

At Arab bastion of 'enlightenment' student politicians campaign on which party has killed more Israelis

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## At Arab bastion of 'enlightenment' student politicians campaign on which party has killed more Israelis

By Evan Osnos

A telling look at intellectually stimulated future Palestinian leaders

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**BIR ZEIT** — Student politicians at Bir Zeit University no longer stump on simply better library services and cheaper lunches. They also campaign on which party claims to have killed more Israelis.

"For the Islamist bloc, it is 135," says senior Rami Barghouti, a leader of the student bloc formed by militant Palestinian factions Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Barghouti says that figure, which is all but impossible to confirm, is the number of Israelis who have been killed by Bir Zeit students associated with Hamas.

The West Bank's oldest and most prestigious university is awash in rhetoric angrier than at any time anyone here can remember. The sentiments roiling a campus known for producing Palestinian leaders offer a bleak illustration of the fury and polarization among young people in the West Bank more than three years after the start of the Palestinian uprising.

The political picture at Bir Zeit also captures a broader evolution in the Palestinian balance of power. Like their parents, today's young Palestinians are increasingly inclined to support radical groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, at the expense of Yasser Arafat's mainstream Fatah Party, which has steadily lost ground on campuses across the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

For the past three years, Bir Zeit had scrapped its campus elections, citing the ongoing violence between Palestinians and Israelis. But, with students demanding a chance to vote, the university relented, and by the time ballots were counted Dec. 10, the campaign had revealed a student body inflamed.



At a debate just before the vote, Barghouti, the Islamist bloc candidate, presented his statistics.

" Hamas activists in this university killed 135 Zionists," he said, challenging the Fatah candidate, according to an Associated Press report at the time. "How many did Fatah activists from Bir Zeit kill?"

The Fatah candidate replied that Barghouti should "look at the paper, go to the archives and see for yourself. Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades have not stopped fighting the occupation," he said, referring to the militant wing of the Fatah movement.

In the end, Hamas and Islamic Jihad cruised to their strongest showing ever, claiming 25 of the council's 51 seats. The student wing of the Fatah Party came in second with 20 seats, and leftist parties took the rest.

In the weeks since the campaign, university officials, professors and students have debated its significance, including whether glorifying violence as a political tactic represents legitimate opposition or something akin to incitement.

"This time, I think there is no question, they overdid it," said Bir Zeit political scientist Hisham Ahmed, an expert on Hamas who backed moderate student candidates.

After the election, the administration circulated a letter to students, declaring that "the university has nothing to do with the violence and we do not support these things," said Munir Qazzaz, dean of student affairs.

In the future, Qazzaz said, student elections will be encouraged to "focus on the bright side of student life."

Yet, the university stands by its policy of not constraining student elections or debate.

Since sweeping to victory, the Islamist students have moved into the small, drafty tan-brick building that houses the Student Council offices on the edge of the sun-soaked campus. What little furniture the Student Council has is plastered with colorful stickers emblazoned with the faces of Bir Zeit students who became suicide bombers.

Over lunch one recent afternoon, the members of the Islamist bloc talked proudly of their showing in the election — the best since the bloc first won control of the Student Council in 1998. Fadhi Ahmed, a slightly built sophomore with a thin mustache, said the group's rising popularity reflects its reputation as the party willing to confront Israel most strongly.

"The political issues, the occupation and the actions of the Israelis are the focal point of concern all over Palestine," Ahmed said. "These are the issues that touch young people's hearts."

The talk of killing, he said, is intended to underscore how committed his fellow party members are to the Palestinian cause.

"During the intifada, many Islamist students have made many good sacrifices for the Palestinian people," he added.

The success of Hamas and Islamic Jihad is particularly revealing among the 6,000 students at Bir Zeit because the campus once was known as a Fatah stronghold. Arrayed high on a hillside a short drive from Arafat's compound in Ramallah, it earned a reputation in the 1970s and 1980s for its secular and nationalist student activism.

All that began to change in 1993, with the signing of the Oslo Accords, which came to symbolize for many Palestinians how negotiations failed to deliver what they wanted. At Bir Zeit and in Palestinian society at large, Arafat's popularity has faded amid the growing profile of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Arafat's approval rating dropped from 50 percent in October to 38 percent in December, according to the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research.

"(The Islamists) are critical, forthright and, some occasions, belligerent," said Ahmed, the political scientist. "And they have a clear-cut agenda to recruit everyone they can. In that, they are successful."

"The results rung a bell for me personally that Fatah, being the main group, will have to be alerted to what the future might hold," he added.

Across the campus from the Student Council offices, the Fatah entrants in the recent election sit in the smoky cafeteria - and stew. They simply can't compete on the issues that matter most to their peers, they say.

"Outside politics are inseparable from what happens here," said Mohammed Al-Swaiti, 22, a member of the Fatah student party. "Most of the martyrs from our community come from Hamas, and that connects (with) people on an emotional level."