

# CRS Report for Congress

.Received through the CRS Web

## Palestinian Factions

Aaron D. Pina  
Analyst in Middle East Religious & Cultural Affairs  
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

### Summary

Palestinian factionalism continues to dominate the political landscape in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The manner in which competing nationalist, socialist, Islamist, and democratic-minded Palestinians vie to control the direction of any future Palestinian state may influence United States objectives in the region. These include ending anti-Israeli violence, supporting Palestinian reforms, and bolstering Palestinian democratization and civil society. Some factions are designated foreign terrorist organizations by the State Department. One of these, Hamas, is building on recent electoral successes and may soon join the Palestinian parliament. This report describes the dominant Palestinian factions, and will be updated as events warrant. See also CRS Issue Brief IB91137, *The Middle East Peace Talks*.

### Overview

Recent and upcoming Palestinian local, municipal, and legislative elections are drawing the attention of policymakers to Palestinian factions.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this report is to describe dominant Palestinian factions and some of the challenges that factions present. For decades, Palestinian factionalism has dominated the political landscape in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. With Hamas, a dominant faction, faring well in local and municipal elections and poised to gain parliamentary representation, the United States and Israel, in all likelihood, will be faced with a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in a position of political authority. Also, during the current Palestinian uprising that began in September 2000, violence and terrorism against Israelis has been conducted not only by Hamas, but also factions related to the PLO, and Fatah in particular.

This development has somewhat shifted the focus of the debate in the United States over the PLO and factionalism. Previously, U.S. official statements and reports on PLO compliance with its commitments to Israel pursuant to Title VIII of P.L. 101-246, the

---

<sup>1</sup> On Jan. 14, 2005, Mahmoud Abbas was elected President of the PA. Two municipal rounds have been held (Dec. 2004 and May 2005), with two more scheduled for September and Dec. 2005. Parliamentary elections, set for July 17, 2005, have been indefinitely postponed.

*PLO Commitments Compliance Act* (PLOCCA), primarily assessed the late Yasir Arafat's willingness and ability to constrain terrorist activities by his rivals, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. However, much of the current United States discussion of the goals and motives of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas focuses on his willingness and ability to prevent anti-Israeli violence and terrorism by PLO/Fatah-related factions that traditionally have been considered his allies or subordinates. Also, the January 2005 PLOCCA report notes that "the death of Chairman Arafat and emergence of a moderate Palestinian leadership could potentially have a significant positive impact."<sup>2</sup> Although the PLO and Fatah are not designated as terror organizations in the State Department's 2004 *Country Reports on Terrorism* (released in April 2005), Hamas continues to be labeled an FTO.<sup>3</sup> The role of Hamas (and other militant groups) increasingly has been tied to the success of the Abbas government and the peace process. The lack of political cohesion among Palestinian factions may impede the ability of Abbas to rein in violent groups and build a cohesive government. It remains unclear whether Hamas, which supports a violent program against the state of Israel, is prepared to abandon terrorism in favor of participation in government and a political solution to the "Palestine Question."

## History & Development of Palestinian Factions

Since the nineteenth century, a mostly rural Palestinian society has relied upon factional clan alignments that cut across region, class, and religion for security, social resources, and representation. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Palestinian factionalism developed as rival rural landowning and urban notables competed over resources and status. The modern political and nationalist orientation of factional groupings emerged during the 1920's and 1930's, partially in response to British colonial rule and Jewish immigration into the region. During this time, politically dominant, urban-based Palestinian families competed with one another over control of Palestinian society, leading to greater factionalism.

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the rise of Palestinian nationalism throughout the 1950s led to the creation of the Palestinian National Liberation Movement in 1957, headed by Yasir Arafat. The 1950's and 1960's have been characterized as an era of increased Palestinian "radicalization," which favored the establishment of national liberation movements like Arafat's Fatah party. In 1964, in partial response to the wider trend of militant radicalism, the Arab League founded the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Fatah subsequently became dominant in the PLO in 1968-1969 and since that time the PLO and Fatah have monopolized nearly all aspects of politics in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the PLO's dual program of violence and political action caused the organization to splinter into several factions, some of which retained a loose affiliation with the PLO. Between 1967 and 1989, groups such as the

---

<sup>2</sup> State Department report and determinations pursuant to Section 804 of the PLO Commitments Compliance Act of 1989, and Sections 603-604 and 609 of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, FY2003 (P.L. 107-228). PLOCCA reports are submitted to Congress every six months.

<sup>3</sup> Current list of FTOs is available online at [<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/45313.pdf>]. Also see CRS Report RL32223, *Foreign Terrorist Organizations*, by Audrey Kurth Cronin.

Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Palestine's People Party, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), either grew up within, or split off from, the PLO to pursue their own factional interests and political goals. Also, during the 1970's and 1980's Palestinians experienced a rise in political Islam, embodied in Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which couch the national "struggle" in *jihadist* terms. By and large, however, many Palestinian factions may be defined as a "quasi-loyal" opposition to the PLO that does not oppose the political program of the PLO. Since the advent of the PLO, Palestinian factions have developed into complex civil, military, and political organizations, many of which espouse a variant of Palestinian nationalism, whether secular or Islamist.

## The "Nationalists"

**The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).** The PLO is a diverse organization that represents all Palestinians around the world, administered by an 18-person executive committee, elected by a 124-member Central Council, which in turn is elected by the 400-member Palestine National Council (PNC). The PNC is the highest decision-making body of the PLO.<sup>4</sup> Although the PLO is separate from the PA, most analysts contend that the PLO dominates PA institutions. Palestinian factions generally agree that the PLO is the most legitimate representative of Palestinians, and Israel recognized the PLO in 1993 as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. Even so, some factions (like Hamas) portray the PLO as corrupt.

The PLO is currently not designated by the United States as an FTO, but legislative restrictions do not allow the United States to provide any assistance directly to the PLO or any of its constituent organizations, except by Presidential waiver. The waiver has been used in the past to provide direct assistance to the PA.<sup>5</sup> On May 25, 2005, President Bush announced his intention to steer \$50 million directly to the PA for infrastructure-related projects in Gaza, which will most likely require a waiver. The consolidated appropriations act of 2004 (H.R. 2673, 118 Stat. 3, P.L. 108-199, 23 January 2004) bans U.S. aid to the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation. The clause was added to past appropriations bills following reports that PBC broadcasts were inciting violence against Israel. On April 28, 2005, a bill, H.R. 2036, was introduced to prevent the establishment or maintenance within the United States of an office for the PLO.

**Fatah Party.** Fatah served as Arafat's power base within the PLO, and under Abbas continues to dominate much of the political scene in the Territories. The founders of Fatah favor a specific Palestinian nationalism over general Arab nationalist ideology, and officially sanctioned political violence against Israel until the 1990's as part of their nationalist rhetoric. A PLO website claims that Fatah supports engagement in a political

---

<sup>4</sup> On a more limited scale, the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC) is the actual legislative body of the PA and represents the residents of the West Bank and Gaza. PLC elections, originally slated for July 17, 2005 have been suspended indefinitely.

<sup>5</sup> In 1994 funds were provided to the Holst Fund of the World Bank, the international organization created to channel funds to the Palestinian Authority. In 2003 funds were provided directly to the PA to cover infrastructure expenses and an electric power bill owed to Israel.

settlement with Israel.<sup>6</sup> However, Fatah also includes several “wings” that do not exclude force of arms to accomplish the political goals of the Party. The following three factions exemplify more militant Fatah “wings.”

**Force 17.** Force 17 was formed in the early 1970’s as a personal security force for Arafat and other PLO leaders. Force 17 members were involved in attacks on Israeli targets in the early 1980’s and it claimed responsibility for killing three Israelis in Cyprus in 1985. In 1994, when the PA was established, Force 17 was merged into the official PA security apparatus and technically ceased to exist, although some PA security officials apparently continue to identify themselves as Force 17 members. Recent attempts by the PA to consolidate its security services did not include Force 17.

**Tanzim.** The Tanzim (or organization) militia, founded in 1995, to counter Palestinian Islamism, is widely considered to be an armed offshoot of Fatah with its own leadership structure. The acknowledged head of the Tanzim is Marwan Barghouti, who is currently serving consecutive life sentences in Israel for murder, and, according to some accounts, has a substantial following among the “rejectionist” camp which opposes the Interim Agreement (also called Oslo II or Taba) signed on September 28, 1995 with Israel.<sup>7</sup> The Tanzim is a grass roots organization that operates at the community level and, by taking a hardline position toward Israel, it has helped siphon Palestinian support from the Islamist groups to the PA and PLO leadership. Despite reports of Tanzim-sponsored violence against Israeli soldiers, the organization has not been designated as a FTO.

**Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.** This organization appeared after the start of the 2000 Palestinian uprising, reportedly formed by Tanzim or other Fatah activists who believe in a more violent approach to force Israel to end its occupation. The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, which is secular, says it does not share the ideology of Hamas and the PIJ, which purport to seek Israel’s destruction. Brigades members say they are interested in a peace process as long as a final settlement results in Israel’s full withdrawal from the occupied territories and provides for the right of return of Palestinian refugees.<sup>8</sup>

The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades does not have a well defined leadership structure and, of the factions discussed in this section, is the one which may have the most autonomy from the PLO. On December 18, 2003, Fatah asked the leaders of the al-Aqsa Martyr’s Brigades to join the Fatah Council, recognizing it officially as part of the Fatah organization. The Brigades was designated as an FTO on March 27, 2002, on the grounds that it had claimed responsibility for carrying out suicide bombings against Israeli civilians.

**The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC).** The PFLP-GC is currently led by Ahmad Jibril, member of a Damascus based faction that is politically close to Syria and is a Marxist group that suspended its

---

<sup>6</sup> Available online at [<http://www.palestine-un.org/plo/structure.html>].

<sup>7</sup> Sana Abdallah, “Marwan Barghouti: A Palestinian Profile,” *Washington Times*, Nov. 1, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Ferry Biedermann, “Secular and Deadly: The Rise of the Martyrs Brigades,” Available online at [<http://www.salon.com>].

participation in the PLO after the 1993 Israel-Palestinian Declaration of Principles. The PFLP-GC split from the PFLP (established by Dr. George Habbash) in 1968, claiming it wanted to focus more on fighting and less on politics. In the 1970's, the PFLP-GC gained attention for undertaking multiple hijacking operations under Wadi Haddad. Since 1999, Fatah has sought out reconciliation with the PFLP (not the General Command) and other "Leftists." On April 25, 2005, Abbas signaled a possible alliance between Fatah and the PFLP (again, not the GC) to challenge the growing political legitimacy of Hamas.<sup>9</sup> The PFLP-GC is currently designated an FTO.

**Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).** The DFLP, an ideological Marxist-Maoist organization, was established in 1969 following a leadership dispute with the PFLP, and is currently led by Nayif Hawatmeh. During the 1970's, the DFLP, drew its support from Palestinian students living abroad and intellectuals. According to some observers, the DFLP played an instrumental role in placing the idea of a democratic Palestinian state (the two-state solution) with equal rights on the political agenda of the PLO. Although the DFLP has frequently taken a pragmatic approach to issues, such as advocating dialogue with the Israeli "left," the Front continues to reject the Oslo peace process. The DFLP was named as an FTO from the first list in October 1997, but, because of a degree of reconciliation with Arafat and apparent acceptance of eventual peace with Israel, it was dropped when the list was revised in October 1999.

## The "Islamists"

**Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas).** Hamas is a Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood Society in Palestine, itself a part of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group founded Egypt in 1928, by Hassan al-Banna. Established by the late Sheik Ahmad Yasin in 1988, Hamas belongs to a constellation of Palestinian groups who, after the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, believed that Arab secular socialism (personified by the late Gamal Abd al-Nasser, the former President of Egypt) had failed to secure a Palestinian state.<sup>10</sup> During the 1980's, Israel lent tacit support to Hamas in an effort to check the growing authority of a secular PLO. Over the past three decades, Hamas has risen to prominence, in part, due to a well-organized social service network that provides services and charitable programs (daycare, foodstuffs, education, and health services) to Palestinians. Through its military wing, the Izz Eddine al-Qassam Units, Hamas has frequently claimed responsibility for attacking and killing scores of Israeli civilians and soldiers. Over the past four years, Hamas and its military wing al-Qassam have employed suicide bombers as a key tactic in targeting Israelis. Hamas is designated an FTO.

**Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).** The PIJ, originally led by Fathi Shiqaqi (later killed by Israel in 1999), split off from the Muslim Brotherhood to form a militant Islamic movement in the mid-1980s (prior to the establishment of Hamas), and advocates armed struggle against Israel to realize a Palestinian theocracy. The current, acknowledged leader of the PIJ is Ramadan Abdullah Shallah. The PIJ opposes the Oslo Accord and diplomatic relations with Israel. Since 1993, Hamas has attempted to subordinate the PIJ, viewing the organization as politically redundant. Both the PIJ and Hamas have similar

---

<sup>9</sup> Khalid Amayreh, "Palestinian Politicians Eye Alliances," *Al-Jazeera*, April 25, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> The Hamas Charter is available at [<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/hamas.htm>].

ideological leanings, advocate anti-Israeli violence, and call for the Islamization of the West Bank and Gaza. The Muslim Brotherhood, originally resistant to armed struggle against Israel, saw the PIJ's pro-violence stance in the mid-1980's as a rogue element. Only in 1988, in response to the PIJ's popularity, did the Brotherhood lend support to Hamas. Since that time, PIJ-Hamas relations are best characterized as inimical. The United States lists the PIJ as an FTO.

## **A “Middle Way?”**

In the last few years a “middle way” has emerged in Palestinian politics. Al-Mubadara (or the National Initiative), headed by Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, a former PA presidential candidate, describes itself as a democratic opposition that represents an unclaimed “center” of Palestinian political society. Barghouti garnered 19% of the Palestinian vote in the 2005 presidential election and finished second behind Abbas. Al-Mubadara opposes violence and does not maintain any militias.

## **Prospects for Palestinian Factions**

U.S. officials, including President Bush, repeatedly have called on the PA to curb factional, anti-Israeli violence, believing that “that the fight against terrorists is critical to the search for peace and for Palestinian statehood.”<sup>11</sup> Those who believe that the PA actively is supporting violence and terrorism against Israel assert that the PA uses violence to force political concessions from Israel. Others argue that terrorist acts are counterproductive for Palestinians since they undercut the credibility of Abbas as a negotiating partner, as was the case with Arafat. Some in Congress believe that the United States should, among other steps, continue to sanction the PLO and some of its factions. Critics of such legislation believe that naming Fatah, the Tanzim, or Force 17 terrorists would indicate that the United States no longer views President Abbas as a legitimate Palestinian peace interlocutor, unable to control disparate factions, the results of which may damage prospects for a peaceful solution to the violence.

Many observers claim that factionalism prevents the development of Palestinian democratic institutions, civil society, and peace with Israel. They note that the cluster of elites who maintain factions harm democratic reforms in the West Bank and Gaza by reserving power for elites and maintaining systems of patronage, cronyism, and nepotism. There remains little doubt, among experts, that Palestinian factions (primarily Hamas and PIJ) have pursued an antagonistic, violent relationship with Israel and, as a consequence, Palestinian statehood has been delayed. However, some agree that factions have helped to cobble together a loose national consensus in the West Bank and Gaza. They hope that recent presidential and municipal elections, and upcoming parliamentary elections, may pave the way for a possible national coalition government of Islamists, reformers, nationalists, and socialists. Such a political arrangement may decrease Palestinian militancy as factions become engaged in the political process, and as power-sharing, political compromise, and the rule of law become a reality.

---

<sup>11</sup> Speech by President Bush at the National Defense University, Mar. 8, 2005.