

More dangerous, Hamas, with Israel's acquiescence, could easily orchestrate the next prisoner release to occur just before the elections. A release of hundreds of famous Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Shalit would be a true coup for Hamas. While a release of Marwan Barghouti from Israeli jail could boost Fatah's standing, the most likely scenario for his release in the near future is in fact one in which Israel is obligated by Hamas to let him go in a prisoners' exchange—just another win for Hamas and Hamas's vision.

And, of course, the Israelis are equally capable of weakening Abbas and Fatah. If Abbas is unable to make headway in the peace process, he—and in turn, his party—will be seen as weak. This is about bigger issues than prisoner releases and UN reports. It is all about the settlements.

Abbas defined a settlement freeze as a vital national interest, and so cannot justify a return to negotiations without it. In fact, only a permanent halting of settlement activity would give negotiations some viability

by forcing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to seek a quick agreement on permanent borders, so he could then allow construction in those settlements falling on Israel's side of the border. A two-year time line for negotiations and statehood would in this case become feasible.

In the past, as with former-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, in the context of the Annapolis process, a permanent freeze on the settlements was not made a precondition of negotiations because the PA was not keeping up its end of the bargain by providing its own security. That is not true now. If Netanyahu does not compromise, the chance for an agreement will vanish—and quickly. And failure to make progress could in fact hurt them both.

PSR polls show that today the overwhelming majority of Palestinians do not believe that a Palestinian state will be established in the next five years. They think Netanyahu and the new right-wing Israeli leadership will always be in favor of maintaining the status quo because a change that leads Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians might threaten the Israeli leadership's coalition and popular standing. Netanyahu must prove them wrong. If diplomacy is futile, many more Palestinians will conclude that violence must be the answer.

Then Abbas and Fatah will only pay a price for their improved security performance, as many Palestinians are critical of security cooperation with Israel and consider the crackdown on Hamas tantamount

to collaboration with the occupation. The fact that both the Israeli occupation forces and the Palestinian security forces function in the same areas of the West Bank—sometimes in the same day, targeting the same people—consolidates the perception of collaboration. This is why Israel must make more than a gesture toward peace, and do so soon. All the moderation and progress within the Palestinian territories is available for the taking but remains at risk.

In fact, alternatives to the two-state solution are already being discussed by the Palestinians. Fatah's sixth congress threatened an abandonment of the two-state solution in favor of a one-state solution, and Fayyad's current government platform has been presented by the Palestinian prime minister as the road to Palestinian statehood, by



negotiations if possible, unilaterally if need be. There is no question the stakes are very, very high.

So, America's shift from demanding that Israel "freeze" to demanding it "restrain" settlement construction during President

For the last nine years, the Israelis have argued that the peace process could not move forward because the Palestinian leadership was weak and governance was dysfunctional. All that may be about to change.

Obama's New York meeting with Abbas and Netanyahu in September significantly damaged the credibility of the new U.S. administration. In doing so, it also damaged Abbas's credibility. One single word change convinced many Palestinians that Obama has shifted his position, from seeking to "resolve" the conflict, in Mohammad Dahlan's words, to "managing" it.

Ultimately to win elections, Abbas needs to convince the average Palestinian that independence can be delivered through diplomacy. Fatah's way, not Hamas's way; negotiations, not violence. As Abbas and the young guard ponder their way out of their current predicament, they realize that without turning their vision of independence and statehood into reality in the near future, they remain vulnerable to Hamas's attacks and potential electoral strength. America and Israel need to realize this as well.

Here is one future very few Palestinians believe in today: A settlement freeze leads to negotiations. A Palestinian state is established thereafter, in less than two years; an achievement that gives Abbas and the young guard the opportunity to consolidate their leadership in the WBGS. For Abbas and Fatah to win the next elections, this scenario must soon sound credible. An American articulation of a detailed vision, an Obama Vision, can go a long way toward reviving hopes in diplomacy. The Israelis have an interest in making this a more believable outcome because without Abbas and Fatah, Israeli-Palestinian relations can only become bleaker. The Israelis have no more excuses; they have a strong PA leadership as a partner, an effective and functioning PA government, a competent PA security force, unprecedented calm and efficient security cooperation. □