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### **Gaza: Disengagement's Harsh Realities**

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In the few weeks that have passed since Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, the urgent challenges facing President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have become clear but whether Abbas will succeed has not. The stakes are high. The PA's ability to impose law and order and the ruling Fatah party's ability to unify and compete effectively in upcoming legislative elections will not only determine the shape of the future Palestinian political system but also whether or not Palestinians will descend further into a civil war.

The most urgent task facing President Abbas is containing lawlessness in Gaza, where murder, kidnapping, and extortion have reached new heights. There have reportedly been 75 kidnappings since the Israeli withdrawal. Armed individuals resort to kidnapping to get jobs, free family members from prison, and exact revenge. Often they belong to local gangs or even to the militias of large clans.

Gazans hope that the lawlessness, infighting, and corruption plaguing them will soon be addressed due the recent return of Gaza's strongman Muhammad Dahlan (former head of Preventive Security and now Minister of Civil Affairs), who had been away for a month for medical reasons. Dahlan said upon his arrival that it was time for Fatah to control its arms, end the chaos in Gaza, and focus on winning the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections slated for January 2006.

Although the agenda Dahlan articulated makes sense, how it might be accomplished remains unclear. President Abbas faces a critical dilemma: he fears that the use of force to stamp out lawlessness would lead to a civil war, but without law and order it is doubtful that elections can be held, thereby complicating the already tense relationship between the PA and Hamas.

Meanwhile the crisis inside Fatah rages on. Lacking a charismatic leader and with its public image tarnished by corruption and incompetence, Fatah has lost popularity among

Palestinians steadily over the past decade. In light of Hamas's impressive victories in recent municipal elections in the West Bank and Gaza, Fatah leaders are justifiably worried about the possibility of a crushing defeat in the PLC elections.

Citing the lack of accountability and democracy within the party, over 240 Fatah activists in Gaza resigned recently while Fatah was preparing to hold primaries for the elections. "We have spent the last ten years trying to improve conditions in Fatah," said a letter to Abbas from the activists, who represent a young guard that has engaged in an ongoing power struggle with the party's veteran leaders. The activists' withdrawal forced the postponement of Fatah primaries (now mandated for November 20) and constituted a severe blow to Abbas's efforts to unify the party in order to prevent a strong showing by Hamas in the elections.

Hamas is well aware of Fatah's disarray and opposes any postponement of the elections. The Islamic movement is playing its cards carefully and has shown a recent desire for calm. It has stressed in its public rhetoric that elections must be held in order to facilitate reform and fight corruption. Hamas is keeping an eye on public opinion, realizing that most Palestinians (nearly 80 percent according to a recent poll) support the cease-fire with Israel and do not want a return to violence. Moreover, it probably hopes not to alienate the United States, which apparently did not oppose Abbas's plan (reportedly discussed during his October 20 White House visit) to allow Hamas to become a legitimate political party in hopes of eventually disarming the movement.

Abbas thus faces a formidable series of political and security challenges. He has just launched a process to disarm militias working under Fatah and now must try to unify the party in preparation for January elections. If he succeeds in that, he must try to achieve through the elections a large enough majority in the PLC to support continuing disarmament and extending it to Hamas and other groups. The greatest test of Abbas' governing ability and capacity, however, will come after the January elections when he will have to try to translate his plans into actions in order to build stability in Gaza and press for Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.

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