

Hamas vs. Fatah

Qantara.de - Dialog mit der islamischen Welt

For the first time the Islamist Hamas movement is running for Parliament. Opinion polls suggest a neck-and-neck race and a possible sharing of power between the ruling Fatah movement and the highly controversial Hamas. Igal Avidan has more from Ramallah



Hamas candidates attend a press conference to launch the election campaign in Gaza City

The Al-Manarah-Square in the centre of Ramallah. On a cold winter day, dozens of election posters flutter in the wind and almost hide the two stone lions, a symbol of the unofficial Palestinian capital. "The people are the alternative," reads one banner. "The alternative is your vote," goes another. The array of candidates is as wide as the variety of salads at the Falafel stand across the busy road.

The political education centre of the ruling Fatah Party lies somewhat hidden in a suburban district of Ramallah. Fatah activist Bakr abu Bakr, a bearded middle-aged man in a black leather jacket, is hardly excited about the forthcoming elections. Palestinians are disappointed by corruption and anarchy, Fatah is divided between the old and the new guard. Bakr says he is loyal to Fatah, but is critical of the situation in the West Bank.

"Fatah has managed to negotiate a truce agreement between different Palestinian factions including Hamas and Israel. However, Fatah has failed to highlight this victory in the media because the opposition succeeded in presenting other issues such as personal security. The gangs in the streets and the deteriorating personal security are influencing the mood of the people. There is no rule of law here, which partly explains the chaotic situation especially when you add to this the reports about corruption."

Michael Jackson's "Give Thanks to Allah"

Abu Bakr admits that Fatah needs young and attractive candidates. He stresses that the last party convention was held 16 years ago. Suddenly Bakr's mobile phone rings.

It's a new song by Michael Jackson, in English and Arabic. Bakr is very proud of the tune "Give thanks to Allah", although it's out of tune with a secular party like Fatah.

Such an Islamic song sounds more like an election clip for Hamas. On Bakr's large desk is a pile of newspapers. Before we leave I pick one up. Bakr intervenes, saying this is a Hamas bulletin and offering a small Fatah brochure he has produced. It seems strange for a Fatah activist to display Hamas propaganda material in his office.

Bakr who runs the Fatah political education branch expects his party to win an absolute majority in the 132-seat parliament. But with the Islamic song on his mobile and the Hamas propaganda in his office he doesn't seem very confident that his Fatah will continue to rule the Palestinians Parliament single-handedly.

US, EU to be blamed for weakened secularism?

At the Bir Zeit University Islam is also gaining ground. Every female student wears a headscarf. Hisham Ahmed, a professor for political science, stresses that the Palestinian society is secular in nature. He sees however a direct link between the failure of the peace process and the growing strength of the radical Islamic Hamas movement.

"I think it's the world community, the USA and the EU, that should be seriously blamed for this dramatic weakening of the secular movement in the Palestinian society. There has been a peace process fledging for the past 12 years. That peace process was led by the secular movement, by Fatah itself, by the Palestinian Authority. Instead of reaping the benefits and the fruits of peace, Palestinian society is dealing even on a more stringent basis with the atrocious practices of the Israeli occupation," he says.

"The failure of the peace process has led to the weakening of the secular movement," Ahmed goes on to say, "and in effect led to the popularity of an Islamic movements such as Hamas, which claim to cater to the demands and the ambitions of the Palestinian people. When there is despair, profound frustration and anguish among the people in the society certainly many of them resort to religion as a way out of this dilemma."

Hamas appears incorrupt

The Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas is participating in parliamentary elections for the first time. Its slogan reads "Change and Reform", its platform is moderate. The number 1 on the Hamas list is Ismail Hania, a cultured and reserved politician, while the provocative Mahmoud Zahar was placed only ninth. And while Fatah candidates compete with each other, Hamas appears disciplined, well-organized and incorrupt.

Most of its candidates are known activists from the movement's various charity organizations and academics like Mahmud Ramahi from Ramallah. He works as a doctor in a private hospital, has studied in Italy and wears a modern suit and tie. Ramahi explains the growing sympathy for Hamas.

"First of all, we are educated people as you. We live in different countries in the world, we speak different languages and we mix with different civilizations. First of all, we have the religious idea, ideology. And we have all the practice and the experience of the other civilizations. And we can mix this experience with our religion and we do our best."

A dove carrying a key

A poster on the wall at the Hamas office shows the former Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin on a map of Palestine, on which Israel does not exist. A verse from the Koran reads: "May the merciful God be with you and forgive your sins, so you may come in Paradise." Another poster entitled "We Will Return" shows refugee tents scattered all over historical Palestine. A dove carries a key, which symbolizes the homes Palestinian refugees have left behind, in what is today Israel.

Hamas politicians proclaim resistance to Israeli occupation. But are not willing to say whether they would be satisfied with an Israeli retreat from the West Bank, which is what Fatah is demanding. For the time being, Hamas activists are avoiding questions concerning the recognition of or a dialogue with Israel. The reason is that Hamas is not part of the PLO.

And the PLO as the Palestinian national movement is Israel's negotiating partner, not the Palestinian Authority, which only represents the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

The Hamas and the PLO

Isabel Kershner is covering Palestinian issues for the Israeli magazine Jerusalem Report. "At the moment that would be subject to a whole other set of negotiations," she says.

"They would make certain demands of quotas. In the past they have spoken about a 40-percent-quota and the PLO, Fatah-dominated PLO, has not so far accepted that. They're not yet at the stage of joining because it would mean changing the whole structure of the PLO and its basic guidelines. So it's not automatic that after the election they will join the PLO. It would have to be a separate process. In the meantime I think the Hamas is not terribly interested in a diplomatic role opposite Israel. It's much more interested in working within Palestinian society and to change the nature of the PA rule. They see themselves as a kind of watchdog that can clean up the corruption and supervise what's going on inside the PA."

In the municipal elections last December, Hamas won control of the West Bank city of Jenin, taking more than half of the council seats. The Islamists also won almost all seats in Nablus, a city where Fatah was traditionally strong. In an attempt to draw more public support, Hamas included 11 women and a Christian on its parliamentary list.

Hamas is particularly strong in the Gaza Strip where it won 76 out of the 118 seats in the first-ever municipal elections. A British expert working in Gaza who asked not to be named for security reasons, says local Palestinians regard Hamas not as a terror group but as a political party, which stands for non-corrupt government.

Winning hearts and minds in Gaza

"What they do when they win is to clean the streets, they get the street lights running and they run free school buses," says the expert. "Now ordinary Gazans find that maybe 70-80 per cent of their monthly income, if they have children, is spent on school buses and having free school buses running again is a big deal to them. So they're winning hearts and minds in Gaza on the basis that the previous administration in a lot of areas was extremely corrupt and that ordinary people weren't receiving the supposed benefits they should be getting."

The Palestinian Authority, or PA, received five billion dollars of financial support in the last five years, the highest aid per capita for any entity in the world. There was widespread corruption during the rule of Yasser Arafat, but things have deteriorated even more since his death last year. The World Bank and the EU were enraged by the PA's decision this year to double the monthly salaries of the 130,000 public employees and security personal. They decided therefore to freeze 60 million dollars of current financing. Such a drastic measure will only increase the popularity of Hamas, political scientist Hisham Ahmed warns.

"There will be a protest vote by Palestinians regarding such interference in their internal affairs by the Americans and the Europeans," Ahmed says. "So I think it would be wiser and more strategic for the West to stop doing that."

Avnery: "Israel must accept the Palestinians' decision"

Palestinian Opinion polls suggest that Fatah will win half of the seats in the new parliament and Hamas 40 percent. With some of the independent candidates supporting Hamas, the election-day could be violent because of the neck-and-neck race.

Yet 82-year-old Israeli peace activist and journalist Uri Avnery looks forward optimistically to a future dialogue between Israel and the Hamas.

"Israel has no choice but to accept the decision of the Palestinian people whatever it is. If the Palestinian people elect Hamas, if Hamas will be a very big minority or maybe even a majority in the next Palestinian parliament, Israel will have to deal with Hamas. Actually, Sharon just before his collapse and also Shaul Mofaz, the minister of defence, both have hinted already that Israel will deal with the Hamas by saying that if Hamas does this and this then we shall deal with them. And for me this is a natural thing to do and even a positive thing."

"I remember when I was the only person in Israel," Avnery goes on to say, "who said 'we must negotiate with the PLO' at a time when everyone said the PLO is a terrorist organization and Israel will never speak with the PLO. And a few years later we made an official agreement with the PLO. Hamas today is in almost the same position. Israel will deal with Hamas. In my mind there is no question about it."

Israel and the Hamas

The British expert on Palestinian issues thinks Hamas might one day accept a two-state solution despite its Charter, which calls for the elimination of Israel.

"I think you'll find that if you start talking to people like Hamas they will find a place for a Jewish state. But until you engage with them, if you always demonise them and say they don't think that we want to exist you're not going to get very far. Similarly, Hamas don't want to engage with Israel at the moment because they don't believe that Israel wants to engage with them. They just think that Israel wants to target them and kill them, their leadership. So you're caught in a kind of an impossible situation there."

Hamas candidate Mahmud Ramahi is sure that Israeli occupation will end one day as it did in Gaza, South Lebanon and Sinai. The Hamas politician would not however speak clearly about the destruction or the recognition of Israel. Maybe he is ambivalent because according to the Oslo agreements, candidates who reject Israel's right to exist are not allowed to run for election.

Mahmud Ramahi: "Our strategy in Hamas is: all of Palestine is our land. The historic Palestine is our land. Yes we know that now it's difficult to reach this goal, but in the future we will reach it. If we can't liberate it in this moment our children, the coming generation. They will decide about that. Now Israel is in the land, there is a state of Israel. But in the future I can't tell you what will happen."

Despite the Israeli siege and the slim chances of seeing an independent Palestinian state in the near future, Palestinians seem interested in voting and trying to shape their future. A new elected government could also show more determination to renew the dialogue with Israel and move forward on the "Road Map" for peace.

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