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## **The End of Quiet for the Palestinian Authority? Ephraim Lavie**

The popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and other parts of the Arab world against authoritarian regimes have not yet engendered similar actions among the Palestinian public in the West Bank. Even Al- Jazeera's exposure of documents from the negotiations with Israel (January 2011), intended to highlight unacceptable concessions by the Palestinian leadership, did not provide the spark. In recent years, the territories controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA) have been relatively calm and with enhanced security, in stark contrast to the first half of the decade during the second Palestinian *Intifada*. The change was due to a combination of factors: Israeli deterrent power, the public's fear of a return to anarchy, and the PA's progress in building and strengthening its governing institutions.

The policy of PA President Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to abstain from violent struggle in favor of institutional state-building has produced a government whose operations are increasingly transparent, one which prioritizes economic and social development in the West Bank. After the decimation of its administrative and security arms during the years of conflict with Israel, the PA has now restored them to operation, boosting efficiency, begun tackling corruption through police and court action, and enforcing law and order, thus creating a more normal and secure life for its citizens. An additional, important part of its actions has been its cracking down on Hamas operations in the West Bank, in cooperation with Israeli security forces. However, the PA leadership fears a possible outbreak of

popular unrest uprising against it, influenced by events in the Arab world. It understands that despite being divided, Palestinian society is aware of its ability to influence the course of events, is familiar with the methods of non-violent struggle, and may use them to try and force a genuine change in the status quo.

The Palestinian leadership's fear of a popular uprising is fed by ongoing social and economic troubles, as well as questions surrounding the legitimacy of the PA regime and the PLO as the exclusive representative of the Palestinian people. The leadership is aware of domestic criticism on a number of counts: human rights violations and the denial of democratic values, including limitations on the freedom to organize and demonstrate; illegal arbitrary arrests, the torturing of prisoners; and vettings of candidates for positions in the public sector by the security forces; and disregard for court orders.

Large parts of the overwhelmingly youthful populace (57% are aged 20 and younger, and 65% are under 25), do not enjoy the fruits of development, but suffer from economic distress and high unemployment rates. The PA's policy of boycotting settlements and banning Palestinians from working in them, without providing adequate alternatives, has bred resentment among the approximately 25,000 workers who have lost their source of income. In fact, there have been calls for workers to ignore the boycott.

The PA government's legitimacy has been called into question since Hamas won the general elections in January 2006, as well as the expiration of the term of the PA president, the Legislative Council and local councils. These voices of criticism are not yet loud, but their content is too incisive to allow the PA to ignore them for long, especially in light of events in the Arab world. The leadership has been careful not to support the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, but has had no choice but to allow a few support rallies to take place. It also hastened to announce a number of ameliorative measures. On February 12, the PLO Executive Committee announced that presidential and legislative elections would take place in the West Bank and Gaza by September 2011. The announcement was accompanied by statements that the elections are the only means to end the current split between the PA and Hamas and

revive national unity; moreover, it was promised that the elections would be free, fair, and under the eyes of international observers. On February 13, the intention to disband the government and reconstruct it to include Fatah and other factions, was announced. Revolutionary Fatah Council members asserted to Abu Mazen that they knowingly accepted the appointment of Fayyad to the premiership in order to ensure American support of the PA, but as the ruling party, they demanded control of key governmental offices.

Prior to these moves, the PA decided to comply with the Palestinian High Supreme Court order requiring it to set a date for local council elections. The Palestinian left-wing parties, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Palestinian National Initiative (PNI) and Palestinian People's Party (PPP), had conducted a legal struggle to force the PA to hold local elections that were supposed to have taken place in the summer of 2010 but were cancelled. The parties petitioned the Palestinian High Supreme Court, which instructed the PA in mid-December 2010 to immediately set a new date for the elections; every delay, it said, constituted a violation of court orders. In response, the minister of local governments announced that municipal elections would be held in Summer 2011. Party activists praised the High Court decision and rejected claims that elections only in the West Bank will deepen the rift between the West Bank and Gaza. They explained that their intent was to save democracy for Palestinian society and prevent both internal fissures and foreign intervention in the nation's affairs.

Hamas rule in Gaza continues to challenge the PA government in the West Bank. Hamas has announced that it does not recognize the legitimacy of Fayyad's government or its decisions, and that it will not participate in the forthcoming presidential and legislative elections. One can assume that the Hamas leadership will persist in this stance as long as major issues concerning the future of the Hamas security apparatus and its ability to operate in the West Bank are not settled, and as long as the West Bank security apparatus receives backing from the US and cooperates with Israel. Furthermore, the Hamas leadership has taken heart from the likelihood that its parent organization, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, will have substantial influence in post-Mubarak Egypt, and thus direct Egyptian support more towards Hamas and away from the PA. Accordingly, the Hamas leadership may decide to wait for the PA to collapse by itself in the absence of a meaningful political

process with Israel and in light of the lack of legal legitimacy for the PA's continued existence.

To be sure, the PA government enjoys a certain degree of public support. At the same time, it relies on the material support of the international community, which comes at the price of cooperating with Israel on security matters, and undermining Hamas—a blow to democracy that is problematic in the eyes of the Palestinian public. This issue throws into question the PA's chances of maintaining social and political stability and further advancing the process of state-building, and contributes to a deepening cynicism in Palestinian society. Senior PA and Fatah officials, aware of the people's concerns and sensitivities, hope that the public will accept their explanation that the national priority is first the political struggle against Israel to end the occupation, and only then the improvement of the PA's internal performance.

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