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Who Speaks for Palestine? The Political Struggle for Gaza

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The struggle for Palestinian power is likely to reach a new, higher level when Israel withdraws from Gaza and Israel completes the security fence separating it from Palestinians from living in the West Bank.

The struggle is apparent in recent power play moves in the Gaza between Mohammad Dahlan (former Palestinian Authority [PA] security chief in Gaza) and General Jabril Rajoub (the PA's current national security advisor). In February, 2004, notably, armed agents of the PA's Preventive Security Service (PSS), apparently acting on behalf of Dahlan, stormed the Gaza City headquarters of the Palestinian police and beat up Major General Ghazi al-Jabali, the police commander and an associate of Rajoub who was *personally appointed by Arafat*. Reportedly, a meeting between Dahlan's people and Jabali went bad. Jabali was hurt so badly that he was hospitalized. Dahlan's people could have killed Jabali with a little more effort—in this sense they acted "with restraint." Note that no retaliation appears to have resulted. Clearly, the PA's position is weakening. Similarly, in another recent incident, Khalil al-Zibann, a close Arafat advisor was killed in downtown Gaza City. This, again, exemplifies the challenge Arafat faces is not unexpected. It is not confined to Gaza. In December 2003, a study team composed of former heads of Israeli security organizations predicted that Arafat would soon lose what control he has in territories, leaving a power vacuum. "What we'll see is a lot of small areas of control and influence," said Shmuel Bar, chairman of the study team. "It will be warlords with their own armed forces."¹

"It is true, anarchy is taking over and it's a shame," Rajoub says of recent developments in the Gaza.² Maybe; or might a better description be that Arafat and the PA are simply being pushed out of the Gaza? An Israeli withdrawal from Gaza will create a vacuum. So much so that Palestine Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia has requested UN peacekeeping forces be deployed to the Gaza Strip when Israel withdraws (probably this July). The UN Development Program of Assistance to the Palestinian People (UNDP/PAPP) has been in the Gaza and may be able to format a map for economic assistance and security once the withdrawal is underway. UNDP could be the front-runner in developing a plan for Gaza without Israeli settlements and for

involving the international community and also the PA. The point is, without strong international backing it is questionable whether the PA will be able to assert much authority in Gaza.

There are four main players or groups in the power struggle for Gaza: Rajoub (the PA), Dahlan, the Tanzim militia in Gaza and Hamas leader Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi.

Rajoub would appear to have the least influence in the Gaza Strip out of the four individuals. His following, and most likely area success, are in the West Bank. The rift between Dahlan and Rajoub has already been noted. Dahlan is challenging the PA's existence, as presently constituted – even though he has recently made a point of emphasizing that Arafat is his leader. Dahlan's ire was reportedly raised four months ago when Arafat personally vetoed his participation in the new cabinet formed by PA Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei.³ The PA's Preventive Security Service (PSS) in Gaza (which Dahlan recently led) are loyal to Dahlan and not the PA. Rashid Abu Shabak, the current PSS head, is a close associate of Dahlan.

Hamas, meanwhile, *in Palestinian eyes*, appears to have established itself as a legitimate player in the Gaza at least after Israel pulls out. Speaking to reporters last week after meeting with Arafat, PA Foreign Minister Nabil Sha'ath said, "we hope this [a withdrawal] will pave the road for a Palestinian general election with participation with Hamas."⁴ The suggestion that terrorists from Hamas might be given a role in governing Gaza, if not Palestinian affairs more broadly, brought immediate opposition from both the Sharon government and the US. Raanan Gissin, a Sharon adviser, described it as "another effort by the Palestinian Authority to bypass the requirement to fight terrorism." He also starkly attributed it to the current weakness of the Palestinian Authority: "This is not Hamas joining the PA. This is the PA joining Hamas."⁵

Nevertheless, it seems unlikely Hamas will be kept out. Moreover, it is not clear how the international community will deal with such an eventuality over the long term. Hamas masks their terrorist activities by establishing schools, hospitals and communities while using their terrorist attacks to influence what happens in the region. Roughly ninety percent of the Hamas budget goes towards these humanitarian efforts according to Israeli sources. Indeed, Hamas's stated model is Hezbollah in Lebanon, which is now a parliamentary party.

At the same time, Hamas has its own liabilities and weaknesses. Too much, in fact, should not be made of this idea that the PA is effectively joining a strengthening Hamas. In particular, Hamas's popular founder, Ahmed Yassin, is now dead and is replaced by Abdel Rantissi. Yassin was able to control and bring together all the separate entities of Hamas throughout the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank in a way that Rantissi *will not be able to match*. Also, Arafat, who had Rantisi jailed on several occasions in the past, "is known to despise him" –and he has refused to have direct dealings with him since Yassin's death.⁶ Indeed, the person who appears to be brokering Hamas's participation in a governing coalition for Gaza is none other than Mohammad Dahlan. Both, it should be noted, come from the Khan Yunis refugee camp in Gaza – which is Dahlan's base of operations. It is said that they have "long been on good terms."⁷ It would appear, then, that Dahlan is seeking to play a major role in Gaza after the withdrawal with the help of Hamas, not the other way around.

Hamas is also weakened by its dependence on Iran, where its support will erode as the reformist movement gains ground.⁸ (For more information on Hamas, see study group paper on Palestinian terrorist organizations.)

The fourth major player is the Tanzim militia in Gaza. The Tanzim is the armed wing of the Fatah, the largest faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Although set up by Arafat in the 1990s, its leadership – the popular and jailed Marwan Bargouti in particular--has been publicly critical of the first generation leaders who were mostly absent from the territories until Oslo; that is, they have resonance with younger Palestinians. The Tanzim acts as paramilitary counter-balance to Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Its members are responsible for their own acts of terror – and it has links to the Al Aqsa terrorist organization.⁹ In Gaza, the Tanzim is associated with the PA's Preventive Security apparatus. Its leader, Ahmad Chiles, is also reportedly close to Mohammad Dahlan.¹⁰ This is another reason why Dahlan is likely to play a pivotal role in Gaza after the withdrawal.

The Palestinian Authority has been referred to as "a house of cards" being held up by Israel. In recent polls taken in the West Bank and Gaza, according to BBC, suggest that about sixty percent of Palestinians support suicide attacks in some degree. For Arafat this is a sign of losing control of a very delicate situation that he has not handled well. The Palestinian Authority has lost dominant control in the Gaza and the West Bank may be soon to follow. A sign of the PA losing

authority in the West Bank would be at Birzeit University and the recent loss of the leadership of the student government by Fatah to Hamas.

The reality of a Palestinian Gaza will create the need for new leadership other than Arafat and the PA. Arafat, famously, is said to be more suited to underground work than to governing. An

Israeli withdrawal from Gaza will underscore this. This will result because a premium may finally be placed on governing, or at least the ability to bring economic development to Gaza. For this reason getting business into the Gaza becomes essential to any form of statehood and peace for the people of Palestine. Mohammed Shtayyeh, the current director of Palestinian Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR), and Ahmed Qurei, the former director of PECDAR and now Prime Minister of Palestine, are two individuals that could accomplish this task. But so too could Dahlan.

Perhaps most significantly, both Israel and the US have had dealings with Dahlan – and are widely believed to favor him in the current struggle. Specifically, the Sharon Government has avoided targeting PA security forces in Gaza.¹¹

Grave issues are at stake. The responsibility for governing Gaza will have major political repercussions – with a key point being that the ability to bring in foreign investment will be a big advantage in the struggle for the Gaza, especially after Israel withdraws. This will give foreign investors (including those proposing appropriate macro-projects) influence. It also seems to point to a more moderate political outcome than many commentators have recently – in the wake of the Yassin execution – forecasted; this, provided appropriate macro infrastructure projects are on the table.

Notes and References:

1. Cited in: Janes Foreign Report (February 18, 2004).
2. Cited in: Janes Defense Weekly (March 5, 2004).
3. Khaled Abu Toameh, "Palestinian national unity talks called off," Jersulalem Post (April 10, 2004).

4. Cited in: Aluf Benn, "Erekat: Sha'ath trip to US not at invitation of White House," Haaretz (April 10, 2004). The election would reportedly be limited to Gaza.
5. Gissin to the Associated Press. Cited in: Ibid.
6. Toameh, "Palestinian national unity talks called off."
7. Ibid.
8. See: Shahram Chubin, "Wither Iran? Reform, Domestic Politics and National Security," Adelphi Paper 342 (London: IISS, 2002). Unfortunately, the reformist movement appears to be sustaining the setback it suffered with the disqualification of its candidates in the February 2004 Majiles elections.
9. Al Aqsa credits Bargouti as their leader, although Bargouti denies either founding or directing the group.
10. Chiles's brother is a senior officer in PSS. "What is Tanzim?" www.palestinefacts.org (accessed April 9, 2004).
11. "The Palestinian Authority has large forces in the Strip that have been almost unharmed in our operations." Prime Minister Ariel Sharon interviewed by Aluf Benn, "PM: My plan will force Palestinians to give up dreams for years," Haaretz (April 5, 2004).