

Give Palestinian Third Parties a Chance

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ABSTRACT

PNI supports non-violence, civil disobedience, and secularism, and claims to be a democratic coalition of leftists, secularists, unionists, and women. [...]parties might just hold the most hope for everyone.

FULL TEXT

No, Dani Dayan, the status quo in the West Bank cannot continue.

I'll leave it to other commentators to explain why this is the case on the Israeli side. But when it comes to the Palestinian side, it's time to consider alternatives to Fatah and Hamas—they're not all we've got.

Hamas and Fatah aren't making Obama's promise of democratic transition in the Arab world a reality, it might be time for all of us—Palestinians, Israelis, and Americans—to consider third party alternatives.

Last month, more than 100 rockets were fired from Gaza into Israel, shattering a de facto truce between Hamas and Israel. Whether Hamas is trying to delay reconciliation with its Fatah rival in the West Bank or testing its relationship with Morsi's Egypt, it is has held onto the reins of power.

As for Fatah, the Palestinian Authority is currently under fire for waging a low key war against the media and others critical of Abbas' rule. On June 30, dozens of Palestinians were beaten by security forces after protesting a scheduled meeting between Abbas and Israeli Vice Premier Shaul Mofaz. The following day, more Palestinians (and journalists) were injured by PA security forces.

In an interview, professor Mohammed Dajani of Al Quds University explained to me that his moderate Islamic reformist movement, Wasatia, rejects Hamas's extremism. Wasatia, which means "centrism," "moderation," and "justice," was established in 2007 and will hold its sixth annual conference in March 2013.

Wasatia's supporters are a cross section of Palestinian society—Muslims, Christians, religious leaders, teachers, women, intellectuals, journalists, and youth. Its charter calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital, while the Old City of Jerusalem is given "Special International Status."

Whereas Hamas and Fatah have failed to provide a better life for their constituents, Dajani's goal is to reform Palestinian religious, social, economic and political life. Unlike Hamas's anti-peace stance and Fatah's ambiguous position on a permanent agreement with Israel, Wasatia renounces violence and advocates an unambiguous peaceful solution. Regarding the Palestinian "right of return," Dajani states that "though the right is holy," he welcomes repatriating refugees to a future democratic, independent, and pluralistic Palestinian state.

Dajani laments the lack of support he receives from the West. Europe and the United States know Wasatia exists, yet they continue supporting the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority, even though Wasatia espouses values compatible with those Washington claims to champion. The lack of political and financial support restricts Wasatia's ability to compete with the two dominant Palestinian factions, preventing it from running in upcoming Palestinian elections.

Another third party that deserves Western attention in the Palestinian National Initiative (PNI), which was launched in 2002 by Mustafa Barghouthi. Barghouthi, a medical doctor and political activist, advocates ending the conflict with Israel in exchange for a total withdrawal from the West Bank and East Jerusalem. PNI supports non-violence, civil disobedience, and secularism, and claims to be a democratic coalition of leftists, secularists, unionists, and women. Its website states that PNI's immediate objectives include providing governmental transparency and accountability, judicial and legislative reform, and police and security reform.

In 2005, Barghouthi ran as an independent candidate in the presidential elections and received 19 percent of the vote, but his party only won two of parliament's 132 seats the next year. Barghouthi continues to spread PNI's vision despite its weak performance at the polls. In 2007, he organized an international conference of over 500 people in Bethlehem to promote nonviolence, and voiced a message of peaceful coexistence with Israel on the Daily Show in October 2009. In January 2012, Barghouthi appeared on Intelligence Squared, arguing that Palestine should be admitted to the U.N. as a full member state. He continues spreading his vision at seminars and on the Internet.

Dajani 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; they articulate in both English and in Arabic that they endeavor to peacefully coexist with Israel. They do not seek Israel's destruction or view a two-state solution as a first step toward Israel's liquidation. While President Obama stated in 2011 that "it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy," he continues to support Fatah and Hamas over these alternative parties.

While it is true that Hamas and Fatah enjoy popular support far beyond that of Wasatia and PNI, this may change. Hamas's decision to resume rocket attacks against Israel will no doubt lead to harsh Israeli countermeasures, which would reduce Hamas's popularity as it was reduced after Operation Cast Lead. Likewise, Abbas's growing authoritarianism in the West Bank coupled with his inability to have Palestine declared a state in the UN will lower his approval rating.

Active support from Washington and its allies could not only entice Dajani and Barghouthi to run for office but give them a decent chance of winning. It won't happen overnight, but Wasatia and PNI could one day help Palestinians take control of their fate without Fatah and Hamas. Third parties might just hold the most hope for everyone.

DETAILS

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