



THE POLARIZATION OF THE PALESTINIAN POLITICAL FIELD

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Arguing that the polarization of the Palestinian political field did not start with Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007, the author analyzes the factors that have eroded the cohesiveness and vitality of the Palestinian polity, namely, the paralysis of Palestinian political institutions, territorial and social fragmentation, and egregious outside interference. In this context, and in the absence of an internal Palestinian debate about the objectives of holding elections under occupation, the author shows that the timing and circumstances of the 2006 legislative elections were bound to precipitate the current state of disarray. Finally, he considers the way forward, highlighting the potential of public pressure in promoting national reconciliation.

NO ONE WOULD QUESTION today the utter disarray of the Palestinian political field,¹ where two separate entities governed by bitterly rival factions are ensconced in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, one under Israeli occupation, the other under a suffocating Israeli siege. Each of the two governments, one primarily secular (controlled by Fatah), the other "Islamist" (controlled by Hamas), has its own security forces and, to the extent possible, bans the activities of members of the rival faction within "its" territory (if it does not arrest or imprison them). Both political "entities" are heavily dependent on external funding (from different donors) and are allied to different regional powers overtly or covertly opposed to one another. As time passes, the two entities grow further and further apart, threatening a repetition in some form of the Pakistan-Bangladesh experience.

This state of polarization did not begin in June 2007 when Hamas installed itself as the dominant political, military, and administrative power in the Gaza Strip while Fatah took steps to tighten its control over the West Bank. Rather, these events deepened trends long in the making, enfeebling still further a political field that had been battered since the early 1990s by many changes and events, regional and international.

The present essay² seeks to highlight the factors underlying the precariousness and vulnerability of the Palestinian polity and its consequent polarization,

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the paralysis of its national institutions, and egregious foreign interference. Similar situations have been noted in other regional states subject to invasion and war (Lebanon, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, and the Sudan, among others), but the disarray is perhaps more visible in Palestine for reasons relating to its history, its specific regional and international context, and its ongoing subjection to settler-colonialism and territorial fragmentation.

THE MAKING OF THE PALESTINIAN POLITICAL FIELD

The Palestinian political field differs from most others in that it includes Palestinian communities with differing socioeconomic, state, and civil society structures, not only in historic Palestine (the 1967 occupied territories and Israel) but also in the diaspora (*al-shatat*) created by the 1948 Nakba. It was also formed *outside* the national territory, not by a state but by a national liberation movement that arose in the Palestinian shatat. From the outset then, lacking a sovereign state, the Palestinian political field has been subject to powerful outside influences and pressures. Its leading institution, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), was founded at the initiative of the Arab states in 1964 and was initially under their control. It was only after the 1967 war, when the PLO was democratically taken over by Palestinian resistance organizations led by Fatah, that it became a popular mass movement and, several years later, the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.” For the next twenty-some years, the PLO and its constituent organizations conducted their political, military, and other activities from bases in countries bordering Israel and later from Tunisia. While this situation made it vulnerable to the machinations of various regional powers seeking to determine the political and economic shape of the Middle East, the fact that the pressures were conflicting helped the PLO maintain to a tangible degree its hegemony over a relatively autonomous Palestinian political field throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

PLO hegemony over the Palestinian political field began to be challenged in the late 1980s with the emergence in the occupied territories of political Islam, whose main embodiment, Hamas, had been established at the start of the first intifada in 1987, and the smaller Islamic Jihad several years earlier. Both these organizations were indigenous, having grown out of local branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, and their prominence in the first intifada showed them to be a force to be reckoned with. However, it was not until the 1993 signing of the Oslo accords, which laid out the stages that were supposed to lead to full peace with Israel by the end of the decade, that the magnitude of the challenge posed by political Islam became fully apparent.

Under the Oslo accords, the PLO leadership returned from its long exile to the Palestinian territories, thus moving the center of gravity of Palestinian politics to the “inside” for the first time since 1948. There it established the Palestinian Authority (PA), a self-governing body whose powers were sharply limited by the Israeli occupier but which was understood as the first step on

the road to statehood. The accords were fiercely opposed by political Islam, as well as by a number of secular PLO factions, most importantly the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). With a growing following, and already endowed with a high degree of discipline and organization, political Islam and especially Hamas found in opposition to Oslo a powerful cause around which to mobilize.

Fatah, as the principal political organization of the PLO and the main Palestinian force behind the Oslo accords, dominated the institutions (government, security apparatuses, the judiciary, and the Palestinian Legislative Council [PLC]) of the PA even more fully than it had dominated those of the PLO, especially since the PFLP and DFLP, among other factions, refused participation in the new body. These factions, together with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, also boycotted (ineffectively) the democratic presidential and legislative elections of 1996 that conferred upon Fatah the legitimacy to rule over the parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip designated by the Oslo accords. Fatah's dominance of the Palestinian national movement had been based on its leadership of the PLO and its history as a resistance organization. Once it became the ruling party of the PA, however, its preoccupation with its bureaucratic and security apparatuses, and especially with the political negotiations with Israel, the results of which were increasingly unpopular in the face of constant Israeli backtracking, gave a further boost to political Islam as a rival movement. At the same time, the clientelism and nepotism that flourished under the Fatah-led PA were fully exploited by Hamas to expand its constituency. This was especially the case as of the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000, when the suicide operations of Hamas and Islamic Jihad galvanized a public distraught and outraged by Israel's brutally punitive assaults at a time when Fatah was stymied in its armed response by its contradictory role of pursuing negotiations with Israel.

It was during the second intifada that the Palestinian political field was conclusively transformed into a field dominated by two rival parties. Yasir Arafat's mysterious death in 2004 deprived Palestinian politics of its sole undisputed central figure of authority. Israel's unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005 only fueled the rivalry, with each movement trying to claim credit for the withdrawal. The polarization exploded into open conflict following Fatah's resounding defeat by Hamas in the January 2006 legislative elections (at least partly because of its insistence on changing electoral rules) and the formation of an all-Hamas government that spring, prompting international powers led by the United States to impose financial sanctions and a political boycott and to suspend all direct aid to the PA. Even the formation of a short-lived Hamas-Fatah national unity government in March 2007 could not bridge the divide, and escalating armed clashes, at times taking on aspects of civil war, culminated in Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. Since then, Gaza has been subject to Israel's total blockade, even as Israel's punitive operations were stepped up, culminating in Operation Cast Lead in

winter 2008–2009. All the attempts to reconcile the two parties—undertaken by Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt, among others—have failed.

Thus, since June 2007, the polarization has been represented both institutionally and territorially, with a Fatah-led PA government in the West Bank, appointed by the PA president but not confirmed by the then-paralyzed PLC, and a Hamas government in Gaza, legally appointed in keeping with the 2006 elections but dismissed by the PA president. Each of the two governments maintains its own ministries, police, and security forces. While both restrict the bearing and use of arms to those operating under their direct control, the West Bank government limits resistance to Israeli occupation to peaceful forms and espouses negotiations as its sole strategy for achieving Palestinian statehood/goals. The Gaza government, by contrast, sanctions military action against Israel—albeit defining when, how, and by whom such action can be practiced—and declares armed resistance its sole strategy for achieving Palestinian rights. The opposing concepts of resistance in effect provide an ideological basis for the geopolitical polarization. Obviously, the two movements also distinguish themselves by their basic outlooks, with Hamas espousing Islam as its guiding ideology and Fatah following, more or less, the secular tradition of the PLO.

FACTORS PROMOTING VULNERABILITY

Against this background, the questions that arise are how such polarization and vulnerability came to be the defining characteristics of a Palestinian political field that had been known during the 1970s and 1980s for its cohesiveness and vitality, and what processes and factors are responsible for this situation. The factors are many, and so intertwined that it is difficult to separate them. Still, three stand out: the paralysis of political institutions, territorial and social fragmentation, and acute external interference, both by the occupier and by other powers, regional and international.

Disempowering National Institutions

Disempowering representative national institutions inevitably exposes a national political field (whether a state, a self-governing authority, or a national liberation movement) to fracture and dislocation, making it vulnerable to polarization internally and to manipulation externally. In the Palestinian case, the paralysis of the PLO institutions—particularly the Palestinian National Council (PNC) and the PLO Executive Committee, which practically became an extension of the PA—contributed significantly to the PLO's disempowerment. The fractionalization of the PA institutions (the executive bodies and the PNC) was more specifically due to the effects of the growing polarization and Israeli colonial policies.

From the time of its creation and especially after its formal takeover by the resistance organizations in 1968, the PLO had been the embodiment of (indeed synonymous with) the Palestinian national movement. Its powerful network

of social welfare institutions and mass and professional unions had branches wherever there were sizable Palestinian communities across the Arab world and beyond. Though encompassing about ten autonomous organizations with political views ranging from Marxist-Leninist to right-wing pan-nationalist, the PLO operated by consensus and managed to weather many sharp disagreements on policy. Even Hamas, while it rejected the PLO's terms of reference, its national charter, and all the agreements of the Oslo process, was careful to acknowledge its patriotic successes (especially before it entered into the peace negotiations). To this day, one of the issues on the table between Hamas and Fatah are the conditions of Hamas's joining the organization.

The beginning of the weakening of the PLO can be traced to Israel's 1982 siege of Beirut, where it was headquartered, and to its subsequent forced exit from Lebanon. While some of its constituent factions, most notably the PFLP and DFLP, moved their headquarters to Damascus, the main body of the PLO reestablished itself in Tunis, its main institutions largely intact albeit weakened by its loss of the close interaction with the Palestinian base it had previously enjoyed. The PLO was dealt a serious blow by the drying up of its financial resources when the Gulf states cut off funding in punishment for its stance during the 1990–91 Gulf crisis. Another blow came with the collapse of the Soviet Union, a major international ally. But it was not until the creation of the PA—under the Oslo accords that the PLO itself had signed—that its real marginalization began. As of 1996, Yasir Arafat—simultaneously chairman of the PLO, head of Fatah, and president of the PA—systematically began sidelining the PLO in order to empower the PA. The strategy was shortsighted because it was anchored in two mistaken beliefs: that statehood was on the horizon, and that the PA was capable of replacing the PLO as the dominant force in the Palestinian political field.

In a sense, the PLO's disempowerment was a consequence of its own quest for statehood. While in the early years the goal of the national movement had been the liberation of Palestine, as of the mid-1970s the objective shifted to the establishment of a state on whatever part of Palestine could be liberated.

In a sense, the PLO's disempowerment was a consequence of its own uncritical quest for statehood.

The Oslo accords accelerated the drive for statehood with the establishment of the PA and the building of quasi-state institutions even as Israel pressed vigorously ahead with its settler-colonialism. The uncritical quest for statehood in the conditions of Oslo, dominated by a highly uneven balance of power, contributed to the fracturing of the Palestinian field by dividing the PLO

as never before. The focus on statehood could also explain why Arafat seemed more concerned with reinforcing his "presidential" powers (mostly of a symbolic nature) than with securing effective Palestinian control over land, natural resources, and the economy.

At the concrete level, the PLO's marginalization manifested itself in the freezing of the PLO's leading institutions, particularly the PNC, whose last full session was held in 1996 under U.S. and Israeli pressure to annul the articles

in the PLO National Charter that were not in line with the Oslo accords. Other PLO institutions, such as the Palestinian Central Council and the PLO Executive Committee—most of whose members held senior positions in PA structures and/or were receiving benefits from it—were activated only when needed by the “presidency” to support PA policies.

The same policy of disempowerment was applied to all the PLO-affiliated popular, trade, women’s, professional, and workers’ unions, which lost their crucial role as national institutions capable of mobilizing (mostly on national issues) major sectors of Palestinians in their communities. Most of these unions and mass organizations have not held conferences since the mid-1980s, and those that did (like the General Union of Palestinian Women and the General Union of Palestinian Writers and Journalists in 2009 and 2010, respectively) did so on the basis of a “quota” that excluded Hamas and Islamic Jihad and paid little attention to the representation of Palestinian communities outside the West Bank and Gaza Strip.³

Certainly the PLO has remained (though now mostly in theory) the pre-eminent Palestinian institution, the one that endowed the PA with its national legitimacy and that continues to be the sole Palestinian authority entitled to negotiate with Israel. But the freezing of its institutions left the Palestinian communities in the diaspora without institutional representation and left the Palestinians in Israel to fend for themselves, since the Oslo accords excluded both from any say in a possible future settlement of the conflict. Thus the policy of shelving the PLO institutions was also shortsighted because it undermined the political unity of the Palestinian people.

As for the institutions of the PA, from the time it was established, decision making had ceased to be based on consensus (as it had been in the PLO) but rather became the monopoly of one party—in fact, at certain crucial moments, the prerogative of one man: Yasir Arafat. While this situation may have streamlined decisions, the fact remains that it obstructed all efforts to build viable national institutions. With specific regard to the PLC, the boycott by Hamas and other oppositional parties of the 1996 legislative elections that brought it into being weakened it from the start by making it less representative. Hamas’s decision to run in the January 2006 legislative elections addressed that issue, but its victory at the polls ultimately resulted in the PLC’s complete immobilization when, in late June 2006, Israel arrested and imprisoned nearly a third of its members, mostly Hamas West Bank residents. Even before that, starting from the outbreak of the second intifada, its functioning had been greatly undermined by Israel’s draconian movement restrictions affecting PLC members’ travels to meetings. In general, Israel utilized the second intifada to further enfeeble the PA through the systematic targeting and wholesale destruction of PA infrastructure and institutions in the West Bank, including the main administrative complex (where the presidential offices and quarters were located), its ministries, the installations of its security forces, civil societies headquarters, and so on, during its massive invasion of West Bank cities in spring 2002. Gaza’s turn came a few years later, especially with the almost

uninterrupted series of assaults on Palestinian institutions and infrastructure that followed Israel's spring 2004 decision to unilaterally disengage from the Strip and that culminated in the massive destruction of Operation Cast Lead.

Fragmentation of Land and Society

Territorial

Fragmentation as a consequence of dispossession, dispersal, and ethnic cleansing has been a central feature of the Palestinian landscape since the Nakba of 1948, which drove three-quarters of a million Palestinians into the areas of Palestine not seized by Israel, as well as into the neighboring Arab states and well beyond. The Nakba also inaugurated the political and territorial divisions of the parts of Palestine that remained in Arab hands, with the West Bank being annexed by Jordan and the Gaza Strip coming under Egyptian administration.

When Israel occupied the remaining parts of Palestine in the 1967 war, perhaps the sole positive result for Palestinians was that it initially restored some of the severed links, allowing refugees and residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to reunite with family and friends who had remained in what became Israel after the Nakba. For the next two decades, movement across the Green Line and between the West Bank and Gaza was relatively free, with some possibility as well of travel outside through Jordan and Egypt. At the same time, the post-1967 rise of the PLO as a framework for the resistance movement had an empowering effect on the Palestinians inside Israel, giving them a sense of empowerment and making them feel part of the emerging national project.

This situation ended with the first Gulf War of 1991, when Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza were required for the first time to obtain special permits to cross the Green Line. These new restrictions were expanded and hardened into a clear strategy after the Oslo Accord. Oslo also opened the way for the further geo-polarization of the 1967 occupied Palestinian territories in that the agreement did not impose a categorical halt to further building of colonial settlements on Israel. Israel effectively severed connections between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and between both and East Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, movement *within* the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had become severely restricted. Oslo II, signed in September 1995, laid the ground for internal divisions into population enclaves, or "bantustans," in the West Bank, which was classified into areas A, B, and C, while the Gaza Strip was divided internally by settlement blocs, security zones, so-called "yellow areas," and Palestinian areas, with north-south roads easily cut. In the West Bank especially, the relentless growth of the colonial settlements encroached on Palestinian population areas and exacerbated the internal fragmentation by segmenting village clusters and towns off from each other.

Full control over the Palestinian enclaves was imposed through an elaborate regime of military and police checkpoints, a pass and closure system, the construction of settler-only bypass roads, and (more recently), the separation

wall in the West Bank begun in 2002.⁴ With the greatly expanded annexed East Jerusalem totally cut off, the remainder of the West Bank has been divided into four major enclaves—north (Nablus and Jenin), central (Ramallah), south (Hebron), and east (the Jordan Valley).⁵ More recently, in summer 2009, some checkpoints were lifted and movement restrictions eased, but the infrastructure allowing their immediate reimposition remains fully in place. In Gaza, the internal closures ended when Israel's 2005 unilateral disengagement removed all settlements and military installations, even as the Strip has become hermetically sealed from the outside world.

Social fragmentation

Physical fragmentation engenders social fragmentation, reinforcing social and economic disparities among regions, districts, and local communities (and between towns, villages, and camps) by affecting access to employment, markets, and basic services. From an institutional standpoint, Israeli restrictions on movement via permits, checkpoints, and physical barriers have effectively restricted the population's access to civic organizations. Meanwhile, the consequent weakening of central national institutions has led to a reinvention of kinship- and locality-based associations to take on some of the functions that the defunct national institutions can no longer fulfill. For example, increased resort to clan- and family-based *diwans* (a kinship meeting place for formal meetings and activities) has been observed, including in cities and among the highly educated.⁶ In short, the process of "bantustanization" has encouraged the emergence of the "politics of the local," which feeds into patriarchal relations and downgrades the values of citizenship and equality under the law.

In such conditions, it is hardly surprising that inequality in the distribution of wealth and income in Palestinian communities is growing. The most striking gap is between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This gap was always considerable, but as long as Palestinians in large numbers were able to cross the Green Line for work, shopping, or other purposes, the starkness of the contrast with Israel's much higher living standards succeeded in relativizing somewhat the inequities within Palestinian society itself. This effect receded with the severe restrictions on Palestinian movement, even as the gap between the two territories widened dramatically, no doubt helping Hamas establish control over Gaza in record time in June 2007. By 2008, the number of families living below the poverty line (measured by actual consumption) reached 51.8 percent in the Gaza Strip compared with 19.1 percent in the West Bank.⁷ The ongoing siege, and especially the massive destruction wrought by Israel's war on Gaza in winter 2008–2009, greatly accelerated the trend. Indeed, Gazans are still living amid the devastation of that operation, with no materials for the repair of infrastructure and homes allowed to enter and no easing of the siege to allow the economy to pick up sufficiently to alleviate the rampant poverty and unemployment. Such disparities between the two territories exacerbate other grievances: Gazans, already aware of bearing the brunt of collective punishment, rankle from the sense of "superiority" they feel is directed at

them by their compatriots in the West Bank. Gaza's isolation, and the Gaza-West Bank split embodied in the parallel governments, have consolidated the divide, doubtless also heightened by the perception that the Fatah-led PA did not adequately protest Israel's onslaught against the Strip.

Disparities in wealth and income in the West Bank and Gaza Strip overall have grown since the establishment of the PA, largely because of the emergence of a relatively large middle class thanks to employment by the PA, the many NGOs established after the Oslo Accord, and the emerging private sector. At the same time, the Palestinian middle class itself has remained divided and fragmented not only by the enclavization already discussed but also according to employment sector (public, private, NGO, etc.), political orientation, and educational level (including whether university education was obtained in Palestine, the Arab world, the West, or socialist countries). This territorial and social fragmentation facilitates the process of polarization and undermines the effectiveness of civil society.⁸ Within the West Bank, inequalities in income and wealth are most visible between the central region and the northern and southern regions. Differences are also evident between towns and villages and refugee camps.

In the unraveling of a shared national consensus, certain divides or splits become more visible. Besides obvious distinctions between West Bankers and Gazans or between rich and poor, these include (with varying degrees of significance) distinctions between villagers and town residents and between camp dwellers and non-camp dwellers. Another significant divide is between "returnees" (diaspora Palestinians allowed to return to the occupied territories after Oslo) and local residents. The sense of difference between the two groups is fostered by the somewhat different cultural attitudes held by the returnees (who experienced urban life in cities like Beirut, Damascus, and Tunis, among others), but it also manifests itself in such matters as the predominance of returnees in government and political leadership positions and the predominance of "locals" in NGOs.

Since Oslo, the division between the Palestinians living in the occupied territories on the one hand and those living in Israel and the diaspora on the other has become more keenly felt. When the leadership was based in the Arab diaspora, and even though its focus was historic Palestine including the occupied territories, the Palestinians in al-shatat (not only the refugees in the camps, but in general) continued to feel part of the national project. The Oslo accords created separate political fields for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, within the Green Line, and in the diaspora, with no institutional links or unified vision or strategy to unite them. The Oslo accords also promoted an already existing mindset within the Palestinian national movement and the elites of most Arab states that the Palestine problem was the concern of Palestinians. Similarly, the accords reduced the Palestinian issue to the 1967 Israeli occupation, disconnecting it from the 1948 Nakba and the refugee problem. By implication, they also signaled a readiness to isolate the fate of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from that of the Palestinians in al-shatat and within the Green Line (i.e., Israel).

Foreign Domination, Direct Intervention, and Donors

Like other highly polarized and fractured fields such as Lebanon and Iraq, the Palestinian political field has been the object of direct external interference and manipulation. Clearly, Israel's domination is the determining factor. The West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is under direct Israeli settler-colonial occupation, the Gaza Strip is under Israeli blockade, and Palestinians in Israel are subject to systematic discrimination against their rights as equal citizens and as a national group. But other outside powers, sometimes but not always acting in tandem with Israel, also intervene in varying degrees.

The Israeli Occupation of the West Bank and Siege of the Gaza Strip

Israel controls the land, airspace, natural resources, access, and borders of the two occupied Palestinian territories as well as movement between them and between each and the outside world. It can, for instance, prevent the holding of general elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip if it so desires. It can refuse to respect the results of such elections by imposing sanctions, paralyze PA institutions through travel restrictions, maintain a total blockade in defiance of international opinion on the entire Gaza Strip in an effort to starve Gazans into submission, and hold Yasir Arafat, the fairly elected president of the PA, virtually hostage by military siege almost until his death.

More routinely, Israel can (and does) deny entry to or exit from any of these areas to individuals and goods. No airport or port can be built or allowed to function without its explicit consent. Israel must authorize (and more often prohibits) any construction, including on private Palestinian property, anywhere in East Jerusalem or in the 61 percent of the West Bank over which it continues to exercise full control (it maintains security control over the remainder). At the same time, Israel has accelerated settlement expansion at a faster pace since Oslo; by 2007, the number of colonial settlements in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) had reached 144, with around half a million Israeli Jewish settlers⁹—more than a fifth of the Palestinian population of the West Bank.¹⁰ Meanwhile, in the course of its forty-three-year occupation, it has entirely reshaped the social and economic structure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip through land expropriations, industrial de-development policies, marginalization of agriculture, control over natural resources, the economy, and trade, and so on. Israel's power, however, has been amply exposed elsewhere and is not the subject of this essay.

Donors and Foreign Powers

Ever since the PA was created, its internal workings have come under the close scrutiny not only of the colonial power but also of international and regional powers and donor countries by virtue of its lack of even minimal sovereignty over its territory, resources, economy, and defense. From 1994 on, donor state involvement in the PA's economic affairs has included direct participation in the drafting of budgets; deciding fund allocations; drawing

up financial, economic, and other plans; and determining goals and priorities. Donors provided what has been called “technical assistance” through international experts on projects that inevitably reflected their own agendas. They also established direct bilateral relations with individual ministries, with the result that Palestinian society was dealt with in bits and pieces rather than as a whole,¹¹ even as PA institutions and Palestinian NGOs increasingly became accountable to the donors rather than to their own constituencies. The result of donor dependency was to greatly reduce the capacity for independent planning and action (especially given the irregularity of funding streams);¹² in the PA’s case, it also substantially eroded overall control. If anything, direct intervention has intensified during the first decade of this century, as it has come to include the training and indoctrination of sectors of PA security forces and various measures aimed at keeping the Palestinian economy (if it can be called that) from total collapse.

Israel’s nonimplementation of the 1994 economic protocols, its total control of exports and imports, and drastic reduction of Palestinian workers allowed into Israel—coming on top of the de-development engineered by

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Israeli policies from 1967 onward, not to mention the end of remittances from Palestinians working in the Gulf after the 1990–91 Gulf crisis—made the occupied Palestinian territories excessively dependent on donor assistance. To alleviate the growing unemployment due to Israeli closures and other disruptions, the PA inflated the public sector, with obvious repercussions for the budget. With the physical destruction and economic

losses incurred during the second intifada, donor aid shifted from “development” projects to covering recurrent expenditures, including salaries. As a result of all this, the PA from the outset, and even more so since the second intifada, found itself captive to foreign aid and geared toward reproducing the conditions on which its very existence now depends.

It is hardly a surprise that this degree of dependency would affect the PA’s political stance. During the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the United States almost invariably leaned on the weaker Palestinian side to make concessions and lowered political demands to make them more acceptable to Israel. With the collapse of the negotiation process following the outbreak of the second intifada, political pressures focused more insistently on Palestinian governance “reform,” by then a euphemism for marginalizing Arafat for refusing to give in to Israel’s conditions. An example of foreign involvement in political “reform” was the creation in March 2003, mostly under external pressure, of the post of prime minister with the aim of reducing Arafat’s maneuverability by transferring some of his powers as PA president to a prime minister hoped to be more amenable to Israeli-U.S. wishes. The Quartet, comprising the United States, the European Union (EU), Russia, and the United Nations (UN), was created during this same period and thereafter took the lead in formulating plans to resolve the conflict, such as the road map (in which Israel always found loopholes),

as well as in setting conditions and imposing sanctions—for example, against the Hamas government formed following the free and fair elections of the PLC in January 2006 (while refraining from putting any tangible pressure on Israel, despite its repetitive flouting of UN resolutions). The West, in particular the United States, has also become involved in the formation, functioning, and doctrine of the Palestinian security forces in the West Bank, especially since Hamas's June 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip. Indeed, covert U.S. military support for Fatah after the 2006 elections is widely believed to have precipitated the armed clashes that led to Fatah's ouster from Gaza and the de facto split between the two territories.

Regional powers

Polarization can be defined as the alignment of political forces into two conflicting parties or movements, with no third political force in the field strong enough to exercise influence on either. In such a situation, the conflicting parties can easily become pawns in the struggle between regional powers competing for influence in the context of their own international calculus. In the Palestinian case, Fatah has the support (open or tacit) of the Arab “moderate” states, notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, while Hamas has the support (open or tacit) of Syria, Iran, and (some would add) Qatar. Several Arab states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen) have sponsored reconciliation talks between Fatah and Hamas, without success. The failure to achieve results is due not solely to obstinacy of the two Palestinian parties but also to entrenched positions of regional powers. Following one attempt, media reports indicated that it was political differences between Syria and Iran on the one hand and Egypt and Saudi Arabia on the other hand that prevented reconciliation;¹³ differences between Syria and Egypt continue to negatively impact reconciliation.

ELECTIONS UNDER OCCUPATION

Hamas's rise as a mass political movement with an Islamist ideology is without doubt one of the most important developments in the transformation of the Palestinian political field since the first intifada. Hamas categorically rejected the Oslo process, including the establishment of the PA and the 1996 general elections for the PA's legislature and executive organs. Ten years later, however, Hamas agreed to participate in the second legislative elections of January 2006, thereby signaling its willingness to take part in PA institutions and to accept, at least initially, the “rules of the game” of the Oslo-imposed system.

In the meantime, Fatah's Mahmud Abbas had won the presidential elections of January 2005, held several months after Arafat's death, with a 60 percent margin, and Fatah was widely expected to win the legislative elections as well. Hamas's upset victory at the polls was all the more pivotal in that the U.S.-encouraged political reform of 2003 had transformed the PA into a mixed presidential-parliamentary system of government, with a newly institutionalized

post of prime minister endowed with real powers. Having won the majority of seats in the PLC, Hamas now had the right to form the new PA government, making tensions between the two centers of PA executive power inevitable. Against the background of occupation, political polarization, and outside interference, it is hardly surprising that the chain of events set in train by the split elections results would lead to the emergence of two antagonistic territorial governments in Ramallah and Gaza City.

Israel, the EU, and the United States, while acknowledging that the elections had been free and fair, found the results unacceptable. They demanded that Hamas renounce the political program on which it ran (and won) in the elections and accept the Quartet's conditions (including recognition of Israel), failing which they threatened to impose sanctions against any government in which Hamas participated. Not surprisingly, Hamas refused. Hence the sanctions against the national unity government, the growing Hamas-Fatah tensions and clashes, the Hamas takeover of the Strip in June 2007, the blockade, the intensification of Israeli operations, and Operation Cast Lead. The threat of another major war continues to be a reality.

It is difficult not to conclude that the elections results were an important factor propelling further polarization of the Palestinian political field. Without doubt, the United States and the EU were anxious for general elections for the PLC to be held, especially since the results were expected to favor the "moderate" leadership. By encouraging them in the prevailing circumstances, the Western powers were operating on a reductionist concept that equated democracy with free parliamentary elections, ignoring that the basis of effective democracy is citizenship and values that are not operative under colonial domination.

But the Palestinians also bear a large part of the blame. The agreement to hold general elections was not preceded by any serious dialogue organized by the major political parties to determine the *objective* of elections in the context of intensifying settlement expansion and the lengthening separation wall in the West Bank and the almost nonstop Israeli military operations against Gaza, not to mention the stalled negotiations and the virtual elimination of any prospect for a sovereign Palestinian state any time soon. Discussion should also have considered the timing of elections, which in fact were held when the Palestinian national movement was at its weakest internally and its most vulnerable externally, suspended in a state of political anomie. Moreover, in addition to the absence of a unifying charter or general agreement on the goals of the elections, there was no mechanism in place that might have resolved the conflicts that almost certainly would have arisen as a result of the elections, especially since the PLC could hardly have played a constructive role in the circumstances, even if Israeli action had not effectively prevented it from holding sessions.

In short, elections in a society under direct foreign occupation or domination, unless held with a clear and predetermined agenda and a postelection strategy for advancing the cause of independence and self-determination, are almost bound to compound the already-existing problems within the political national field. The mere fact of foreign occupation is likely to push political

forces to polarize into two major camps: those who seek to get rid of the occupation through resistance (particularly armed resistance) and those who advocate negotiations and peaceful resistance.

TOWARD A CONCLUSION

In November 2009, general elections for both the PA presidency and the PLC, which were supposed to be held in January 2010, were called off because of disagreements between the two principal movements. Moreover, all attempts to end the geopolitical polarization so far have failed, and the polarization seems to have acquired its own dynamic. Yet all the actors within the Palestinian political field acknowledge that prolonging the present divide is deeply harmful to Palestinian national interests.

The continuation of the polarization derives especially from two processes: (1) the paralysis of Palestinian institutions, making them powerless to mediate and resolve national conflicts, and (2) outside interference in (and manipulation of) the political, security, and financial dimensions of the Palestinian national field by actors both regional and international. It goes without saying that the geopolitical divide within the Palestinian political field cannot be ended if these issues are not addressed.

With regard to the internal Palestinian scene, priority must be given to reforming and empowering Palestinian national institutions so as to enable them to fulfill the functions for which they were established, including resolving internal conflicts, formulating policies and strategies, promulgating and enforcing legislation, and mobilizing the Palestinian people. The problem is not simply getting the contending parties to acknowledge the need to empower national institutions (and especially representative institutions like the PLC and the PNC) and to agree to make them more democratic, responsive, and responsible, but, more fundamentally, to get them to take the *necessary steps* to implement the reforms needed to this end. But the prerequisite to reform is reconciliation.

Part of the present tragedy derives from the fact that both Fatah and Hamas clearly believe they will lose if the political field is reunified through the rebuilding of Palestinian national institutions—in other words, from genuine reconciliation. Hamas believes that reconciliation—and subsequent “integration” into the Palestinian political field—would force it to choose between two unwelcome options. The first would be to renounce its declared political program by accepting the Quartet’s three demands (recognize Israel, adhere to all PLO-Israeli agreements, and renounce violent resistance) in order to participate in a “national unity government,” which might possibly allow it to retain a dominant (but by no means exclusive) role in Gaza. The second would be to renounce any control of Gaza but keep its political program intact as the main opposition party to a Fatah-dominated PA government. Fatah, on the other hand, fears that reconciliation would allow Hamas to organize freely in the West Bank and would, once the PLO institutions are restructured, give it effective partnership in reforming and then running the PLO. (Consensus

on the need to reform the PLO already exists.) These two Hamas gains taken together, the Fatah leadership fears, would help the movement secure wider Arab and international acceptance.

Given the growing threat to civil and political freedoms in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, it is imperative that sustained internal pressure be brought to bear on both parties (however great their resistance to changing the status quo) to put the national interest above narrow sectarian concerns. Pressures to this end have been applied by the smaller Palestinian parties, but without the coordination and unified approach needed to make their efforts effective. Similarly, attempts to reconcile the two parties by a number of independent public figures (such as businessman Munib al-Masri), together with civil society organizations, have been to no avail. What has not been tried is mass Palestinian action—demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, and acts of civil disobedience, both in Palestine and in the diaspora—calling on the two main parties to work together with other factions and groups to rebuild and reform democratically the virtually defunct national institutions.

The second obstacle to reconciliation between the two leading Palestinian movements is the direct interference of outside powers. This problem is both simpler in appearance and more difficult to influence at the Palestinian national level. To date, the various external attempts to reconcile Hamas and Fatah—led by Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt—have all come to nothing, undoubtedly because all three states have been primarily supportive of one side (Fatah) at the expense of the other (Hamas), which is supported by Syria and Iran. What this would seem to mean is that unless Saudi Arabia and Egypt reach agreement with Syria and Iran to give the go-ahead for Hamas and Fatah to sort out their differences, the polarization is likely to continue.

As mentioned above, the mass intervention of Palestinian civil society organizations and popular action could perhaps bring the two leading Palestinian national movements to realize that neither can exclude the other from the national institutions and from having a voice in formulating national strategy. It is more difficult to envisage what could break the second deadlock, caused by the external actors. Here, too, the active intervention of Arab political and civil organizations could play an intermediary role with the governments concerned. But especially, the Arab and regional decision makers themselves should realize that a vulnerable Palestinian political field (as represented by the geopolitical polarization between Fatah and Hamas) can only be an additional source of strength for Israel and its regional agenda.

ENDNOTES

1. The concept of political field utilizes the concept of field as conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu; see Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (London: Sage Publications, 1993). The boundaries of a political field are drawn by the parties,

movements, and political organizations operating within that field—competing to capture the center of power, secure a stake in it, or influence it. Political fields comprise systems of rule, as well as procedures for the rotation and legitimization

of power through various procedures. In every political field, national and cultural symbols are generated, along with a particular historical narrative and its constitutional frames of reference or national charters that regulate the relationship of the individual to the institutions of the central authority. In addition, civil society organizations—social movements, popular unions, professional and workers' unions, and civil organizations among others—have to function within (and attempt to influence) the institutions of the national political field. Political fields are shaped (to a small or large degree) by the relations the dominant force over the field has with the centers of international and regional powers. They are also influenced by the field's ongoing socioeconomic processes (such as urban growth, education, domestic and international migration, and industrial and technological change).

2. This essay benefited from research into political polarization in Iraq, Lebanon, and the occupied Palestinian territory carried out by the author during spring and autumn 2008 as a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Centre (Beirut) and from a background paper by the author on polarization and fragmentation in the occupied Palestinian territory for the "Palestine Human Development Report 2009/10" published by the United Nations Development Program in May 2010.

3. The General Union of Palestinian Women held its fifth conference in May 2009 in Ramallah, twenty-five years after its last conference (held in 1985). The General Union of Palestinian Writers and Journalists held elections in 2010, but—partly in response to Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip—these were held on the basis of a "quota" system of PLO factions, without representation of Hamas or Islamic Jihad.

4. See Michael Sorkin, ed., *Against the Wall: Israel's Barrier to Peace* (New York and London: The New Press, 2005). See also Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), "Impact of the Expansion and Annexation Wall on the Socioeconomic Conditions of Palestinian Households

in Localities in Which the Wall Passes Through, August 2006," Press Conference on the Survey Results, February 2007, http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/ImpactWall_e.pdf.

5. See Virginia Tilley, ed., "Occupation, Colonialism, Apartheid? A Reassessment of Israel's Practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories under International Law," The Middle East Project, Democracy and Governance Programme, Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa, May 2009, <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/DG.phtml>.

6. See Institute of Law, "Informal Justice System: The Rule of Law and Dispute Settlement in Palestine," Birzeit University, 2006.

7. See PCBS, Press Conference on the Poverty Report, 26 June 2008.

8. See Jamil Hilal, *The Palestinian Middle Class* [in Arabic] (Beirut and Ramallah: Institute of Palestine Studies and Muwatin—The Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy, 2006).

9. According to a statistical report by PCBS, there were some 440 occupation (colonial) sites in the West Bank in 2007, of which 144 were settlements with a Jewish population of 483,453. See http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/annual%206.pdf.

10. According to the population census carried out by PCBS, the Arab population of the West Bank was 2,350,583 at the end of 2007, and 1,416,543 in the Gaza Strip at the time.

11. See Anne Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians After Oslo: Political Guilt, Wasted Money* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

12. Le More, *International Assistance*.

13. See, for example, Jamil Hilal, "Lebanon, Iraq, Territory of Palestinian Authority; Factors of Polarization" [in Arabic], Carnegie Centre, 2009, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/Hilal_Paper.pdf; and Al-Akhbar, "They say in Syria . . . on Lebanon, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia" [in Arabic], 11 December 2008, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/107311>.