

MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS



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RE-LEGITIMIZING THE PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP: IS IT POSSIBLE AND IF SO, HOW?

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Pity the poor Palestinian leadership! As if things weren't already bad enough for them, mired in that swamp known as the 'peace process,' now Al Jazeera has pulled the plug on a trove of confidential documents that do not exactly attest to their negotiating skill. A leak of documents leads to a leak of legitimacy.

In fairness, the Palestinians have been dealt a weak hand. Israel is unified, prosperous, secure and unconditionally supported by the United States. The Palestinians are beleaguered: under siege in Gaza and under occupation in the West Bank. They are not well served by the Arab governments and not taken seriously by the U.S. To be sure, their cause is just and they enjoy widespread international support, but as realist scholars remind us 'might' usually trumps 'right.' So we should not be expecting miracles from Mahmoud Abbas and his colleagues.

Nevertheless, Palestinians have a right to expect their leaders not to trade away fundamental principles without consulting their followers or obtaining significant benefits. But the Palestine Papers indicate that the Palestinian negotiators were ready to concede the fundamental right of return for Palestinian refugees and control of Arab East Jerusalem and even authority over the Muslim holy places to others for minor concessions such as a freeze on settlement building, when the very existence of settlements should be the issue. Worse still, the evidence that the Fatah-dominated leadership of the Palestinian Authority colluded with the Israelis in attacking—and even assassinating— Hamas officials, and that their leaders criticized the Egyptians for insufficient diligence in their collaboration with Israel to seal the Egypt-Gaza border might lead ordinary Palestinians to wonder which side their leadership was actually on.

No durable settlement to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict can come about without legitimate Palestinian leaders. Only strong, wise and credible leaders can negotiate and 'sell' the compromises that may be necessary for a negotiated solution. But can the PA-PLO leadership now restore its tattered legitimacy? To ascertain the bases of legitimacy (and illegitimacy) it may be useful to look back at the history of the Palestinian national movement. This is a complex story but two dynamics stand out clearly. First, the most credible leaders have been legitimized from within the Palestinian community, but they have lost legitimacy the more they ingratiate themselves with external actors. Second, the most effective legitimacy formula, if you will, combines resistance with what we might call an Islamic-inflected discourse of territorial nationalism.

During the British mandate period the most effective leaders were those who stood up most firmly against the occupation: the Husseinis were more effective than the Nashashibis. Later, when Hajj Amin al-Husseini aligned himself with Nazi Germany, his star faded. The British vilified Shaykh Izzidine al-Qassam as a gang-leader and a terrorist during the violent events of 1936-39, but he enjoyed popular support as a resistance leader fighting for homeland and Islam. In the 1960s when the Palestinian resistance movement began to take shape, Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement gained traction both for 'armed struggle,' in contrast to most of the Arab regimes, and for a

certain affinity with political Islam. By comparison, the Palestine Liberation Organization, newly created by those Arab regimes to 'manage' the Palestine issue, was initially suspect, as was its first president, Ahmad Shukairy. One of the reasons, perhaps, that the 'progressive' left wing of the Palestinian resistance failed to garner the broad base of support enjoyed by Arafat was its relatively secular Marxist discourse.

Arafat and his Fatah colleagues wove their way through the thickets of Arab and international politics, gradually paving the way and preparing the Palestinian people for their 'historic compromise' of a two-state solution, and the acceptance of only 22 percent of historic Palestine. Finally, reluctantly buying into the 'Oslo process,' Arafat and Fatah began to lose their luster as their Israeli and international partners indefinitely delayed consideration of the key 'final status' issues (Jerusalem, refugees, borders, etc.) in favor of short-term compromises. And at the end of the day Arafat, old and sick, was besieged in his Ramallah compound, deprived of political victory and tarnished by corruption and administrative mismanagement.

But compared to the current leadership, Arafat is probably looking better these days. For with all of his many flaws he resisted US-Israeli pressures at Camp David in 2000 to abandon the right of return for an ill-defined territorial settlement. He never completely capitulated to external pressures and he would not cede the Islamic holy places in Jerusalem. Compare that with the words of the chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, as revealed in the Palestine Papers: "It is no secret that on our map we proposed we are offering you the biggest Yerushalayim in history."

How will history evaluate these Palestinian leaders? On a spectrum of 'knaves' to 'fools' they will probably be closer to the latter. These are all honorable men, no doubt; and they must be sincerely frustrated both about their failure to advance their cause under enormously unfavorable conditions and also to be vilified as virtual traitors in light of the recent revelations. Small comfort to them or to Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims in general that their Israeli adversaries were unyielding and their American 'honest brokers' were anything but honest. Because they have become disconnected from the broad swath of Palestinian public opinion and are perceived as perhaps unwilling collaborators with their occupier, they are undermining their legitimacy. Moreover, as has regularly happened in the past, alternative leaderships are emerging. Hamas and other Islamist groups enjoy substantial though far from universal popular support, while younger elements in Fatah and the leftist-nationalist groups are disillusioned with the PA leaders whose main support now seems to lie in Washington, somewhere between the White House and the World Bank.

The Palestinians are living through one of the worst moments in their history. But if an effective leadership is to be constructed, history suggests that it must be rooted in popular support; that means that authentic Islamist currents must be represented along with other political tendencies. And it must have the backbone and dignity to insist on principles while showing readiness to negotiate a just solution without violence.

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