

# Can Palestinian Third Parties Make a Difference?

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## ABSTRACT

While it remains to be seen whether Islamists and democracy can coexist, he believes that the United States' decision to focus on "hard power" to eliminate terrorism has undermined moderate Islamist movements and that the absence of a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is pulling Palestinians away from the center. [...]Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, the Gilad Shalit prisoner swap, and the rejection of PA President Mahmoud Abbas as a negotiating partner, has strengthened radicals within Hamas and weakened moderates within both Fateh and Hamas. PNI supports nonviolence, civil disobedience and secularism, and claims to be a democratic coalition of leftists, secularists, unionists and women." Its website states that PNI's immediate objective includes combating corruption, providing transparency and accountability, judicial and legislative reform, institutional reform and police and security reform.xiv During the 2005 presidential elections, Barghouthi ran as an independent candidate and drew 19% of the vote, losing to Fateh leader Mahmoud Abbas.

## FULL TEXT

On May 19, 2011, at the height of the Arab Spring which saw citizens from across North Africa and the Middle East risk their lives to demand change and reform, U.S. President Barack Obama asserted that "it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy." While the United States has encouraged reform and democracy in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria, it continues to support the Fateh-led Palestinian Authority (PA). Washington has also stated that Hamas could join in negotiations if the Islamist movement renounces violence, recognizes Israel and abides by previous PA agreements."

Although Fateh and Hamas are the largest Palestinian factions, they have been criticized for a range of undemocratic actions - including corruption, nepotism, torture, mismanagement, and censorship of the press. They have also failed to unequivocally and unambiguously articulate a permanent peace agreement that establishes a Palestinian state alongside Israel, rather than in place of it. There exists an often overlooked constituency of nonviolent Palestinian third parties who genuinely advocate peaceful coexistence with Israel and adhere to the principles of reform, transparency, freedom and democracy. A pragmatic Obama should pay closer attention to the movements described below, movements that offer real change and realistic reform.

### In Search of the Middle Ground

During my conversation with Prof. Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, he explained that his movement, Wasatia, is a moderate Islamic reformist movement that rejects the fundamentalism of Hamas and welcomes moderate Palestinian Muslims and Christians. Wasatia, which in Arabic means "middle ground," "balance," "moderation" and "justice," was established on January 1, 2007 and held its first annual conference on March 21. On March 21, 2012, it held its sixth annual conference."

Born in Jerusalem in 1946, Dajani earned two doctoral degrees: one from the University of South Carolina at Columbia in political science (1981), and another from the University of Texas at Austin in government and economics (1983).<sup>1</sup> Dajani is a celebrated academic who along with his brother, Munther, teaches at the American Studies Institute at al-Quds University.

Wasatia membership represents a cross-section of Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and includes religious leaders, teachers, women, intellectuals, journalists and youth. Wasatia's charter calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital and the Old City of Jerusalem accorded "Special International Status."<sup>2</sup> Its goal is to meaningfully address Palestinian religious, social, economic and political issues. Dajani's movement is unique in that it is the only Palestinian Islamic initiative that calls for a negotiated peaceful settlement based on justice and renounces violence. In regards to the "right of return" of the Palestinian refugees, Dajani affirms that "the right is holy, yet the return is negotiable." He prefers repatriating those Palestinian refugees wishing to return inside the democratic, independent, and pluralist State of Palestine.

Dajani is deeply concerned about how the text of the Holy Qu'ran has been misinterpreted by radicals to serve a political agenda aimed at seizing power and inciting against the other. Wasatia seeks to make people aware of the true teaching of Islam in order not to be misled by extremists.

In the context of the Arab Spring, Dajani asserts that the groundswell has "unleashed the hidden power of religion of the Arab masses" and has emboldened radical Islamists to capitalize on the subsequent power vacuum. While it remains to be seen whether Islamists and democracy can coexist, he believes that the United States' decision to focus on "hard power" to eliminate terrorism has undermined moderate Islamist movements and that the absence of a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is pulling Palestinians away from the center. Moreover, Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, the Gilad Shalit prisoner swap, and the rejection of PA President Mahmoud Abbas as a negotiating partner, has strengthened radicals within Hamas and weakened moderates within both Fateh and Hamas.

Dajani laments that "although the United States and European Union are aware that Wasatia exists, they do not keenly support its moderate vision." He urges the West to play a more proactive role in bolstering Wasatia and other nonviolent Palestinian movements "which genuinely advocate reform, tolerance, nonviolence, moderation and peaceful coexistence."

### A Third Party Electoral Challenge?

Wasatia has yet to participate in Palestinian parliamentary elections, and Dajani says that Wasatia will not run in the next elections for several reasons: "Firstly, we do not have the funds needed to finance costly election campaigns; secondly, we believe that the current political situation is not suitable for Wasatia to take part in governance; thirdly, it is more in the national interest to empower moderation within Hamas and Fateh than to collide with both parties in vying for political power." Nonetheless, Dajani continues spreading Wasatia's message at conferences, schools, forums and at the websites [www.wasatia.info](http://www.wasatia.info) and [www.bigdreamsmallhope.com](http://www.bigdreamsmallhope.com).<sup>3</sup>

### The Palestine Forum

Another Palestinian committed to reform and nonviolence is Munib al-Masri, a 77-year old billionaire whose Nablus villa has been described as "the most imposing private residence from Morocco to the border of India."<sup>4</sup> An avid

entrepreneur, Masri studied geology at the University of Texas and founded the Palestine Securities Exchange stock market in Nablus, the Engineering & Development Group (EDGO), the Palestine Development and Investment Company (PADICO) and the Palestinian phone company Partei. (TM)'

Masri launched the Palestine Forum in November 2007. Known in Arabic as Muntada Filastin, the Palestine Forum renounces violence, recognizes Israel and sees itself as a moderate, pragmatic alternative to both Fateh and Hamas. Masri 's movement calls for an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital, and seeks to uphold the principles of international law and United Nations resolutions."

Palestine Forum's website ([www.palestineforum.ps](http://www.palestineforum.ps)) advocates for a "Democratic National Framework with political, economic, social and cultural dimensions intended for all Palestinians wherever they reside, in Palestine or in the Diaspora." Palestine Forum proposes building a modern democratic society that champions human dignity, equality and freedom for all citizens. It supports peaceful dialogue, the resolution of all disputes without resorting to violence, and an end to tribalism so as to ensure the widest public participation. However, this website is no longer active.

The decline of Palestine Forum's social media presence is perhaps due to the fact that Masri does not view it as a formal political "third party" but as a lobbying mechanism for peace and reconciliation. Instead of competing with Fateh and Hamas, Masri seeks Palestinian unity as a precursor to peace talks with Israel, and supports full peace with Israel in exchange for a negotiated agreement on the Palestinian refugees in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194."

Like Wasatia, the Palestine Forum has not proven itself at the ballot box and will not challenge Hamas or Fateh in future elections. Masri prefers working behind the scenes to spread his vision of unity and peaceful coexistence in interviews and forums."

#### Mustafa Barghouthi

Of all the third-party candidates, Mustafa Barghouthi is perhaps the most well known. In June 2002, Barghouthi launched the Palestinian National Initiative (PNI), known in Arabic as al-Mubadara al-Wataniyya al-Filistiniyya, as an alternative to Fateh 's corruption and Hamas 's extremism. PNI was co-founded with other intellectuals such as Gazan physician Dr. Haider Abdel Shafi, the late literary critic Edward Said, and Ibrahim Dakkak - an engineer residing in Jerusalem.xiii

Born in Jerusalem in 1954, Barghouthi was educated in the Soviet Union and at Stanford University. He practiced medicine at the Maqassed Hospital in Jerusalem from 1978 to 1988, and created the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, a grassroots healthcare clinic.

PNI advocates a lasting peace with Israel in return for a complete withdrawal from the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. PNI supports nonviolence, civil disobedience and secularism, and claims to be a democratic coalition of leftists, secularists, unionists and women." Its website states that PNI's immediate objective includes combating corruption, providing transparency and accountability, judicial and legislative reform, institutional reform and police and security reform.xiv

During the 2005 presidential elections, Barghouthi ran as an independent candidate and drew 19% of the vote, losing to Fateh leader Mahmoud Abbas. In the January 2006 parliamentary elections, PNI won only two seats in the 132-seat parliament. Hamas earned a majority with 74 seats and 45 were allotted to Fateh.xv

## Spreading the Word and Winning Support

In spite of PNI's weak performance at the polls, Barghouthi has not been deterred. He organized an international conference of more than 500 people in Bethlehem in December 2007 to address nonviolent resistance against Israel, and appeared on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart in October 2009 to present his message of nonviolence and peaceful coexistence with Israel. In January 2012, Barghouthi participated in an "Intelligence Squared U.S." debate, defending the proposition that Palestine should be admitted as a full U.N. member state. He continues spreading his vision at seminars and via the website [www.almubadara.org](http://www.almubadara.org).

Dajani, Masri and Barghouthi each share a vision that is compatible with the core values of the United States. They champion human rights, democracy and government accountability, and they declare, in both Arabic and English, that they endeavor to peacefully coexist with Israel. They do not seek Israel's destruction, nor do they view a two-state solution as a first step toward Israel's ultimate elimination. Yet their dovish attitudes appear inconsistent with mainstream Palestinian politics. Fateh and Hamas control militias, enjoy grassroots support and oftentimes speak in an inconsistent and ambiguous tone - purportedly agreeing to peaceful coexistence in English, while often repudiating this in Arabic.

Dajani and Masri do not wish to run for office and instead seek to moderate Hamas and Fateh. While Barghouthi could be a serious contender in future elections, his pro-reform, pro-peace platform, like Dajani's and Masri's, may fall on deaf ears. Without the support of the security services and in the absence of grassroots support, Barghouthi will most likely be unable to pose a significant threat to Fateh and Hamas.

Wasatia, Palestine Forum and PNI could one day play a role in Palestinian affairs with the proper combination of Western support and domestic backing. If Palestinians decide their fate might be better off without Fateh and Hamas, a third party might emerge as a viable alternative. Perhaps such a scenario is not unrealistic should the West decide to support these parties.

### Footnote

1 Text of Obama's Mideast Speech, New York Times, May 19, 2011.

" Hilary Leila Krieger, "Hamas Must Reform If US to Talk With Palestinian Gov't," Jerusalem Post, May 6, 2011.

### Footnote

ii Author's interview with Prof. Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, Feb. 12, 2012.

iv Mohammed Dajani, "Palestinian Higher Education under Occupation: The Challenges," April 13, 2005.

" Wasatia Homepage, "Wasatia, A Moderate Way: New Palestinian Islamic Initiative Takes The Middle Ground," <http://www.wasatia.info/aboutus.htm>.

### Footnote

" See Wasatia's Homepage, <http://www.wasatia.info/aboutus.htm> and Mohammed Dajani's Website, <http://www.bigdreamsmallhope.com/>.

v" Uri Avnery, "The Duke of Nablus," Palestine Chronicle, Dec. 22, 2011.

vi" See Munib Masri's bio at [http://www.edgo.com/directors/directors\\_masri.htm](http://www.edgo.com/directors/directors_masri.htm).

"" Billionaire Setting Up Political Movement to Challenge Hamas, Fatah," AP, Nov. 16, 2007.

### Footnote

x Ilene R. Prusher, "One Palestinian Billionaire's Vision of Unity," Christian Science Monitor, Feb. 29, 2008.

- xi Elinor Levy, " Hamas Ready For Peace Talks With Israel," Ynet News, May 1 , 20 1 1 .
- xii Palestinian National Initiative Homepage, "Profile: Dr. Mustafa Barghouti," Jan. 19, 2006.
- xiii Eric Hazan, "Mustafa Barghouti: Palestinian Defiance," New Left Review 32, March-April 2005.

### Footnote

- xiv See the official website for Palestinian National Initiative, <http://www.almubadara.org/new/english.php>.
- xv Aaron D. Pina, "Palestinian Elections," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, Feb. 9, 2006.

### AuthorAffiliation

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