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# After the Palestinian Elections

## Understanding and responding to the Hamas victory

by Yossi Mekelberg

### Introduction – coping with Hamas’s unexpected victory

Both Israel and Palestine are experiencing leadership transformations, the overall consequences of which are far from clear. Ariel Sharon's recent illness came amidst a radical political reshape that he had initiated. At the same time, the Palestinian political arena is in a state of protracted crisis and disarray since the death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004. The early days after Arafat's demise were marked by a relatively smooth transition of power within Fatah. However, a year later the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) election result has almost completely stripped the Fatah movement, which Arafat helped create, of its power.

It is not uncommon for elections results to spring some surprises on political observers when the ballots are counted. However, it is rare for the outcome to send such shock waves as the Palestinian elections have done. No one expected a landslide victory for the Islamic fundamentalist movement, Hamas. Whilst it took only 44 per cent of the popular vote, it won 76 seats in the 132-seat parliament. Though clearly a hammer blow to the Fatah movement, it became instantly obvious that the decisive victory also surprised the Hamas leadership. They were quick to ask their bitter rivals in Fatah to join them in government, in the hope that Fatah would provide international legitimacy and assist in the thorny business of government.

### The role of the PLC

Ten years have elapsed since the last PLC elections. The parliament was the creation of Oslo II, signed in 1995. In the 1996 elections, Fatah enjoyed a comprehensive victory, winning 49 seats of the then 88 seats, with a further 15 independents also affiliated to the ruling party. Hamas did not participate in those elections, refusing to recognise either Israel or the Oslo accord.

The PLC lacks any legal authority in the negotiations process with Israel or in the discussions with donor countries, these roles being in the hands of the Abbas-led PLO. The Council deals with civil matters such as economy, industry, agriculture, energy, justice, social welfare, education and health, though it relies heavily on cooperation with Israel on all these matters. Initially, it was expected to serve as an interim parliament until a permanent peace agreement would be signed with Israel. As the peace process faltered, there were increasing demands from within the Palestinian territories and from the US and EU to hold fresh elections as part of the drive to democratise and reform the ill-functioning Palestinian Authority.

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## Understanding the rise of Hamas

Throughout 2005, there were growing signs of increasing disenchantment among Palestinians towards their leadership. While Hamas made substantial gains in local elections, there were violent clashes between Fatah and Hamas supporters. In the election, the Palestinian public delivered their electoral verdict on the PA's inefficient provision of public services, corruption within the Palestinian administration and, not least, despair at the leadership's inability to fulfil the national aspirations for Palestinian self-determination in the West Bank and Gaza by bringing an end to the occupation.

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A recent survey by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah revealed that 86% of the population believe corruption exists in the PA. Among those, 58% expect corruption to increase or remain the same in the future. Moreover, only 35% say they and their families feel safe and secure. 65% rate democracy under the PA as weak. Other statistics demonstrate a significant drop in the number of Palestinians who believed that a permanent peace agreement with Israel was imminent. In short, the election exposed the growing pessimism about what the future held for Palestinians and the complete distrust in their leadership.

Another contributory factor was the dire economic situation in the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinian economy sharply deteriorated from the beginning of the 2000 Intifada, according to a UN report. By 2005, GDP declined by 1% to a level that was 15% below that of 1999. Over the five-year period 1999-2004, real per capita gross national income (GNI) contracted by 33%. Unemployment remained high: one third of the labour force was jobless at the end of 2004. Poverty is estimated to average 45% across the territories. Five years of conflict and destruction has caused a sustained contraction in the supply capacity of an already shattered economy. The Palestinian trade deficit grew faster than domestic production – from \$1.8 billion in 2001 to \$2.6 billion in 2005 – representing 65% of GDP, with two thirds of this deficit arising from the imbalance in trade with Israel.

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Considering the daily hardships the Palestinians are going through, there is little surprise that they bare considerable frustration and resentment. It seems, therefore, that the elections were to a large extent a referendum on the collapsed Oslo process and what it should have achieved for the Palestinians, rather than a strategic decision about the direction the Palestinian national movement should take. It is also relevant that these were the first parliamentary elections after the departure of Arafat and Sharon from the political scene and a few months after Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip. The disengagement has already become part of the Palestinian narrative as the victory of Intifada over the mighty Israeli army and the colonisation of Palestinian territory. Hamas promoted this version of events to its full advantage in the ballot box.

## The failure of Fatah

Whereas Hamas was well organised, united and disciplined throughout the elections, Fatah was on the verge of implosion. Marwan Barghouti – currently serving five life sentences in an Israeli jail for his involvement in terror attacks – emerged as the biggest winner from the Fatah primaries. Together with his allies, he dominated the list of Fatah candidates; a blow to Fatah's 'old guard' cohorts of Arafat who are widely considered corrupt.

The Barghouti-led young guard, who rose through the ranks during the first and second Palestinian Intifadas but were kept out of leadership positions by the old-timers, has long pushed for a greater say. Divisions within the ruling party did little to help them during the election campaign.

At the same time, Hamas's standing among the Palestinians benefited from the very fact that they were seen as unacceptable to Israel, especially after Sharon's decision not to co-operate with the running of the Palestinian elections if Hamas was allowed to take part. Hamas accused Israel of hampering the vote by arresting suspected militants, including many Hamas members.

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## Hamas and the peace process – unlikely partners

As a result of Hamas's victory, the painstaking, though grudging, search for peace between Israel and the Palestinians has suffered a massive setback. It took 45 years for the two national movements to recognise, at least in principle, each other's national rights based on a two-state solution. If the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada set back the process of reconciliation, the election of the Hamas may paralyse the process for some time.

The Hamas charter clearly declares that:

*“The Islamic Resistance Movement believes that the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day and Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it.”*

It calls for the Arab world to unite in the “struggle against Zionism” because,

*“After Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. When they will have digested the region they overtook, they will aspire to further expansion, and so on. Their plan is embodied in the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’, and their present conduct is the best proof of what we are saying.”*

Furthermore they dismiss any “Initiatives, and so-called peaceful solutions and international conferences...” claiming that they are in contradiction to the principles of the Islamic Resistance Movement.

Political movements who reached power vaunting radical ideologies have historically gone through a process of moderating while in power – especially when needing to accommodate their international environment. There is little doubt that the tasks of government will force Hamas to reassess their policies. However, the starting point lacks any common ground to resume negotiations. Hamas's election manifesto is softer than its charter, in that it does not explicitly call for the destruction of the state of Israel. Yet it still advocates the continuation of the armed struggle, and offers not more than a long ‘hudna’ (truce) in return for an Israeli withdrawal to 1967 borders and the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. Israel is tolerated as an unfortunate reality, but her right to exist as a Jewish state is not recognised.

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This refusal to recognise Israel's legitimacy or any agreement signed with her by the PLO, and their insistence on the continuation of the armed struggle, makes it hard to imagine a future Hamas government as a partner for peace negotiations, not only with Israel, but in the eyes of the international community. As a result, the US, Quartet and EU, while congratulating the democratic process in Palestine,

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have all warned that, without renouncing terrorism and recognising Israel, there will be no negotiations with a Hamas-formed government. Egypt has backed these demands and it seems that the Hamas victory enjoyed clear endorsement only from Teheran and Damascus. Bringing Hamas to change its position depends, to a large extent, on this united front in the international community.

### The donor's dilemma

For an economy which relies so heavily on foreign aid – to the tune of \$1 billion annually from donor countries and a further \$55 million each month from taxes collected by Israel – the withdrawal of aid would place intense pressure on a Hamas government that refused to modify its policies. However, the international community and Israel cannot in practice stop completely the transfer of money as it could push the Palestinian economy out of the protracted humanitarian crisis from which it currently suffers and into a full-scale disaster. This might cause the opposite of the desired effect, pushing more Palestinians from one-time ballot box supporters of Hamas to long-term activists and adherents to its dangerous ideology. However, the international community must now guard against the misuse of funding.

### Pressure on Hamas

Several weeks after Hamas won a convincing majority, a new government has not yet been formed. Negotiations have been ongoing about the nature of the government. Hamas is very keen to see its arch rival Fatah stay in government, or at least to give the impression that Abu Mazen remains in charge of security and foreign policy. Initially, its leaders, Ismail Haniya, Mahmoud Zahhar and even Khaled Mashal, seemed to be shying away from holding directly the reins of power, preferring to hide behind the international acceptability of Fatah, or some other government of technocrats.

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In a matter of a fortnight, Hamas has learned that, however difficult and dangerous it is to function as a militant opposition outside the political system, elected responsibility poses its own perils. Running a government on the basis of their long standing ideology might gain them short term respect among those who valued their militancy, but will hamper their ability to run a viable administration. While deserting their ideology might please the international community it would expose them to criticism among their diehard rank and file activists. They now need to face an historic choice over whether they want to be a movement of protest, or a viable party of power, and the international community must continue to make this clear.

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