

FACTSHEET: PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP 2005-2007



From January, 2006 through January, 2008, the Palestinian geo-political environment has seen repeated upheaval. This upheaval tells important lessons about the players, Palestinian and international, and provides important guidance for Canadian-Palestinian relations moving forward.

Who led the Palestinians leading into the 2006 Palestinian elections?¹

Mahmoud Abbas became President of the Palestinian Authority in an election in January, 2005, following the death of Yassir Arafat in November, 2004. Arafat had previously been dismissed by Israel and the US as an unworthy negotiating partner, and Abbas was considered by them to be a more reliable and moderate leader. Nevertheless, despite Abbas' relative success in reducing militant attacks against Israel through 2005 (partially because of Hamas' unilateral ceasefire), neither the US nor Israel seriously engaged Abbas in negotiations. Partly as a result of Abbas' failure to win concessions from Israel and the US, Abbas and his Fatah party lost the Jan. 2006 Palestinian elections. Hamas' victory in those elections was also attributed to: 1) desperation in the face of an increasingly oppressive Israeli occupation; 2) impatience with the corruption of Fatah, and Hamas' record of strong governance; and 3) cynicism with the diplomatic process and international mechanisms for change.

Who led the Palestinians following the elections in January 2006?

Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian elections, winning 74 of the 132 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), with 42.9% of the popular vote. Initially, the Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh sought to form a coalition government with Fatah to deter an international boycott of his government. When Fatah refused to cooperate, he delayed the formation of his government until the end of March, to delay the onset of international sanctions against Palestine.

Punishment of Palestine for its election outcome included the illegal withholding of its customs income by Israel (49% of its budget revenue); and the cessation of international aid (25% of its budget revenue.) Initial Israeli punishment of the Palestinians also included continued violation of agreements on movement and access in/out and within the occupied Palestinian territories. These sanctions precipitated the fulfillment of the World Bank's most dire predictions on the economy, personal incomes, and employment.²

Given the heightened suffering of the Palestinian people, there was increased interest to create a joint Fatah-Hamas government as 2006 progressed. An important document called the "National Conciliation Document" (a.k.a. the "Prisoners Document") was signed in June, 2006 by Fatah, Hamas and other Palestinian leaders. Serious talks of such a so-called "Unity Government" continued through the Fall but failed to reach conclusion until February, 2007.

It is important to note that although the PLC is constitutionally elected to serve for four years, Abbas was still the president of the PA, as well as Chairman of the PLO (since 2004.) International donors sought to provide aid through Abbas' Office of the President, thus bypassing PA ministries managed by Hamas. In addition, under Oslo (1993), the PLO was designated the sole representative of the Palestinian people. Despite Hamas' current importance in Palestinian politics, Fatah has never allowed Hamas to have representation in the PLO, a sore point between the two parties for many years.

Who led the Palestinians under the Unity Government of early 2007?

Through 2006, pro-Western Arab regimes had been led to believe that a Unity Government might re-enable Western acceptance of the Palestinian government. Following negotiations with the help of Saudi mediation in Mecca, the details of the Palestinian Unity Government were hammered out in February, 2007, with a formal launch of the government on March 17th. Hamas' Haniyeh continued as Prime

Minister of the new government, but the cabinet was also set up to include several members from Fatah, as well as from other Palestinian political parties.

Unfortunately, the agreement at Mecca failed to address the two central sources of discord: 1) genuine political power-sharing, and 2) genuine security power-sharing. With respect to political power-sharing, Fatah leaders seemed to have no intention of integrating Hamas into the PLO as mandated by the Mecca agreement. As a result, Hamas hedged in its support of Abbas as sole international negotiator for the Palestinians – also a part of the Mecca accord. Fatah leaders undermined Hamas' governing leadership among Western governments, and enjoyed favoured treatment by Western governments. The US also took this opportunity to bolster Fatah's military strength. Hamas observed this unequal treatment, and knew that time was working against its popularity given the economic crisis imposed by the ongoing Israeli occupation and continued international sanctions.³

With respect to security power-sharing, the Unity Government was never able to consolidate all the various "security" arms of the PA, Fatah and Hamas. Selection of the Hani Qawasmi as Interior Minister (responsible for security) was the most contentious of all ministerial appointments. Inevitably, Qawasmi resigned soon after his appointment when elements from both sides failed to recognize his unified command. Hamas also accused Fatah of promoting lawlessness to undermine the Hamas-led government, while both sides jockeyed for positions of authority and independence and/or recognition of their security forces.⁴ War between the two sides broke out finally in Gaza on June 10, and by June 14th, Hamas had taken control of all security installations in Gaza. Fatah, meanwhile, retaliated for its losses in Gaza with widespread destruction of Hamas assets in the West Bank. Abbas dissolved the Unity Government on June 14th, appointing a new caretaker government with Salam Fayyad, an independent, as Prime Minister.

Who leads the Palestinians in January, 2008?

As of January 1, 2008, Mahmoud Abbas continues as President of the Palestinian Authority, with Salam Fayyad (an internationally respected economist) the Prime Minister over a Fatah-supportive cabinet. Hamas, meanwhile has vowed to continue to govern in Gaza and questions the legitimacy of the new Fayyad government as unconstitutional (i.e. lacking the approval of the PLC), and unrepresentative (i.e. ignoring the election results of 2006.) The PLC is paralyzed as dozens of Hamas legislators are held (untried) in Israeli detention, so it can neither gather quorum, nor outvote Fatah. As well, each party boycotts PLC sessions called by the other. While some have called for early elections for their own political purposes (either for the president or for the government), neither is likely to happen as the PLC is constitutionally mandated for four years, and Abbas is not unexpected to push the issue through the PLO.⁵

Since June, Abbas has refused to negotiate with Hamas, demanding that they relinquish control of Gaza before any talks can begin. Since the Gaza takeover, Hamas has tried to present itself as the party more interested in reconciliation, responding positively to overtures in the Arab world. Thus far, however, they have not overtly offered to cede Gaza and its security elements in order to engage Abbas and Fatah.

Immediately following the creation of the Fayyad government, Western governments ceased their boycotts and sanctions of the PA, and Israel restarted customs transfers to the new government. Meanwhile, the population of Gaza is increasingly punished by Israel (with Western support) because Hamas retains control over the territory. With funds to the PA reinstated, the Fayyad government restored salaries to PA employees, but forbade Gaza civil servants from returning to work or risk losing their jobs. The Fayyad government has also been quite successful at recruiting additional international aid in tandem with Abbas' negotiations for a settlement with Israel. Ironically, at the beginning of 2008 Israel and the US have the same negotiating partner that they had in 2005, yet curiously this time around, they appear keenly interested in engaging with him. Meanwhile, Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere weather the worst humanitarian crisis in decades imposed on them by the Israeli occupation.⁶

¹ For more info on the Jan. '06 elections, see CJPME Factsheet: "Hamas and the 2006 Palestinian Elections," February, 2006

² For more info on the economic predictions for Palestinians, see CJPME Factsheet: "The Impact of Changes to Aid in Palestine," April, 2006

³ "After Gaza," International Crisis Group, Aug. 2, 2007, pp. 5-10

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 17

⁶ See UNRWA Emergency Appeal, 2008, issued Dec. 17, 2007