

Fatah and Semi-Democracy

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Introduction

How long can a democracy exist when it is dependent upon a dominant political party? Palestinian history and politics provide an insight into this question through the actions of Fatah, its longstanding secular party. From the party's beginnings as a guerilla organization to its emergence as the most internationally-respected political faction in Palestinian affairs, Fatah has evolved from hierarchical militancy to politically-centralized democracy. In general democratic procedures, non-violent political competition is the baseline upon which democracies function. The Fatah has instead sought the monopolization of political power as opposed to open contests for power in Palestinian politics. Although Fatah participated in fair and transparent elections prior to the 2007 Hamas-Fatah civil war, its continued centralization tendencies, paternalistic governance, and expulsion of political challengers demonstrate that Fatah's conduct vacillates between illiberal democracy and authoritarianism.

Fatah's Non-Democratic Origins

Palestine's origins are rooted in a non-state territory that has often been the stomping grounds for foreign powers, from the ancient Egyptian Pharaohs to the British Empire. The Palestinian's first substantial and unified political endeavor developed under the Ottoman Empire from 1876-1912, when Palestinians were permitted to send delegates from Jerusalem, Jaffa, Nablus, Acre, and Gaza to participate in Ottoman parliamentary elections. Palestinians now had access to volunteer for Ottoman civil service, diplomatic corps, judiciary, army, and

ministries.¹ However, with the British capture of Jerusalem in 1917 and the Ottoman Empire's collapse after World War I, the Palestinians lost their political leverage, but not their political appetite.² By the 1920s, Palestinians began expressing interest in forming their own state and intensified their non-violent protests against British colonial rule. This included political entreaties, diplomatic petitions, protests, strikes, and civil disobedience.³ Local merchants and ruling families formed the nerve networks of political proto-parties, which stressed unified Muslim-Christian nationalism.⁴

The year 1948 squashed these hopes with the military victory of the nascent state of Israel. The Israeli occupation of Palestine displaced up to a million Palestinians, established Israeli dominance over three-quarters of Palestine, and left the remaining territory to be administered by Jordan and the Egyptian military.⁵ It was in the context of this *Nakba* ("Catastrophe") that Palestinian guerrilla operations sprang to life, as these factions launched raids into Israel to force the state to relinquish occupied territory.⁶ Prominent in this endeavor was the guerrilla organization *Fatah* ("Conquest" or "Opening"), which formed in the late 1950s under an ambitious engineer named Yasser Arafat. *Fatah* soon began conducting operations from Damascus, Syria. It became one of the largest and best-funded Palestinian organizations by the late 1960s.⁷ This decade birthed pan-Arab movements, underground rebellions, repression,

¹ "Introduction: The Last Days of Ottoman Rule 1876-1918," *Institute for Palestine Studies*, accessed October 30, 2016, <http://btd.palestine-studies.org/content/introduction-last-days-ottoman-rule-1876-1918>.

² *Ibid.*

³ Jamil Hilal, "Problematizing Democracy in Palestine," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23, no. 1 & 2 (2003): 163; see also Victoria Mason and Richard Falk, "Assessing Nonviolence in the Palestinian Rights Struggle," *State Crime Journal* 5, no. 1 (2016): 167.

⁴ Hilal, "Problematizing Democracy in Palestine", 163.

⁵ Michele Angrist, *Politics & Society in the Contemporary Middle East*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2013), 396; see also Mason and Falk, "Assessing Nonviolence," 168.

⁶ Mason and Falk, "Assessing Nonviolence," 168.

⁷ "Fatah," *Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.*, Accessed: October 27, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fatah>.

violence, and nationalism, which became the political norm in the region. Democracy was not at the forefront of most factions' agendas.⁸

The League of Arab States aided the Palestinians in establishing the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, which was primarily made up of exiled community leaders and guerrilla officials who sought to represent Palestinians across the region and the globe.⁹ The PLO's Executive Committee was the managerial body, while the Palestine National Council (PNC) was its legislative arm—but the PLO could only govern in exile and lacked the sovereign rights and powers to accomplish any structural changes in Palestine proper.¹⁰ Fatah fought alongside the PLO against Israel during the 1967 Six Day War, in which the Arab League was handily defeated while Fatah demonstrated its combat prowess and coordination at the Jordanian town of Karameh.¹¹ Thus, although the Six Day War was devastating for the League and the pan-Arab movement, Fatah survived and gained support within the PLO, allowing the guerrilla faction to merge itself into the PLO governance.¹² By 1969, Yasser Arafat became the PLO Chairman and initiated sweeping changes to accommodate local political leaders and to restructure the organization's administration, military operations, financial sector, and

⁸ Hilal, "Problematizing Democracy in Palestine," 164.

⁹ "Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)," *Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.*, Accessed: October 27, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Palestine-Liberation-Organization>.

¹⁰ Angrist, *Politics & Society in the Contemporary Middle East*, 397; see also Hilal, "Problematizing Democracy in Palestine," 164.

¹¹ Spencer Tucker and Priscilla Roberts, *The Encyclopedia of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Political, Social, and Military History*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2008), 570.

¹² "Fatah," *Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fatah>.

ideology.¹³ By the mid-1970s, these Fatah-led initiatives elevated the PLO as the sole Palestinian representative to the Arab states and led to its official recognition by the USSR.¹⁴

Guerilla Fighters to Semi-Democratic Politicians

While Fatah led the PLO and tapped into diverse communities to build its bureaucracy and military, it did not incorporate these groups through democratic platforms.¹⁵ For instance, seats in the Executive Committee and the PNC were appointed positions based upon the PLO's quota system proportional to the population size of each respective faction.¹⁶ Left-wing parties within the PLO were one of the few voices advocating for democratic initiatives, as their populations were small and their representation minimal. Furthermore, as the government-in-exile had no direct means of administering to the Palestinian territories, there was no avenue for the PLO to initiate democratic reforms in towns and cities even if its officials had been more democratically inclined.¹⁷

For decades the PLO and Fatah rallied their pluralistic bases to contest the Israeli military through guerrilla raids and terrorist tactics. This pattern degraded in 1972 to international infamy through the actions of Black September, a breakaway assassination group originally trained by Fatah. The group murdered eleven Israeli Olympic athletes at the summer Olympic Games in

¹³ "PLO vs. PA," *Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs*, Accessed November 6, 2016. <http://www.passia.org/images/meetings/2014/oct/28/PA-PLO2.pdf>.

¹⁴ Hilal, "Problematizing Democracy in Palestine," 164.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁶ "PLO vs. PA," *Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs*, <http://www.passia.org/images/meetings/2014/oct/28/PA-PLO2.pdf>.

¹⁷ Hilal, "Problematizing Democracy in Palestine," 164.

Munich, Germany.¹⁸ Israel sought revenge and initiated the counter-assassination Operation “Wrath of God” against the PLO, killing at least ten PLO operatives by 1973.¹⁹ In 1974, Chairman Arafat attempted to save face by cutting off international (though not domestic) terrorism funding and operations, including the full dissolution of Black September.²⁰ Israel eventually invaded Fatah’s headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon in 1982 and routed the PLO, forcing its base of operations to relocate to Tunis, Tunisia.²¹

Meanwhile, native Palestinians within the territory were prevented from forming any real governing institutions under Israeli regulations. Additionally, the Palestinian economy was “de-institutionalized and de-developed,”²² normalizing the exploitation of Palestinian labor, the initiation of curfews, and the establishment of harassment and arrest. Under this intensifying pressure, Palestinian community groups and associations provided local social services and formed the early foundations of civil society and a quasi-state.²³ By 1987, with intensifying deportations and house demolitions, local Palestinians reached a breaking point and took to the streets in mass protests, “undertaking nonviolent actions such as demonstrating, building barricades and roadblocks, burning tyres, staging sit-ins... wearing the Palestinian national colors, and raising the outlawed Palestinian flag.”²⁴

During the *First Intifada* (“Shaking Off”), 97% of the resistance activity was non-violent according to the Israeli Defense Force. Nonetheless, 500 Palestinians were killed, 7,000

¹⁸ Ibid, 169; see also "Fatah," *Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fatah>.

¹⁹ Erica Pearson, “Operation Wrath of God,” *Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.*

²⁰ "Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)," *Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.*; see also Rafael Reuveny, “Black September,” *Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.*

²¹ "Fatah," *Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fatah>.

²² Mason and Falk, “Assessing Nonviolence,” 168-169.

²³ Ibid, 168-169.

²⁴ Ibid. 169.

wounded, and 50,000 arrested, shocking the international community as images circulated of unarmed protestors grappling against heavily-armed Israeli soldiers.²⁵ Some prominent Israelis began rethinking the Israel-Palestine “David and Goliath” narrative, fostering dialogue with notable Palestinians, who in turn helped the PLO tone down its anti-Israeli rhetoric. As a sign of more hopeful times, that same year the PLO strategically recognized United Nations resolutions 242 and 338. This subtly signaled that they respected Israel’s right to exist as a state while simultaneously declaring Palestine as a state, demonstrating a potential acceptance of a two-state solution.²⁶

The 1993 Oslo Peace Accords formalized a state solution, where the PLO was recognized as the representative of the Palestinians—the tradeoff being that the PLO would recognize Israel as a state and not enact terrorist actions against it any longer.²⁷ This deal gave the Israeli military a timetable to withdraw its forces, and Fatah and the PLO were now able to physically relocate directly onto Palestinian soil and participate in the first elections.²⁸ The Oslo Accords also internationally recognized the newly crafted Palestinian Authority (PA) as the sole governing entity of the transitioning Palestine, funneling the PLO’s political initiatives onto a common political platform.²⁹

Fatah’s most prominent members began transitioning their leadership roles in the PLO and sought membership in the PA’s Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), which acted as its

²⁵ Mason and Falk, “Assessing Nonviolence,” 170.

²⁶ “Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO),” *Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.*

²⁷ Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, “The Oslo Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process,” *United States Department of State*, Accessed June 5, 2017, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1993-2000/oslo>.

²⁸ Angrist, *Politics & Society in the Contemporary Middle East*, 398.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 398-399; see also “PLO vs. PA,” *Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs*, <http://www.passia.org/images/meetings/2014/oct/28/PA-PLO2.pdf>.

parliament. The first Palestinian elections were held in 1996 with a high turnout of over 75%.³⁰ Fatah won 77% of the parliamentary seats and Yasser Arafat, thanks to his popularity among local tribes and ruling families, won the presidency with 88% of the vote.³¹ Fatah now had overriding control of the Palestinian ministries, legislature, judiciary, executive orders, official mass media, negotiations, and security forces (Israel would not allow the PA to have a standing military).³² However, placing so many institutions in the hands of a former guerilla organization accustomed to non-democratic political control and hierarchical obedience would not translate well into the PA's constitutional structures.

Hybrid-Democracy Under Yasser Arafat

President Arafat was very popular when he took office in 1996, with a 72% approval rating in a West Bank poll.³³ As he was both the president of the PA and the chairman of the PLO, Yasser Arafat held a well-established ascendancy over his fellow Fatah party members. Even though there were anti-corruption measures implemented in the constitution and the bureaucracy, President Arafat swiftly sought to expand the number of loyalists in his cabinet. He illegally granted well-positioned sympathizers the title of "minister," changing the signs outside their offices into ministries and carrying on politics-as-usual with an unauthorized and expanded cabinet.³⁴ Furthermore, throughout the 1990s, President Arafat's executive budget remained a mystery, with some paper trails eventually leading to foreign banks and an array of individuals

³⁰ Amal Jamal, *Media Politics and Democracy in Palestine: Political Culture, Pluralism, and the Palestinian Authority*, (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 39-40.

³¹ Ibid, 40.

³² Angrist, *Politics & Society in the Contemporary Middle East*, 398; see also Hilal, "Problematizing Democracy in Palestine," 165.

³³ Jamal, *Media Politics and Democracy in Palestine*, 25.

³⁴ Ibid, 23-31.

who had access to the president's signature. Yasser Arafat also had a habit of silencing his critics, marginalizing party contenders, replacing young Fatah members during elections with old-guard sympathizers and co-opting notable rivals.³⁵

President Arafat expanded his reach by appointing himself as Interior Minister, which was intended to be independent of the presidency due to its exclusive authority to appoint regional governors. With the president occupying this position, Palestinian governors rapidly became a link for municipal officials to sidestep PLC administrators to communicate with Arafat directly. Conversely, Arafat was able to circumvent the PLC to directly involve himself in community politics, extending favors to local loyalists and even acting as the “supreme judge” in provincial cases. Governors, for their part, could extend their own kin networks further into the central government and heighten their clout over their districts. Municipal elections were also commonly delayed until an Arafat supporter was abruptly appointed to the position.³⁶

The Palestinian Legislative Council was unable to check this paternalism and was ineffective in its ability to govern, as many ministries' responsibilities were ill-defined and were often performing the same functions simultaneously. For instance, four separate ministries—Local Governments, Health, Agriculture, and Sports and Youth—created their own offices for infrastructure projects, but that was the official responsibility of the Ministry of Public Jobs. Compounding this issue, in each of these ministries more than one person was designated with the same title—for instance, the Ministry of Health alone had 40 General Directors and 40% of the of the Ministry of Sports and Youth held the title of Director or General Director.³⁷

Exacerbating this dysfunction was the PA's judiciary. It was a composite of Jordanian, Egyptian,

³⁵ Jamal, *Media Politics and Democracy in Palestine*, 23-31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

British Mandate, and Israeli statutes which created expansive loopholes in the rule of law. This allowed prisoners and detainees to be held for extended periods and denied access to a lawyer, as well as allowing the Minister of Justice to force the resignation of lower judges with near impunity.³⁸

In both the parliamentary and judicial arenas, Arafat loyalists and Fatah patron networks received favorable bureaucratic and legal benefits while many native Palestinians, Islamists, and independents eventually gave up and fell back on customary laws to govern themselves. The blame fell on the PLC rather than on Arafat or his patron networks, exemplified in 2000 when only 48% of Palestinians saw Arafat as corrupt, while roughly 80% saw the PLC as such.³⁹ The international community and Israel responded to these deteriorating practices by pressuring the PA to appoint a professional finance minister to implement structural changes, curtail the non-transparent executive budget, streamline taxes and revenue, and advocate for the creation of a prime minister to redistribute key presidential powers.⁴⁰ The creation of the office of prime minister coincided with the passing away of Yasser Arafat in 2004, and the presidential election saw Fatah candidate Mahmoud Abbas win the office.

Democracy as a Threat to Authoritarian-Democracy

After the initial optimism of the Oslo Accords, peace negotiations between Palestine and Israel repeatedly broke apart and slid into violence. In 2000, the Second Intifada flared up and led to an increased number of deadly clashes between the local populace and Israel until 2005.

³⁸ Jamal, *Media Politics and Democracy in Palestine*, 37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 25-37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

However, this time grassroots opposition and religious parties were at the forefront of protests and battles as the Palestinian population increasingly began to popularize these movements. Aware of this momentum, Fatah invited these groups to participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections in order to build goodwill amidst criticisms of corruption.⁴¹ Included in this invitation was the rival guerrilla/terrorist faction Hamas (an acronym for “Islamic Resistance Movement”), which was an Islamist analogue of secular Fatah’s early fighting career. Fatah and Hamas members did not differ in age, occupation, education, or income, and instead diverged ideologically. The key difference in 2006 was Hamas’s unrelenting antagonism towards Israel—during this time, Fatah had adopted a more tolerant position whereas Hamas refused to recognize the Israeli state.⁴²

Much to the surprise of both Fatah and Hamas, Hamas won 56% of the parliamentary seats in the 2006 election and secured the selection of the prime minister.⁴³ Locals interviewed after the election indicated that they were exhausted with Fatah’s years of double-dealing and were hoping that Hamas, under its religious principles, could administer politics in a “cleaner” manner that would translate into better services for non-loyalists.⁴⁴ As Hamas attempted to build coalitions, Fatah reneged on its initial cordiality and instead protested the election results. As the international donor community did not wish to be implicated in potentially funding a terrorist group that was actively and unapologetically hostile towards Israel, it cut off its funds to the PA. Attempts to cripple Hamas emerged from multiple fronts as Israel refused to return tax revenues while hostile Palestinian groups emerged to sabotage Hamas. Simultaneously, Fatah galvanized

⁴¹ Angrist, *Politics & Society in the Contemporary Middle East*, 399-400.

⁴² Hilal, “Problematizing Democracy in Palestine,” 168.

⁴³ Angrist, *Politics & Society in the Contemporary Middle East*, 400; see also Yolande Knell, “How Palestinian Democracy Has Failed to Flourish,” *BBC*, January 20, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30883917>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

unions to go on strike. Israel even deployed designated soldiers into Palestine during a Palestinian-Israeli flare-up to capture Hamas members of the PLC, crippling Hamas' ability to govern and bringing it to a near standstill.⁴⁵

Even without these external complications Hamas was not in full control of the PA, as the presidency was still in the hands of Fatah and Fatah members still retained much of the upper echelons of the PA. Locals noted that although Hamas was an initial relief compared to corruption-heavy Fatah, Hamas' guerrilla platform made it a painful amateur in actual governance and coordinating support.⁴⁶ Fatah did briefly attempt to negotiate with Hamas, but the compromise failed and militias from both factions launched operations against one another, actions which ultimately initiated the 2007 Palestinian Civil War.⁴⁷ During the bitter infighting, Fatah and Israel blocked Hamas' attempts to govern the West Bank, forcing Hamas to capture the Gaza Strip and consolidate its parliamentary power there. Fatah's President Abbas subsequently took over the political vacuum in the West Bank alongside his top administrators, and both sides of the conflict refused to recognize the other's legitimacy and routinely arrested rival supporters. Attempts to negotiate peace in 2007 in Mecca and 2011 in Cairo broke down due to lack of dialogue between the two parties.⁴⁸

A bisected government has made it impossible to conduct parliamentary and presidential elections, the PLC has been officially suspended and the PA to this day remains frozen in a

⁴⁵ Angrist, *Politics & Society in the Contemporary Middle East*, 400.

⁴⁶ Knell, "How Palestinian Democracy Has Failed to Flourish," *BBC*.

⁴⁷ Angrist, *Politics & Society in the Contemporary Middle East*, 400.

⁴⁸ Jed Ober, "The Struggle for Democracy in Palestine," *Muftah*, July 1, 2013, <http://muftah.org/the-struggle-for-democracy-in-palestine/#.WB6eHforl2w>.

hostile stalemate.⁴⁹ It has been noted that Hamas has been able to retain its political unity even under these circumstances—but between the drying up of donor funds, Israel’s blockade of the Gaza Strip, and the knee-jerk international hostility to its governance, Hamas remains unable to implement its political initiatives. On the other side of the coin, Fatah is internally fragmented between political rivals in the PLO and the PA, who seek to outmaneuver each other. All the while Fatah remains the internationally recognized and donor-approved representative of Palestine.⁵⁰

In today’s post-Civil War environment, Fatah is demonstrating a resounding lack of democratic initiative in its governance of the West Bank. President Abbas has long exceeded his 2004 – 2009 term limit and is consistently cracking down on internal dissent by freezing assets, revoking parliamentary immunities, and expelling ministers from the government in what has been described as an echo of “autocratic Arafat.”⁵¹ President Abbas now relies on the PLO to bolster his presidential credentials while censoring the media and the internet, jailing journalists, and preventing the exchange of ideas in the public arena.⁵² Fatah’s attempts at democratic actions have been mostly supplanted by political ambition and hegemony.

⁴⁹ Leila Farsakh, “Undermining Democracy in Palestine: The Politics of International Aid since Oslo,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 45, no. 4 (2016): 53.

⁵⁰ Angrist, *Politics & Society in the Contemporary Middle East*, 400; see also Farsakh, “Undermining Democracy in Palestine,” 53.

⁵¹ Jonathan Schanzer, “The Slow Death of Palestinian Democracy,” *Foreign Policy*, April 19, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/19/the-slow-death-of-palestinian-democracy/>; see also Ober, “The Struggle for Democracy in Palestine.”

⁵² Knell, “How Palestinian Democracy Has Failed to Flourish,” *BBC*; see also Schanzer, “The Slow Death of Palestinian Democracy,” *Foreign Policy*.

Conclusion

Fatah was never a fully democratic party. It favored democracy and transparent elections as long as it was politically convenient and as long as its party remained the dominant political actor. Today, Fatah can be partially considered a government-in-exile with its separation from the Gaza Strip, although it still possesses the West Bank as a controlled territory, the party has done little to convince the local populace that it has their best interests in mind. Fatah increasingly exemplifies the characteristics of an authoritarian government with crumbling democratic fixtures. Without a genuinely democratic process of competitive power sharing to temper its ambitions, Fatah will continue to rely on this autocratic trajectory to maintain its political strength and survival.

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