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Palestine: Can Fatah Survive?

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With preparations accelerating, it seems increasingly likely that the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah) will hold its Sixth General Conference during 2008. Yet given the advanced state of disintegration in which the movement finds itself, it may well be a case of too little too late. Simply put, Fatah's very survival now hangs in the balance.

Much has changed since Fatah held its Fifth General Conference in 1989. The movement's leader, Yasser Arafat, has departed the scene, along with a third of the twenty-one member Fatah Central Committee (FCC). Yet none have been replaced because the power to do so rests with the General Conference. The surviving members—though drawn from a society whose median age is well below 30—are over 65, often considerably older, and in several cases incapacitated by illness.

Moreover, Fatah in recent years has fragmented, not just into two or three rival camps but into multiple, competing power centers. These power centers (generally associated with individual leaders engaged in constantly shifting alliances) consist of networks based on patronage, shared history, geography, foreign sponsorship, ideology, policy, or various combinations of the above.

Simultaneously, Fatah has been struggling to cope with the most serious challenge yet to its supremacy within the Palestinian national movement by the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), a challenge in large part attributable to Fatah's strategic failure to end the Israeli occupation on the basis of a negotiated two-state settlement as well as its failures in governance since the Palestinian Authority (PA) was founded in 1994.

Organizational preparations for the General Conference rest with a committee led by the Tunis-based FCC member Abu Mahir Ghnaim, whose refusal to enter the occupied territories prior to their liberation has meant that preparations within the West Bank and Gaza Strip are the responsibility of Fatah's Department of Organization and Mobilization (*da'irat al-ta'bi'a wa-l tandhim*) currently

headed by FCC member Ahmad Qurai (Abu Alaa), who replaced FCC member Hani al-Hassan in 2007. Another preparatory committee, led by Fatah Revolutionary Council (FRC) member and former PLO UN envoy Nasser al-Qidwa, has been charged with formulating the movement's political program.

The Organization and Mobilization Department has established a computerized database of the Fatah membership in the occupied territories and supervised a series of local, district, and regional elections throughout the West Bank to select Conference delegates. While this complex process has been surprisingly smooth, it forms only one of numerous challenges Fatah must overcome on the road to the General Conference.

One challenge consists of delegate criteria. Elected delegates chosen locally by Fatah members in the occupied territories and various exile communities represent only part of the Conference. FCC and Fatah Revolutionary Council members participate *ex officio*, and some have proposed that these be joined by current (and former) officials including elected Fatah Palestinian Legislative Council members, mayors, and PA ministers. An additional quota of between 35 and 51 percent of delegates is set aside for members of the movement's military cadre, according to Fatah's by-laws. With no cap on the number of General Conference delegates, the meeting could easily be stacked in favor of delegates selected by the present leadership. More to the point, only the General Conference is empowered to alter the representational criteria, while such alterations are considered essential to the Conference's success.

A second challenge concerns the venue of the Conference. It is extremely unlikely that Fatah delegates, including those from the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria, will be able to assemble in Ramallah. Some have therefore proposed holding three separate events – in Gaza, Ramallah, and an Arab state – to be linked by video conference or held successively. Others have countered that this would be politically dangerous and instead argued for a single event to be held in al-Arish in the Egyptian Sinai or on the Jordanian coast of the Dead Sea.

A third issue to be confronted concerns the movement's political program. An increasing number of Fatah leaders and rank-and-file members have come to the conclusion that the movement needs to define itself and its strategic objectives clearly in order not only to meet the challenge of Hamas but to lay the basis for organizational coherence and discipline. Yet to do so will almost certainly precipitate defections by the disenchanted and perhaps even cause a split within Fatah. While al-Qidwa easily ranks among the movement's most able and sophisticated minds, the challenge could well prove insurmountable.

Finally, there is a widespread feeling that the movement cannot go to a General Conference in its current weakened state, but needs some real achievement, such as concrete progress in negotiations with Israel or at least the prospect of an imminent agreement. Yet this is highly unlikely at best. One prominent FRC member expressed concern that President Mahmoud Abbas "is pushing for a quick achievement as he did with the 2006 elections; on the formal level it looks like a success, but you are risking very negative consequences."

Ultimately, the challenge of the Sixth General Conference is to ensure that a successful outcome—including a new leadership structure—is decided and agreed by the main power centers in advance. Yet the formulas for doing so do not presently exist, and require a General Conference to be created. On this basis some of the movement's leaders are proposing to hold an (admittedly unconstitutional) interim conference that would seek to finesse the by-laws in a manner that would allow for a purposeful meeting.

The stakes are extremely high. If Fatah fails to hold the General Conference—and in the process to make the necessary leadership reforms and formulate a meaningful national program—in 2008, it is probably finished as a movement. Despite the rise of Hamas, Fatah remains the spinal cord of the Palestinian national movement, and its disintegration could only mean further Palestinian paralysis.

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