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What Stands between the Palestinians and Democracy?

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Can the state-building currently underway in the region of the Palestinian Authority (PA) avoid the brutal dictatorships and lack of basic civil and political liberties that prevail throughout most of the Middle East? If the fresh start in Gaza and the West Bank offers a unique opportunity for democracy, the five years since the establishment of the PA in May 1994 have also shown the many obstacles to that goal.

Other writers have examined the diplomatic and political obstacles, such as the Oslo accord and the personality of Arafat;¹ we shall look here at the societal forces that stand in the way. These divide into three main categories: the demise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the lack of support for democratic values and principles, and the strength of Islamist parties.

I. The Rise and Demise of Civil Society

Recent studies show that civil society organizations, those institutions politically and financially independent of government control, contribute significantly to democratizing authoritarian polities.² These tend to thrive when the state assumes a minimalistic role in relation to society and does not provide crucial services (such as unemployment benefits or protection for minorities). Independent, self-organized groups such as sporting leagues, women's rights groups, literacy teachers, or prayer meetings, provide for these needs; in the process, they also develop a corporate sense of identity and a political posture.

Over time, some of them may establish ties to one another, making them stronger and creating the basis for a civil society. A civil society may be said to emerge when these groups find that their collective efforts can pressure the state to open up and become more accountable. Civil society always encourages democratization of the larger polity, though not necessarily a democratic political system. At the very least, civil society democratizes groups with a major impact on politics.

The existence of Palestinian civil society organizations dates back to the 1920s and the 1930s, when attempts were made, futile for the most part, to match the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) in developing the institutions in preparation for the end of the British mandate. Most Palestinian organizations then tended to be run by influential local families, so their patriarchal and feudal nature prevented them from gaining lasting or widespread influence. Moreover, they existed at a time when an increasing number of young Palestinians, alarmed at the growing powers of the Yishuv, resented what
they saw as archaic Palestinian institutions. As a result, beginning in the 1930s and lasting up until the 1967 war, associational life in the Palestinian communities remained generally weak and poorly organized.

Israeli military occupation and control from 1967 until 1994 was directly responsible for the emergence of numerous civil society organizations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. An increasing number of Palestinians considered participation in NGOs and professional associations an effective means of undermining Israeli occupation, thus seeking to establish rival, democratic institutions. Establishing nonprofit, independent research institutions acquired great popular prestige and a plethora of them emerged.

The 1980s then witnessed a mushrooming of Palestinian NGOs, due to four main developments: the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) departure from Lebanon for Tunisia, greatly increasing its distance from the occupied territories; the outbreak of the intifada (uprising) in December 1987, which, despite its largely violent nature, also served as an important catalyst for Palestinian civil society; Israel's heavy-handed response to the uprising; and King Husayn of Jordan's 1988 renunciation of his claim to the West Bank, along with the ending of his financial support for that area.

By the mid-1990s, the number of trade unions, university student groups, and youth and women's organizations had skyrocketed. New professional associations for merchants, artisans, engineers, physicians, lawyers, writers, and journalists were established, while existing ones expanded their operations. According to one estimate, by 1995 there were as many as 700 NGOs in Gaza and some 1,500 in the West Bank. Today, an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 Palestinians work for the NGOs. NGOs handled as much as 30 percent of all educational services for Palestinians, 50 percent of hospital care, nearly 60 percent of primary health care services, almost 100 percent of agricultural research and training programs, and 100 percent of disability care.

The sheer number of NGOs, however, was no guarantee of their efficacy. They suffered from internal weaknesses, such as their tendency to remain closed, secretive, and not always accountable. Duplication plagued the NGOs, with many of them pursuing almost identical goals and agendas; for example, the think tanks researching domestic and international issues overlapped. Personality conflicts or career rivalries tended to account for this duplication, which reduced their ability to work together against the PA. Nor has the fever to establish research institutes and centers always been fueled by the desire to further intellectual endeavors; at times, the allure of foreign subsidies and donations has been a bigger factor. As one Palestinian scholar has observed, "civil society in the territories runs after subsidies." Arguably, these problems resulted more from the NGOs' relative youth and the fact that many of them were still being "crash tested"; with time, presumably, they may grow out of them.
Despite their shortcomings, by the early 1990s civil society organizations had begun to usher in an embryonic civil society. They provided an "infrastructure of resistance" against political domination, first to Israeli authorities and then to the PA. Middle-class Palestinians, even those not associated with NGOs, generally knew of the NGOs' existence and realized that they could provide forums for political discussion, activity, and perhaps even pressure on the authorities. If Palestinian NGOs were not strong enough to offer a new model for politics, they did represent an important new development in Palestinian society. If the *intifada* gave young Palestinians in the streets a defiant sense of empowerment, NGOs did the same for older Palestinians in lecture halls, offices, and institutes. In a sense they represented the intellectual and institutional articulation of the *intifada*, which had been a spontaneous, populist manifestation of Palestinian nationalism.

But then the PA arrived in July 1994 and almost immediately overwhelmed the NGOs. It saw the political independence of existing social institutions as an impediment to state-building and set out to disassemble them. It began to systematically dismantle the growing and steadily vibrant NGO network and took over their tasks. Given the still-tenuous nature of Palestinian civil society, the PA succeeded without much effort; the youth, factionalism, and lack of professionalism of the NGOs contributed to the ease with which the PA marginalized them. Also important was a lack of popular support for the larger, society-building importance of the NGOs.

The drying up of financial support from outside donors, most of whom now funneled funds through the PA, further curtailed NGO autonomy. Claiming to represent both the PA and the NGOs, a High Council set up by the PLO asked foreign donors to make contributions directly to its coffers, thus resulting in an immediate drying up of much of the NGOs' funds. Within one year, sixty-six rural clinics located in remote areas of the West Bank closed down. Gaza was hit even harder. The Society for the Care of the Handicapped, active throughout the Strip, was forced to dismiss 180 employees and cut services to 2,500 children after it lost $1.5 million of its donations to the PA. The Culture and Free Thought Association of Khan Yunus, also in Gaza, had to terminate thirty-nine positions after losing 60 percent of its budget. Arafat has successfully resisted attempts by foreign donors to earmark contributions for specific infrastructural projects. Instead, he has preferred the flow of unspecified "operational funds" in order to finance his nascent administration.

In addition, the PA quickly set out to impose tight political controls on the NGOs. It required that they supply detailed information regarding the personal and professional lives of their members; in some cases, it asked for past and present political affiliations; the names of members' fathers and wives; and past convictions on spying. NGOs soon found themselves closely monitored by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the intelligence services (*mukhabarat*).

In 1995, to protest growing PA restrictions, sixty-three NGOs formed a Palestinian Non-Governmental
Organization Network (PNGO) to safeguard their "freedom to associate, organize and operate." Although this network initially met with some success, the blow to Palestinian civil society had been struck. Today, an uneasy and unequal relationship exists between the PA and the NGOs, with many of the latter continuing to operate in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip but usually far below their pre-1994 levels.

A new understanding has emerged among the NGOs of what politics is about. It is no longer oppositional, but careful; it means no longer openly criticizing the authorities but taking up projects that the PA does not attend to. Voluntary organizations are no longer the self-conscious building-blocks of civil society but mere fora for discussion. Somewhere along the way, the civil society project was diverted—hijacked by the PA, and turned into today's politically inconsequential cluster of NGOs. In just a few years, the vibrancy and excitement of the NGOs gave way to a more sober spirit as it became clear that the PA insisted on controlling Palestinian society. In essence, the PA aborted and reversed the process of social democratization even before it had a chance to take hold.

II. Popular Support for Democracy

Rhetoric to the contrary, opinion polls demonstrate a preference among Palestinians for political ideals and practices that are essentially undemocratic; obedience to the PLO and to its Islamist opponents rank higher. Democracy, the polls indicate, has not yet sufficiently gained hold among Palestinians.

Soon after the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993, foreign and domestic organizations conducted a flurry of public opinion polls in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Two stand out: the June 1995 surveys conducted for the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute of Freiburg, Germany, and the 1996 studies undertaken by the Nablus-based Center for Palestine Research and Studies. While by now a few years old, no comparably detailed surveys have taken place since; and, given the values and norms these surveys ask about, there has not likely been much change in the intervening years.

A superficial reading of the polls gives the impression that democratic values are widely popular among Palestinians. When asked about the "best solution" for Palestine, for example, only 26 percent of the respondents listed "undemocratic" as their first option, with 28 percent preferring a "consociational democracy" and another 47 percent favoring a "competitive, majoritarian democracy." Similarly, on average 49 percent of the respondents favored a multi-party system, 88 percent endorsed government accountability, 77 percent saw a need for independent courts, and 87 percent called for freedom of the press. A second poll, this one conducted by the Nablus-based Center for Palestinian Research and Studies, (see table 2) showed equally overwhelming support for such bastions of democracy as a free press, a multiparty system, fair elections, the right to criticize the government, and the like. While only 10 percent of Palestinians consider themselves "undemocratic," another 28 percent say they are "partly
democratic," and 62 percent "very democratic."

A deeper probe, however, shows that the respondents are in fact quite ambiguous about democratic values. Support for "democracy" exists in a broad, generic sense; but answers to specific questions about the ideal type of state-society relations betray marked anti-democratic proclivities. The data in table 3 (see page 9) demonstrates that 17 percent of Palestinians "strongly agree" and another 47 percent "agree" with the statement that "leaders should be obeyed." Likewise, 19 percent "strongly agree" and 42 percent "agree" that the PA president should have more powers than he currently holds. Palestinians also rank achieving democracy as less important than improving the economy, finishing negotiations with Israel, and maintaining order and security.24

Earlier polls reinforce these findings. Throughout the 1980s, the idea of democracy was hailed in Palestinian publications and learned circles as the basis of solidarity, mobilization, and resistance against Israel.25 But in a 1986 survey, only 20 percent of Palestinians polled chose democratic government; in 1992, only 30 percent did.26 In a poll conducted in Gaza in 1995, 69 percent said they did not feel they lived in a democracy.27

Even when sincere, the ideals of democracy tend to be undermined by undemocratic actions and practices. Most manifestations of Palestinian political culture have pushed democratic practices to the back or ignored them altogether. For generations, Palestinians have been socialized into a political culture calling for national resistance, self-assertion, and liberation. National "liberation" took precedent over almost everything else, including democracy. Palestinian nationalism took the form of armed struggle, and for many was personified and expressed through Yasir Arafat. Machinations by the Arab states further undermined the spread of democratic values. Palestinian political actors who found themselves engaged in politics in the capitals of Arab countries also become accustomed to undemocratic ways. For all these reasons, democratic norms and principles remain fragile among most Palestinians.

III. The Islamists and the Politics of Violent Coexistence

The increasing popularity of Islamism has further eroded democratic values among Palestinians. The connection is direct; respondents who identify themselves as "Islamists" are the least democratic, as table 4 (see page 10) shows; Fatah supporters come next, with "secularists" the most democratic. The two Palestinian Islamist groups, Islamic Jihad and Hamas, both undermine the prospects for democracy. Although neither group has articulated a coherent position on this specific topic,28 some distinctions can be made.

*Hamas*. Hamas, founded in late 1987 as the *intifada* got under way, has issued statements that come close to endorsing a democratic political system. In a pamphlet distributed in May 1995, it emphatically stated that it "respects political pluralism, democracy, and public freedoms. [It] also supports the rights of
minorities, and considers Christians in Palestine as partners in the homeland who were subjected to the same mistreatment as their Muslim brethren.\textsuperscript{29} According to a Hamas official: "We accommodate all other views, since all of us, the leaders and the rank-and-file, are all concerned about the interests of the movement and the Palestinians. There is also pluralism inside the Hamas itself."\textsuperscript{30} Hamas activists claim democracy is enshrined within Islam, as represented in the Qur'anic concept of \textit{shura} (consultation).\textsuperscript{31}

But for every statement praising democracy, many more disdain it. Examples include: "democracy does not fit all societies, and neither does it do justice to the needs of everyone;" "political parties are permissible only so long as they serve the purposes of the Islamic state;" "alliance with non-Islamic groups is allowed only when Islamic principles are not violated;" "in the absence of an Islamic order, democracy is an acceptable alternative as it helps spread the credo of Islamic parties."\textsuperscript{32}

Its contradictory statements about democracy suggest that Hamas has an instrumentalist approach to the topic: use it to get to power, then drop it. During the \textit{intifada}, Hamas was a dominant force in the Territories; it could mobilize popular support by calling for strikes and demonstrations, put pressure on shopkeepers to close their stores, and, most notably, it ran small medical clinics and schools. When it had the power, in other words, Hamas had no time for democracy. Prior to the 1993 Declaration of Principles (DoP), as the above quotations demonstrate, Hamas members were quite open in proclaiming democracy and Islam as incompatible.

But the advent of the Palestinian Authority reduced the Hamas writ; the former controls almost all official sources of power, including an incipient bureaucracy, a burgeoning police force, the electronic and much of the printed media, de facto control over mosques (by paying clerics' salaries), and so forth. Hamas's somewhat belated discovery of democracy can be seen as an attempt not to be completely left out of the political equation. At a time when the PA is clearly the dominant power, Hamas finds democracy a useful addition to its rhetoric. According to one skeptical observer, Hamas views democracy as "an interim measure, a necessary stage and a means to achieve the real Islamic goal: the creation of an Islamic state in Palestine."\textsuperscript{33}

Further confirming this point, Hamas's actions seem to be devoid of any democratic spirit. Its military wing, called Al-Qassam Brigade, threatens to carry out operations against Israeli authorities and suspected Palestinian collaborators. Its doctrinal framework is even more directly detrimental to democracy; Hamas stands for belief in the supremacy of the \textit{Shari'a} (Islamic sacred law) over secular law and the use of the Qur'an as the constitution of a future Palestinian state.

\textit{Islamic Jihad}. Islamic Jihad, established in 1980, has been more forthright in its consistently hostile attitude to democracy. Institutionally older, more scripturalist in its interpretation of Islam, far more radical in its rejection of the DoP and the PA, it has a narrower base of constituents and members. Accordingly, Islamic Jihad has not faced the same dilemmas as has Hamas since 1993, and its declarations are
unambiguous. "The Islamic Jihad Movement came into existence through our awareness of Islam, the Qur'an, [and] a realistic understanding of history," claimed Fat'hi ash-Shiqaqi, the group's leader until his assassination in 1995. According to Shiqaqi, the movement was launched with three slogans: "Islam is our principle; jihad [sacred war] is our means; and Palestine is the target which we will liberate." He often repeated this sort of violent rhetoric:

*Armed jihad* is the main reason for the movement's existence. We will not give it up and consider it of utmost importance. We will continue the *jihad* even under the most difficult circumstances. The Zionist entity, itself established through terrorism and repression, only understands the language of violence. Our violence is sacred and right. It is a *jihad* in the path of God, principles, and the motherland.

Islamic Jihad does not talk of compromise, of a possible dialogue with the PA, nor of democracy. Its message is blunt, consistent, and clear: armed struggle. Unlike Hamas, which modifies its stand and ideology for political considerations, Islamic Jihad remains radical and uncompromising. Indeed, the group's high-profile suicide missions deep inside Israel have enhanced its stature among a small but determined cadre of young Palestinians.

The activities, ideological platforms, and popular purchase of the Islamic Jihad and Hamas organizations have played a significant and direct role in undermining the pervasiveness of democratic values and civil society. Their uncompromising, rejectionist stances, backed by an often violent rhetoric, undermine the possibilities of political compromise, and, ultimately, civil discourse. Moreover, the reliance of the Islamist organizations on violence adds to the politicalization and polarization of Palestinian society. The prevalent environment of violent rhetoric, outlandish promises, and "heroic" deeds frustrates and foils civil society, which cannot provide an attractive forum for thought and action.

In assessing the impact of the Islamist organizations, however, it is important to remember that they do not act in a vacuum. Their anti-democratic ways find an ideological counterpart in the equally vitriolic and often violent dogmas emanating from the Israeli right, plus some of the actions of the Israeli authorities, such as the house demolitions. The conduct of the Palestinian Authority has also exacerbated the situation, with its dismal human rights record and the many young Palestinians killed or in detention.

**Since Oslo**

Ironically, the founding of the Palestinian Authority has brought to life, often in a violent manner, contradictions within Palestinian society that had lain dormant when the main fight was against the common enemy, Israel. Prior to the DoP, the Palestinian "movement" seemed much more in unison in its goals, if not in its tactics: liberation of Palestine; defeat of the Israeli enemy; the establishment of a "democratic" Palestinian republic. True, the lives and predicaments of "internals" (those who lived under
Israel control) and the "externals" (those who did not) differed, but both espoused almost the same goals.

In contrast, the manner in which the DoP was signed and Arafat attained power, followed by the conduct of the PA, have exacerbated intra-Palestinian contradictions. For many Palestinians today, Israel is no longer the main enemy. Secularist supporters of the PA tend to see Islamists as no less a threat as the Israeli right; Hamas and Islamic Jihad sees the PA's collaboration with Israel as treasonous.

This is not to imply that civil war is imminent among Palestinians. But the PA does find itself limited in subduing or accommodating the society it governs. Palestinian politics may no longer be the politics of war or liberation but it remains in many ways the politics of dogma and praetorianism—uncompromising, charged, summed up in slogans and backed up by force. The ultimate shape of this evolving politics is still some time away; for the time being it does not have the ingredients necessary to make it democratic.

**Conclusion**

Three social impediments prevent the emergence and consolidation of democratic values among Palestinians: the steady demise of civil society organizations since the institutionalization of the PA; the predominance of values inimical to democracy; and the activism of Islamist organizations. Social factors, of course, are only half of the equation. Democracy also requires an appropriate set of political institutions, procedures, and practices; but, as other studies have shown, these are also currently in short supply in the areas under the Palestinian Authority. Also obstructing the path are the PA's efforts at state-building, the endless travails of negotiating with Israel, and the persistent suspiciousness across the Israeli-Palestinian divide. In short, the prospects for Palestinian democracy do not look very bright for the foreseeable future.

Of course, democracy does not appear overnight; it usually results from generations of historical experience, trial and error, an indigenous intellectual tradition, and deliberate political engineering. If the obstacles to democracy are great, they are not insurmountable. History has shown that most democracies have a gestation period, during which contradictions arise but are resolved. This is the stage at which Palestinian society currently finds itself. Palestinian intellectuals and policy-makers hold the key to the society's future trajectory. Will they popularize the virtues of political accountability, fair and equal representation, and societal empowerment in relation to the state? Only if they do will Palestinian democracy have a chance.

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5 Such as those studying international affairs (Palestine Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs), domestic politics (Palestinian Center for Peace and Democracy), cultural matters (the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center), the environment and agriculture (Applied Research Institute), and women's issues (The General Union of Palestine Women, among others).


9 Ibid.


12 Peteet, "The NGO Phenomenon in the Arab World," p. 27.


14 Peteet, "The NGO Phenomenon in the Arab World," p. 27.

15 Usher, Palestine in Crisis, p. 47.

16 Sullivan, "NGOs in Palestine," p. 96.

17 Usher, Palestine in Crisis, p. 64. By one account, some 90 percent of this money goes to policing, security, and surveillance (Sullivan, Non-Governmental Organizations and Freedom of Associations, p. 13).


20 Theodor Hanf and Bernard Sabealla, A Date with Democracy: Palestinians on Society and Politics:
An Empirical Survey, trans. John Richardson (Freiburg: Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institute, 1996). The survey was conducted in fifty-two localities in the West Bank and sixteen in Gaza.


22 Hanf and Sabealla, *A Date with Democracy*, p. 123.

23 Ibid., p. 126.

24 Shikaki, *Transition to Democracy in Palestine*, p. 29. Similarly, a survey of deputies in the Palestine Legislative Council found them more concerned about the economy and "state-building" than democracy; on which, see Mehran Kamrava, "Domestic Political Obstacles to Democracy in Palestine," *Middle East Affairs Journal*, Winter/Spring 1998, pp. 109-127.


28 This is the conclusion of Ziad Abu-Amr, "Palestinian Islamists, Pluralism, and Democracy," *Democracy, Peace, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 245-55.

29 Quoted in *Ad-Diyar* (Beirut), May 5, 1995.


31 Ibid.

32 Abu-Amr, "Palestinian Islamists, Pluralism, and Democracy," pp. 247-249. These statements were made by various high-ranking Hamas members and influential supporters in the 1980s and the 1990s.


