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COMMENTARY

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The Fatah Conference:

From Liberating the Homeland to Institutionalizing Power

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There have been mixed responses to the 7th general conference of Fatah, the nationalist movement that has dominated Palestinian politics for decades, which was held at the end of November. Outside observers welcomed the reconfirmation of Palestinian Authority President and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Mahmoud 'Abbas as head of Fatah, and the renewed commitment under his leadership to seeking a two-state solution to the conflict with Israel through negotiations. For many Palestinians, conversely, 'Abbas's sole aim in convening the conference was to eliminate potential rivals and stifle opposition within the ranks. In their view, the conference did little to further national reconciliation with the rival Palestinian government led by Hamas or end the Israeli siege of Gaza, let alone end Israeli occupation and attain full independence, whatever platitudes about these goals were voiced at the conference.

Much of the criticism has come from Fatah members, whose objections have ranged from the procedural to the substantive. Many were bitter about the exclusion or under-representation of specific membership groups: especially representatives of Fatah branches in the Palestinian Diaspora and Gaza, but also cadres whose participation in previous conferences or membership of certain Fatah bodies automatically entitled them to attend the 7th conference according to the internal statutes, but who were regarded as unpliant. In some local Fatah branches in the West Bank that held internal selection contests, members who ran for nomination as conference delegates against candidates preferred by 'Abbas or other Fatah bosses found their Facebook pages mysteriously blocked, suggesting collusion by the security agencies.

More importantly, as one ranking veteran argued, the "election" of 'Abbas by standing ovation at the start of the conference precluded any serious attempt to assess his performance, debate alternative political strategies, or hold other leading officials and bodies to meaningful account. Delegates focused instead on Fatah's leadership elections, in which personal cliques and regional loyalties counted far more than nominal political platforms. As a result, the "new" Central Committee is anything but that: its first 19 members (four more will be added later by appointment), whose average age is 64, are drawn from the same pool of candidates who have rotated between various Fatah agencies and Palestinian Authority bodies over the past two or more decades, and include only one woman.

This outcome reveals a movement that has become almost entirely a vehicle for political patronage and elite circulation. Through its grip on the Palestinian Authority, Fatah perpetuates job security and continued access to other material resources and opportunities in a highly vulnerable economy for its members and supporters. Formally, it remains dedicated to establishing an independent Palestinian state in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, but there is little evidence of any serious effort towards this goal in practice. Delegates at the 7th conference could not even be bothered to issue resolutions or a final statement, expediently dispensing with this task by adopting 'Abbas's opening speech in lieu of an official political program and relegating any further discussion of political issues or Fatah's internal statutes to its newly elected leadership bodies.

With the 7th conference, Fatah's mutation from national liberation movement into a party whose primary purpose is institutionalizing its hold on power became complete. In the process, as several Palestinian commentators have noted, Fatah has become homogeneous for the first time in its long history; not in terms of its sociological profile, but insofar as there are no contending political platforms and ideological persuasions. The loss of diversity, both cause and effect of creeping authoritarianism, was a long time in the making. Once "a bus that everybody could board," diversity of opinion and sources of advice within Fatah was the norm under 'Abbas's predecessor Yasser Arafat, at least until 1993.

The transfer of the PLO and Fatah from exile into the occupied Palestinian territories and their fusion into the quasi-state Palestinian Authority after the Oslo Accords sharply reduced such tolerance. All of Arafat's peers except 'Abbas had died by then, removing an important constraint on his exercise of power. Veterans returning from exile were put on the Palestinian Authority payroll and made subject to mandatory retirement; many thousands had been side lined by 2008. Some leading figures were marginalized by being co-opted into Fatah's Revolutionary Council—nominally its principal oversight body in between general conferences, but now a mere talking shop—or relegated to a toothless "advisory council" that was created at 'Abbas's behest in 2010. And much as Arafat did in the last decade before his death in 2004, 'Abbas also relied on a narrow coterie of presidential advisors and intelligence chiefs to act as

gatekeepers and enforcers to stand between him and the Fatah grassroots, Palestinian Authority civil servants, and local society.

But Fatah's 7th conference shows that the movement's mutation has been a bottom-up process as well. After 1993, tens of thousands of Fatah members in the occupied Palestinian territories claimed salaried employment and senior appointments in the Palestinian Authority as an entitlement earned by their years of resistance to Israel. Fusion and inter-penetration were intensified as they additionally pulled in their extended families and townsmen. This did not eradicate factional rivalries within Fatah—far from it—but differences were no longer ideological. The Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007 accelerated the homogenization of Fatah by dispersing its sizeable local branch. And Fatah's West Bank membership compounded the impact by turning its collective back on Gaza altogether.

As a consequence, Fatah politics are now dominated by the mutually reinforcing relationship that has evolved between its senior appointees and patronage brokers on the one hand, and its salaried membership and social base in the West Bank on the other. Furthermore, by reconstituting itself as the institutional ruling party over only part of occupied Palestinian territories—with no obvious prospect of regaining the others—Fatah has set itself apart from the rest of Palestinian society. This helps explain the diametrically opposed views of the 7th conference expressed in a poll published by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research: this found a majority of Fatah members satisfied with its outcomes, while a majority of the general public were unhappy with the declaration of Abbas as Fatah head by acclamation and unconvinced that the movement is united or able to achieve national reconciliation.

And yet there is little likelihood of a challenge to Fatah's grip. The reasons for this are counter-intuitive. Despite the continuing concentration of power in 'Abbas's hands, growing intolerance of dissent, and increasing reliance on security agencies to monitor politics and regulate relations with society, his presidency has not needed to be overly repressive. Paradoxically, this is because Israel undertakes most of the physical repression and intimidation in the occupied Palestinian territories. Those who regard the Palestinian Authority exclusively as a subcontractor for Israeli security miss the reverse side of the coin: Israel spares Fatah the opprobrium of taking on a more overt repressive role, even as Fatah institutionalizes perpetual rule.

So despite serial failures in delivering its declared national goals, Fatah's position in the West Bank remains hegemonic, with dissenters and opponents posing no real threat to its power base or to its effective monopoly on public office. It is helped by the failure of its most prominent rivals to offer credible alternatives. Nothing of substance distinguishes the rival camp of former security chief Mohammad Dahlan, in particular, from the rest of the Fatah apparatus in terms of political aims or methods. And although Hamas claims a purer nationalist commitment and revolutionary integrity, it is following Fatah's lead in institutionalizing its grip on power in Gaza; it is simply a bit further behind in the trajectory. Its rule is moreover helped, however indirectly

or uncomfortably, by the role it plays in maintaining the balance between Israeli punitive power and more militant elements in Gaza who challenge it.

The main threat to Fatah's position, ironically, may come from 'Abbas. He never actually liked his own movement, but while Fatah has lost its sense of purpose, he appears to be using it to serve his: preserve his hold on office until he can reach a peace deal with Israel. There is arguably little hope of attaining the latter in his lifetime, but his persistence provides Fatah with a veneer of political legitimacy and assures the continued injection of international assistance as well as a modicum of facilitation and protection from Israel.

In theory, significant events such as the relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem could reactivate Fatah's grassroots and revitalize the movement as a whole, but its mutation has probably gone too far to allow this. More likely is that it will deepen the institutionalization of its grip on power and resources, even as its own society becomes more polarized and alienated politically.

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