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The Palestinian parliamentary legislative elections 25 January 2006

SALIH BIÇAKCI

The Palestinian parliamentary elections, which were held on 25 January 2006, represent a historical turning point in the fate of Palestinians. After Arafat, the expectations of Palestinian politics decreased to a minimum with the rising concern over a civil war in the Palestinian territories. The result will be the worst of the alternatives if one pays attention to the prevalent discussions before the elections. Palestinian issues attract enormous attention, but one only recognizes a limited number of comprehensive analyses to understand the roots and the routes of the problems. This paper aims to discuss the Palestinian parliamentary elections in a wider context, which will also cover the implications of the Hamas victory in the elections on Palestinian politics and, in general, for the future of the peace process.

Background

One major breakthrough in the struggle of the Palestinian people was the recognition of Palestine as an independent state under the leadership of Yasser Arafat. Arafat's legendary organization—the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—has not only achieved a major role in international relations and the struggle against Israel, but has also been a major actor in domestic politics.¹

UN Resolution 242, which assumed Palestinian rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, created the context of Palestinian politics.² The years of struggle did not really lead to the emergence of vibrant societal politics, but rather to militias and resistance groups. The major issue was the creation of a legal basis for Palestinian politics, which was created by Arafat's leaving the guns behind and, as mentioned, the creation of Palestinian statehood. The emergence of the PLO as a legitimate actor in international politics also defined the sphere of politics within the Palestinian territories.³ This situation—under serious war conditions—led to the emergence of a number of groups that paved the way for a communitarian style of politics.

There have been several determinants of this polity. The PLO held on to its dominating force, and the narrow base of domestic politics only led other groups to seek a place within the political realm vis-à-vis this hegemonic role. In this sense, the PLO has been an umbrella organization. The subsequent uprisings in

¹For further details, see Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.

²For the full text of UN Resolution 242, see <<http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/9a798adb322aff38525617b006d88d7/59210ce6d04aef61852560c3005da209?OpenDocument&HighLight=2,242>> (20 January 2006).

³Sayigh, *op. cit.*, pp. 174–216.

the occupied territories created another source of legitimacy—not necessarily legality—in the struggle against Israel and the community services among the Palestinians. Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, emerged in this context, and later on monopolized the militia warfare and suicide bombings against Israeli targets. Hamas has both civilian and military branches and is considered the major threat to Israeli security and the peace process.⁴ In the positive atmosphere of the post-Oslo Accord, there was an optimistic expectation for the emergence of a two-pole political system among the Palestinians: the PLO versus Hamas. However, this expectation was not met, mainly because the peace process did not prove successful and because of the increasing violence in the occupied territories after the Al-Aqsa Intifadah.⁵

Retrospectively, in the 1996 elections, Yasser Arafat was elected president of the Palestine Authority with an 88.2 per cent majority.⁶ Even though the independent international observers reported that the elections were free and fair, there was no competition—with the exception of a weak candidate, Samiha Khalil.⁷ Hamas and opposition movements chose not to participate in the presidential election by claiming that they would not compete with a party that recognizes Israel. On the other hand, the 1996 elections took place at a moment of optimism in the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. The majority of Palestinians believed that the government they were electing would be the first of an independent Palestinian state. In the following years, the continuation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the failure to come to any peace agreements triggered instability in the region. As a result of this instability, new presidential and legislative elections were not held until nearly a decade later.

On 11 November 2004, Yasser Arafat passed away in France.⁸ His death brought closure to a period of struggles for Palestine Independence. The heroic and legendary period of Palestinian leadership ended. Since Arafat did not allow for a second man, the presidential elections were vital not only for Palestinian society, but also for Israel, which waited anxiously for the results.

The presidential election

The 2005 Palestinian presidential election took place on 9 January 2005 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Mahmoud Abbas won over 62 per cent of the vote in the Palestine presidential elections. The other powerful candidate, Marwan Barghouti, who was in an Israeli prison due to his conviction in several *Intifadah* killings, withdrew his candidacy on 12 December. Seven candidates contested the election. The independent Mustafa Barghouti came in second, with just under 20 per cent, with the remaining candidates far behind.⁹ This election was also

⁴Shaul Mishal-Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000, pp. 13–26.

⁵Cherly Rubenberg, *The Palestinians: In Search of a Just Peace*, Lynne Rienner Publishers Colorado, 2003, pp. 323–335.

⁶'1996 election results', Central Elections Commission Palestine, <http://www.elections.ps/pdf/Results_election_1996.pdf> (20 January 2006).

⁷Ghada Talhami, 'In memoriam: Samiha Khalil', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 21(2), Spring 1999, pp. iii–iv.

⁸For further details on Yasser Arafat, see Barry Rubin and Judith Colph Rubin, *Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.

⁹'Presidential election final results', Central Elections Commission Palestine, <http://www.elections.ps/pdf/Presidential_Elections_Final_Results.pdf> (26 January 2006).

boycotted by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which were the strongest groups in the Gaza Strip.

The election campaign was faced with the blockade of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in Palestinian territories. In many instances Israeli forces actively interfered with the campaigns. The IDF did not permit several Palestinian candidates to enter East Jerusalem. There was even an incident of (gun?) open fire at a school that was functioning as a voting centre in Khan Yunis during the 2005 presidential elections. With regard to political participation, 70 per cent of those listed in the electoral register voted. One should note that over 30 per cent of eligible citizens were not registered.

The local elections

On 15 December 2005, six weeks ahead of the 25 January parliamentary poll, local elections took place. Hamas realized big local election gains from the fractured ruling Fatah Party (the strongest faction of the PLO). In the local elections, Hamas won growing support from Palestinians who saw it as less tainted by corruption than Fatah. Hamas won control of the West Bank city of Jenin, taking eight seats, while a coalition between Fatah and the radical Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine garnered just seven.

In Al-Bireh, a large suburb on the outskirts of Ramallah, Hamas won 72 per cent of the vote, grabbing nine seats, compared with Fatah's four. Hamas also won Nablus, winning 13 out of 15 seats in a city where Fatah was traditionally strong.¹⁰

Thousands of Hamas supporters celebrated in the Gaza Strip, chanting 'God is the greatest' and waving their green flag. The last round of voting in the local elections gave control of the big cities to Hamas.

Shimshon Arbel, a former Israeli military governor in Nablus, said that he was not surprised by Hamas' victory, because the movement has invested a great deal in building up a strong civil structure that provides free schooling and medical treatment to the Palestinian population. He also added that meanwhile Fatah has been corrupt and failed to manage the Palestinian Authority.¹¹

A senior Hamas leader, Sheikh Nizar Rayan, gave indications of their victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections by issuing the statement, 'We are coming, we are coming.'¹² Meanwhile, Hamas looked forward to further victories. Hamas spokesman Yasser Mansour said, 'We will be a big party when we win the elections for parliament.'¹³

Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in September after 38 years of occupation has intensified the power struggle which has given Palestinians a territory that is widely seen as a testing ground for statehood.

Ali Jarbawi, a Palestinian commentator, interpreted the condition as such: 'Fatah has two choices: either to regroup or to take steps to sabotage

¹⁰United Nations Development Program, POGAR, 'Elections: Palestine', <<http://www.pogar.org/countries/elections.asp?cid=14>> (26 January 2006).

¹¹Haaretz, 30 January 2005, <<http://www.haaretzdaily.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=657860>> (29 January 2006).

¹²'Hamas extends gains in Palestinian local election', *Reuters*, 16 December 2005, <<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L16379650.htm>> (20 January 2006).

¹³Haaretz, 30 January 2005, op. cit.

the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections. Otherwise they will risk Hamas controlling the PLC.¹⁴

The Legislative Council elections

On 25 January 2006, elections were held for the PLC. This was the first election for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) since 1996; elections had been postponed due to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. All Palestinian people voted for 132 seats. In addition to the independent candidates, there were 11 parties which were new even to the Palestinian people. Fatah and Hamas were the main contenders. This was the first time that Hamas participated in a parliamentary poll. The PLC election ran into a few problems that seemed crucial for reliable results. These obstacles can be grouped under security issues between Israel and Palestine.

The electoral environment

The political situation under which legislative elections are conducted in Palestine differs greatly from that in other countries due to Israeli security measures. In the last week leading up to the elections, a suicide bombing also created suspicion about postponing the elections. In general, there were few obstacles which affected the electoral process of the Palestinian people. The PLC elections took place in 16 locations such as Hebron (Al-Halil), Gaza and Khan Yunis. In these locations, there were strict checkpoint controls and road closure policy applications. The IDF had *habitus* of closing the roads by asserting security reasons. These road closures prevented Palestinians from reaching the registration and polling centres. On the other hand, the road closures also restricted the propaganda activities of candidates during the electoral process. The road blocks also caused problems for the mobilization of ballot boxes and papers.

The second major obstacle was the electoral process in East Jerusalem. The Jerusalem electoral district is divided into two areas: East Jerusalem and its suburbs. East Jerusalem was under the control of Israeli forces and is the area behind the checkpoints. A total of 250,000 Palestinians, holding Israeli ID cards, reside in East Jerusalem.

The electoral campaigns of the PLC election candidates were limited by the Israeli forces' detentions. In particular, inadequate support by the Israeli government to facilitate the balloting process for voters at post offices was vital for Israeli Arabs who were located in Eastern Jerusalem and who wanted to vote. The electoral campaign of Mustafa Barghouti and Hanan Ashrawi in East Jerusalem was ended by the brief detainment of both by the Israeli police.¹⁵ The Israeli police also closed a few Hamas election offices in East Jerusalem. In addition to this tide chasing, the other difficulty of the Palestine elections was the candidates in Israeli prisons. A remarkable number of election candidates were located in Israeli prisons. In total, there were 10 candidates located in Israeli prisons: 8 from the Change and Reform list, 1 from The Popular Front list, 1 from the Fatah list.

¹⁴Hamas extends ...', op. cit.

¹⁵'Palestinian campaigners stopped', BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4578210.stm> (19 January 2006).

The PLC elections were very colourful, not only from the perspective of the dying inks to prevent multiple voting, but also because of the campaign posters. The Gaza Strip was ornamented with banners, flags and an incessant number of campaign trolleys perusing up and down the city streets, blasting out music and messages. All opportunities and technical availabilities were used by the political parties to convince the Palestinians to vote for their party. Fatah set up a toll-free hotline and sent SMS messages to their subscribers.

Hamas perceived the elections as a battle of visual images; therefore, they got professional aid for their clothing and campaign. Mahmoud al-Zahar, a senior Hamas leader in Gaza, mentioned that they recruited a professional image-maker for the campaign.¹⁶ The female members of Hamas also joined the political campaigns for the first time. Door-to-door campaigns of the parties were a common method of convincing Palestinian society to vote for them.

After the elections, the streets were quiet, with Hamas leaders advising supporters to stay indoors and not to react to any provocations from their rivals. Tension, uncertainty and of course, measured giddiness on the part of Hamas, were in the air.

Electoral system

On 25 January 2006, the 1.4 million registered voters in Palestine cast two different kinds of ballots—a district and a national ballot. The Palestinian Legislative Council, on 18 June 2005, approved a new elections law which adopted the mixed electoral system for PLC elections.

The mixed electoral system combined majority voting in the districts and proportional representation, or 'lists', and each list consisted of at least seven persons. The 132 seats of the PLC were divided equally between the two systems with 66 for each. The number of seats was allocated according to the populations of the 16 electoral districts. To protect the rights of Christian Palestinians, six of the 66 seats allocated to the majority system were reserved for Christians. Seats were won by Christians who obtained the highest number of votes in the district.

There are 16 districts with the following seat allocations: Jerusalem (six seats, two reserved for Christians); Ramallah (five seats, one reserved for Christians); Bethlehem (four seats, two reserved for Christians); Hebron (nine seats); Gaza City (eight seats, one reserved for Christians); Northern Gaza (five seats); Nablus (six seats); Qalqilya (two seats); Tulkarem (three seats); Jenin (four seats); Khan Yunis (five seats); Rafah (three seats); Deir al-Balah (three seats); Jericho (one seat); Salfit (one seat); and Tubas (one seat).¹⁷

On voting day, each voter received two ballot papers; the first one contained the names of the candidates who were running for the seats of the electoral district. The voter had to elect a number of candidates without exceeding the number of seats assigned for each district. The second paper had the competing lists of parties from which the voter had to choose only one list.

Winning candidates were those who obtained the highest number of valid votes regardless of the numbers, that is, it was not necessary to win the absolute

¹⁶Manset' program, CNN-Turk Television, 26 January 2006.

¹⁷'Candidates for electoral districts', Central Elections Commission Palestine, <http://www.elections.ps/pdf/Final_List_of_Registered_District_Candidates_-_English.pdf>.

majority of votes. In the case of a tie between two or more candidates in a district with one seat, elections were held between these candidates within 10 days.

Parties participating

Fatah movement (Harakit Fatah)

The acronym for *Harakat At-Tahriri Al-Filistiniya*, is Fatah (in reverse order), giving Fatah-conquest. The movement was founded in Kuwait in 1959 by Yasser Arafat and his associates, in order to liberate Palestinian lands. The Fatah movement has had the majority in the PLC, holding 68 of the 88 seats. However, Fatah has been separated by the strife of younger figures such as Mohammed Dahlan and Marwan Barghouti (currently in an Israeli prison on terrorism charges). Fatah organized primary elections to decide on the list of candidates; however, the results were disputed, and separated the supporters and central lists imposed in some areas. Fatah is broadly divided between an old guard, dating from Yasser Arafat's years in exile, and younger members who have fought Israel on the ground and who now want a bigger share of power.

The younger faction submitted a list dubbed *Al-Mustaqbal* ('the Future'), headed by Barghouti. On 28 December 2005, the leadership of the two factions agreed on a strategy to submit a single list to the voters, led by Barghouti, who began actively campaigning for Fatah from his jail cell. The two groups were by no means fully reconciled. There were a remarkable number of election candidates running as independents in the lists. The main complaint of the Palestinian people regarding Fatah has been corruption and lawlessness.¹⁸

Change and Reform (Al-Islah wal-Taghyir)—HAMAS

Shaikh Ahmad Yassin co-founded Hamas with Abd al-Aziz al-Rantissi in 1987, originally calling it the Palestinian Wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas, the acronym of *Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyya* (literally 'Islamic Resistance Movement'), is a Palestinian Islamist movement and political party.¹⁹ The main component of the Change and Reform list is the Islamist Hamas movement. The polls showed that Fatah and Hamas were the main political rivals. In basic terms, Fatah recognizes Israel's right to exist, but Hamas is of the opposite opinion. Indeed, in the 1996 election, Hamas took the stance that the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was illegitimate due to its negotiations with Israel, and refused to participate. Hamas started the PLC elections with the motivation of their electoral success in the municipal elections in December 2005.

Western governments have been concerned about the prospect of a PLC dominated by Hamas as Hamas is listed among the terrorist groups of these governments. It was the fear of a Hamas victory that was largely credited with driving the reconciliation between Fatah and Al-Mustaqbal.

¹⁸Glenn E. Robinson, *Building a Palestinian State: The Incomplete Revolution*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1997, pp. 180–185.

¹⁹For the moderation of Hamas after Shaikh Ahmad Yassin and Al-Rantissi, see Khaled Hroub, 'Hamas after Shaykh Yasin and Rantisi', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 33(4), 2004 pp. 21–38.

The Alternative (Al-Badiil)

The Alternative is a coalition of leftist parties. The list is headed by Qais Karim Khadir and forms a coalition of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Palestinian People's Party (PPP), Fida and various independents. After Fatah, the PFLP is the second largest group of the umbrella Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).²⁰

The Third Way (Al-Tariq al-Thalith)

This list is headed by former Palestinian Authority Finance Minister and technocrat Dr Salam Fayyad and former PA Minister of Higher Education Hanan Ashrawi.²¹ Their platform focused on the reform of the security forces, democratic improvements and socio-economic progress in their PLC election campaigns. The Third Way is growing, according to the various polls in the PNA.

Independent Palestine (Falastin al-Mustaqila)

The Independent Palestine slate (National Initiative) is headed by Dr Mustafa Barghouti, a distant relative of Marwan Barghouti, who finished second in the 2005 Palestinian presidential election. The main component is the Palestinian National Initiative. The slate promised to fight corruption and nepotism, and demand the dismantlement of Israel's security wall. In truth, the Independent Palestine slate aimed to provide 'a truly democratic and independent "third way" for the large majority of silent and unrepresented Palestinian voters, who have been stuck between the autocracy and corruption of the governing Fatah party and the fundamentalism of Hamas'.²²

The National Coalition for Justice and Democracy Wa'ad ('Al-I'tilaf al-Watani lil Adala wal Democratiya' Wa'ad)

Also known as the National Coalition for Justice and Democracy, this list is headed by Gaza psychiatrist Dr Eyad Al-Sarraj, who was a consultant to the Palestinian delegation to Camp David. He is also leading a group of Palestinian and Israeli academics in working towards a peace agreement. The list's main concentration was on security reforms and on establishing the rule of law and respect for human rights.

Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa (Ashaded Abu Ali Mustafa)

This slate was formed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and took its name after the assassination of the General Secretary of the PFLP in 2001. Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa is led by Ahmad Sa'adat.

²⁰Harold M. Cubert, *The PFLP's Changing Role in the Middle East*, Frank Cass, London, 1997, pp. 1-7.

²¹For further details on Hanan Ashrawi, see <<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/Elberg/Ashrawi/Ashrawi.html>> (20 January 2006).

²²Barghouthi announces "Independent Palestine" as the third way in Palestinian politics', Al-Mubadara, <<http://www.almubadara.org/new/edetails.php?id = 204>>.

Martyr Abu al Abbas (Ashaded Abu al Abbas)

This slate takes its name from the Palestine Liberation Front Secretary-General who died a martyr in an American prison in Baghdad under unclear circumstances. Omar Shlabi headed the list.

Freedom and Social Justice (Al-Huriya wal Adal al-Ijtma'ya)

This slate is led by Ahmad Majdalani, who is the former minister of state in the PNA. In the pre-election polls, it had 0.7 per cent support of the Palestinian people.

Freedom and Independence (Al-Huriya wal Istiqlal)

Saleem Al Bardeeni led the list. In the polls of An-Najah National University, the list had 0.3 per cent support.

The Palestinian Justice (Al-Adala al-Filistinya)

This list is led by Sameer Qadri and was new to Palestinian voters. In the polls leading up to the election, the list's ratio went from 0.3 to 0.7 per cent.

Analysis of the election results

Table 1 shows the results at the end of the Palestinian parliamentary legislative elections.

Before the PLC elections, there was concern over postponement. A week before the elections, the suicide bombing in Tel Aviv also created anxiety among Palestinians. Fortunately, the elections started and finished on time. A total of 1.4 million Palestinians voted for their destiny.

The death of Yasser Arafat created a political gap and uncertain conditions in the PNA and among the Palestinian people. Palestinians are still searching for a political hero and defender of Palestine. The new leaders mainly emerged

Table 1.

Parties	Obtained seats
Change and Reform (HAMAS)	74
Fatah	45
Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa	3
The Alternative	2
Independent Palestine	2
The Third Way	2
Independents	4
Total	132

from the former tribe of Arafat. The former ministers and compatriots of Arafat appeared as the leaders of new political parties. Therefore, the PLC election is the reformation of a new power configuration of Palestine. Eleven parties participated in the elections.

Fatah and Hamas were the forerunners of the elections. Fatah, as a keystone of the political system, was competing with its tough counterpart Hamas for the first time in Palestine.

Fatah won 43 seats in the elections, which is noteworthy, given their remarkable defeat in the political history of the PNA. Fatah has not properly evaluated their political experiences since Oslo and therefore has failed to develop a coherent plan in their dealings with American–Israeli pressures. The crisis was deepened by the absence of security, the continuation of the centres of corruption and a general lack of accountability. In the PNC elections, the Fatah movement now stands at a historical crossroads. Either its organizational bodies and leadership must stop the process of self-corrosion and confront the contradictions besetting the movement, or the dynamism of the crisis will push the movement towards division and disintegration. Prior to the elections, Fatah tried to improve their public image by opening a campaign that promised ‘an answer to every question’.

In numbers, Fatah won 43 seats in the election; however, the ratio is not enough to become the majority party in parliament. It is a remarkable decrease compared to previous years. Fatah has had to share their potential voters with the former compatriots of Arafat.

The political predictions before the elections suggested that there would be new coalitions in the Palestinian parliament. Hamas and Fatah officials indicated an interest in joining together in a coalition after the vote.²³ But after the certain victory of Hamas, Fatah resigned the government by submitting a petition to the president prior to the final announcement of Central Elections Commission results.

On the other hand, the Fatah movement, which represents itself as the movement that brought to life the national struggle with the motto ‘the first bullet, the first rock’, has had the nostalgic support of the Palestinian people. Nevertheless, Palestine preferred to vote for the Hamas movement, which put this motto into practice. For time being, the Fatah movement has formed a middle class in Palestine, which means an ossified supporter group for itself.

The new and key element of the PNC elections is Hamas, which has 76 of the 132 seats in parliament. The Change and Reform list has the majority of the seats in the PNC, which means victory in a political sense. The corruption and lawlessness of Fatah empowered Hamas’ position and therefore increased the number of votes in their favour.

Hamas is an inbred organization of the Palestinian people and rooted at the public level. Hamas entered the PNC elections under the name of ‘Change and Reform List’, with the slogan ‘Building with one hand, battling with the other.’ It is representative of what Hamas wants from this election. The Hamas movement has tried to open a new period in the Palestine political system, cleansed of the corruption and lawlessness of the Fatah movement. The motto

²³Haaretz, 24 January 2006, <<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/673820.html>> (29 January 2006).

of the Change and Reform list also represents the fact that they will try to build a new Palestinian society and political arena after Arafat, battling corruption—if not Israel.

Before the elections, Olmert said, 'under no circumstance we will permit Hamas to enter Jerusalem and carry out electioneering'.²⁴ He had authorized the police to remove all 'traces' of Hamas presence in the city. Israel also warned the Palestinian people that if Hamas did well in the elections, international donors, including the USA and the EU, will stop their aid.

Israelis and some eminent members of Israeli academia do not believe that Hamas can be moderated. In contrast, other academicians assert that becoming a political entity in the parliament will moderate Hamas. Indeed, this is too optimistic a view regarding Hamas, which is an organization that always takes its core power from the *muqawamah* (armed struggle). One may, however, still expect moderation of Hamas to some degree, considering their earlier refusal to participate in the 1996 elections because of Fatah's approach to Israel.

What has changed between then and now? The only fatal change was the death of Yasser Arafat. It is hard to see a radical change in Fatah. Therefore, one assumes that Hamas became more moderate by participating in the PNC elections. Their list was entitled 'change and reform' because the Hamas ruling elite believed that a change in their mentality was a necessity. However, the moderation of Hamas is not a guarantee for the decrease in armed struggle and their activities.

After the elections, the Israeli media started to publish statements blaming Hamas for being a terrorist organization and not being reciprocal towards Israel. The question is how Israel will cooperate with Hamas now that they are a partner in the Palestinian government. During the election campaigns, Sheikh Mohammed Abu Tir, who was second on the Hamas national list for the Palestinian parliamentary election, stated, 'We'll negotiate [with Israel] better than the others, who negotiated for 10 years and achieved nothing.'²⁵ The statement is rather interesting because it comes from a party that does not recognize Israel. But the media also misunderstood the message of Hamas leaders, as al-Zahar says, 'We do not recognize Israel.'²⁶ At its core, Hamas believes that the PNA is an independent state and does not need Israel's approval to be valid. In the sense of international relations, both parties are acting in a rational manner.

After the announcement of Hamas' victory in the elections, Mahmoud al-Zahar added, 'they will keep the guns'.²⁷ Many parties understood this statement to mean that Hamas will go on their *muqawamah*. However, one thinks that al-Zahar implied that they would form a modern military for the PNA, which will not be formed by the nepotism of the Fatah movement.

In spite of the victory of Hamas, the Palestinian voters—even those who voted for them—are not sure if they will fulfil their expectations. The main

²⁴*Al Ahrām Weekly*, No. 778, 19–25 January 2006, <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/778/fr1.htm>> (20 January 2006).

²⁵Haaretz, 16 January 2006, <<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/670203.html>> (20 January 2006).

²⁶'Hamas leader sees no change toward Israelis', *The New York Times*, 29 January 2006, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/29/international/middleeast/29hamasx.html>> (29 January 2006).

²⁷'Manset' program, op. cit.

question in the Palestinians' minds is: Hamas has proven itself trustworthy on the municipal level, but how will they perform nationally, as a body of legislators and politicians?²⁸

The minority of Palestinian voters who did not want to vote for Fatah or Hamas chose to support other parties in the political spectrum, such as Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa led by Ahmad Sa'adat; Independent Palestine and the Independents led by Mustafa Al Barghouti; The Third Way led by Salam Fayyad; or *Al Badiil* (The Alternative) led by Qais Abu Laila. The Independents and these lists got 13 seats in parliament. Owing to the crisis of the Fatah movement, the leftist pole has gained increased importance in Palestinian politics. This is because the left can form a force of polarization and attraction for the mass sectors of Palestinian society.

Conclusion

More than 1.4 million voters are registered in the PNA, with more than 120,000 eligible voters in East Jerusalem, which is under Israeli control but mostly populated by Arab Palestinians. On 25 January, 74 per cent of registered voters voted for the representation of their choice in the Palestinian parliament. Actually, the rise of Hamas is not surprising when one looks at the local elections. The major question is how will Hamas interact with the Fatah movement as well as with Israel, the USA and the EU? After the elections, the friction between Fatah and Hamas became evident with the clash of supporter groups in the streets of Ramallah and Gaza. Even the Fatah supporters broke into a PLC building. Since elections are vital for the democratic process, it would be rational to accept the choice of the Palestinian people for Hamas. In this sense, it might be more logical for the USA and the EU to wait and see without reaching any decisions just yet. However, the USA declared Hamas to be a terrorist organization and pushed it to recognize the State of Israel. Additionally, Israel has also wished for the outbreak of a civil war in Ramallah and Gaza. The EU also declared that they would stop their economic aid to the Palestinian people. Overall, to be disrespectful of the preference of the Palestinian people will be a misguided approach to teaching them about democracy. If an organization participates in an election, it means they are ready to consider the will of the voters.

In Palestinian society, the middle class has remarkable influence, and they are the main supporters of Fatah. This middle class suffered from corruption and security issues; therefore, they voted for Hamas with the hope that they will obtain the needs of Palestine. Hamas is conscious of this balance of power in Palestinian society and was the reason why Hamas did not have a presidential candidate in the Palestinian presidential elections in 2005.²⁹ Hamas initiated its political life by joining the local elections thus it appeared to rise step by step.

Israel's and Sharon's unilateral policies have increased the number of votes for Hamas. The continuation of this policy will only tighten the robes. The Israeli

²⁸For a sociological revise of Hamas' rise, see Jamil Hilal, 'Hamas's rise as charted in the polls, 1945–2005', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 35(3), 2006 pp. 6–19.

²⁹For another approach to Fatah's apparent reluctance to share power, see Graham Usher, 'The democratic resistance: Hamas, Fatah and the Palestinian elections', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 35(3), 2006 pp. 20–36.

people's support of Sharon also prepared the background for the rise of Hamas. After Sharon, Ehud Olmert has also followed hard line policies toward the Palestinian people. Israel has continued its attacks on Gaza. Hamas had to form the government via video conferencing due to lack of connections between the West Bank and Gaza. The EU announced the suspension of all aid to the Palestinian Authority because of the Hamas victory after the elections on 7 April 2006. After forming the cabinet, Hamas had to deal with the payment of salaries to Palestinian officers and workers. However, resources were almost all lost after the elections. The payment of salaries has become a lever in the hands of pro-Fatah Palestinians. Hamas was stuck because of the suspension of aid that had been transferred via Israeli banks. Ismail Haniyya tried to figure out a solution to the problem by outsourcing. Hamas officials attempted to smuggle €639,000 into Gaza, but the border monitors confiscated it on 19 May 2006. There was a consensus in the world to tame Hamas through economic sanctions. There is a global misunderstanding about the position of Hamas; the military and political wings are separately, independently managed by different rulers.

Israel was trying to protect Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah gunmen to compensate for the domestic power shift among the Palestinians with a secret wish to start a civil war. Before Ehud Olmert's trip to the USA, Olmert and Amir Peretz (Minister of Defence) agreed to transfer some weapons to the Palestinian Authority to purportedly assist in the defence of Mahmoud Abbas.³⁰ Israel continued to hit different targets in Gaza. Palestinian picnickers in the Gaza beach were hit by a missile strike which resulted in nine casualties including two children. Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit was captured in a cross-border attack by Palestinian gunmen on 25 June to take revenge for the Israeli missile attack on civilians. The Palestinian Popular Resistance Committee demanded prisoner releases in exchange for Shalit. Three days after the kidnap of Shalit, Israel started Operation Summer Rains and re-invaded the Gaza Strip. Three days after the beginning of the operation, the IDF arrested Palestinian cabinet ministers and lawmakers. The heavy bombing continued with the destruction of the only electric plant in the Gaza Strip, the roads, the Islamic University and the hospitals in the region. These raids did not help to find Corporal Shalit. Finally, the Israeli Air Force hit the Prime Minister's office with a missile. The international media and NGOs harshly criticized Israel's heavy attack. Turkey and some other Muslim states tried to mediate between the Hamas government and Israel for the release of Shalit. Haniyya tried to convince the military wing to release the corporal. A few days later, Hizballah kidnapped Israeli soldiers and hit Haifa with Katyusha rockets. As a result, Israel invaded Lebanon and concentrated on Hizballah. At the end of August 2006, the IDF arrested the PA deputy prime minister. In September, the decrease of Israeli intervention in Palestinian politics showed its affects with the agreement of Hamas and Fatah to create a national unity government.³¹ However, the plans were not realized in practice, Hamas and Fatah clashed heavily for a few days. Spain, France and Italy held a summit

³⁰ < <http://cosmos.ucc.ie/cs1064/jabowen/IPSC/php/event.php?eid = 1249> > (accessed 26 May 2006).

³¹For further details on the national unity government proposals and Hamas' approach, see Khaled Hroub, 'A "new Hamas" through its new documents', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 35(4), 2006 pp. 6-27.

in Girona to propose a European initiative (excluding the UK) to work out a compromise on the Israeli–Palestine–Lebanon conflict. The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution deploring Israeli military aggression against Palestinian civilians. All these international efforts ended up without any results. The Hamas government offered *hudna* (a ceasefire) for 10 years to the Israeli government and to start negotiations. Israel insisted on the condition of the recognition of the State of Israel by Hamas to initiate any negotiations. Khalid Meshal, the Chairman of the Political Bureau of Hamas, threatened Israel with the beginning of a third intifadah.

In the middle of December 2006, Haniyya's attempted entrance to Gaza from the Rafah border with money was not allowed and he had to leave the money on the Egyptian side. He was attacked by Fatah gunmen after his entry. Hamas supporters protected him. President Mahmoud Abbas publicly called for early parliamentary and presidential elections. Israeli politics supported the call of Mahmoud Abbas. Hamas leadership has announced that they will boycott any elections called by Mahmoud Abbas or Fatah.³² Olmert and his cabinet aims to narrow down the circle around Hamas either by the IDF or by provoking the internal dynamics of Palestine. By the end of December, Hamas was holding 47 per cent of all voters. The Israeli government has been cautiously following the strong public support for Hamas. Therefore, to reinforce Fatah's position, Ehud Olmert released \$100 million of withheld funds during a meeting with Mahmoud Abbas. Olmert also permitted weapons originating in Egypt to be transferred directly to Fatah forces in Gaza.

Almost one year has passed since Hamas' victory in the PLC elections. In spite of all Israeli manoeuvres and the narrowing down of the circle around Hamas, Hamas still has strong public support not only in the Gaza Strip but the West Bank as well. *Al-Quds*, one of the prominent newspapers of Palestine has also published an opinion poll on its site asking the question: 'Do you support the presidential and legislative elections early?' A total of 2359 out of 3764 voters answered 'No' which makes 62.67 per cent.³³ Both Israel and the USA would probably prefer Fatah via Mahmoud Abbas to achieve the road map plan. It has also been noted in various media that the Bush administration started lobbying activities to raise \$100 million in aid for Mahmoud Abbas. The Bush administration continuously declared that they aim to establish an independent Palestinian state with temporary borders.³⁴ The missing dimension in the US policy is failure to understand the importance of the Palestinian question for the Middle East and the Muslim world. Their policy should be aware of the fact that the Palestinian question has transboundary impact in a wider geography than the US policy makers expected. The current US policies made this conflict as a source of international humiliation in a seriously conflict-prone region. Therefore, the logical choice for Israel is to apply its own policy based on their local experience which has to respect the choices of the Palestinian people.

³²For a recent poll on the evaluation of Palestinian President and Prime Minister, see <<http://home.birzeit.edu/dsp/arabic/opinionpolls/poll29/results.html>>.

³³<<http://www.alquds.com/index.php>> (3 January 2007).

³⁴See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/iraq/iraq_strategy_nov2005.html>; <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A46469-2004Nov12.html>> (3 January 2007); and also <<http://www.forward.com/articles/state-department-weighs-plan-for-palestinian-state/>> (3 January 2007).

Hamas has to and will moderate their politics.³⁵ The brutal and risky interventions will only extend the duration of the moderation of Hamas. It would be wise to help Hamas stabilize the internal politics of Palestine which will expedite the ending of conflicts in the region.

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³⁵Some Israeli scholars also share this idea, see Dror Zeevi, 'What do Palestinians really want? The social implications of the Hamas victory', *Middle East Brief—Crown Center for Middle East Studies of Brandeis University*, No. 3, 2006, p. 5.