

PALESTINIAN LANDSLIDE: THE ELECTIONS; HAMAS ROUTS RULING FACTION, CASTING PALL ON PEACE PROCESS

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The radical Islamic party Hamas scored an overwhelming victory in Wednesday's Palestinian legislative elections, taking 76 out of 132 seats, deposing the former governing Fatah party, which won only 43 seats.

The results, announced Thursday night, which give Hamas the right to form the next government, were likened by Palestinians to an earthquake or a tsunami. They ended more than 40 years of domination by Fatah, the political faction built by Yasir Arafat, which along with the Palestinian Authority was widely viewed by Palestinians as corrupt and ineffective.

The shocking outcome put Hamas, considered a terrorist group by Israel, the United States and the European Union, in charge of the Palestinian political future, and put at least a temporary halt to efforts to restart peace talks. The balloting also made a mockery of the voter surveys released Wednesday night that indicated that Fatah would have the most seats and could retain control of the legislature and the cabinet.

In a televised speech on Thursday night, the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, said he remained committed to negotiations with Israel. Mr. Abbas, who heads Fatah, but whose official status was not affected by the vote, suggested that future talks would be conducted through the Palestine Liberation Organization, which could bypass a Hamas-led government.

"I am committed to implementing the program on which you elected me a year ago," he said. "It is a program based on negotiations and peaceful settlement with Israel."

But Ehud Olmert, the acting prime minister of Israel, issued a statement saying that talks were not possible now. "The state of Israel will not negotiate with a Palestinian administration if even part of it is an armed terrorist organization calling for the destruction of the state of Israel," he said after an evening cabinet discussion of the election results.

Even before the results were announced, the Fatah prime minister, Ahmed Qurei, who had warned Mr. Abbas against holding these elections, resigned, and cheering Hamas supporters raised their green flag over the parliament building. They celebrated throughout Gaza and the West Bank, holding victory marches in major cities. In Nablus, they hung enormous green banners on public buildings, while members of the group's military arm, the Qassam brigades, marched in uniforms with weapons, but did not wear their customary masks.

In Ramallah, Ali Abu Shusha, 31, with a bright green Hamas banner on his taxi, exulted in the victory. "Hamas was created by the people and belongs to the people," he said. "I want Hamas to run the government -- it has clean hands, puts the poor before the rich and will resist the occupier."

In Gaza City, however, Kamilia Barghouti, 26, a waitress, said she was in shock. "I'm worried about the way this victory will affect how I can dress in public, and even if it will affect where I can work," she said.

The victory of Hamas represents an enormous test for the Palestinians, for the Western nations who pressed for this election and who provide millions of dollars in aid to the Palestinians and for the Arab world, which is likely to be shaken by the victory of a militant Islamic party in the symbolic heart of the Muslim world.

But the results, seen more as a repudiation of Fatah than a declaration of war against Israel, will be a test for Hamas, which had seemed to want a more gradual entry into politics. The leader of Hamas, Mahmoud Zahar, said proudly in Gaza, "We are going to change every aspect, as regards the economy, industry, agriculture, as regards social aid, health, administration, education." But it will not be an easy transformation, and it will provoke political resistance from a largely secular society.

While Hamas politicians said they would invite other parties, including Fatah, to join them in a government of national unity, key Fatah members like Jibril Rajoub and Mahmoud Dahlan made it clear that Fatah should not take part in a government dominated by Hamas. They argued that doing so would help Hamas by providing cover for the group as it struggles with the reality of governing. Fatah, they suggested, should go into opposition and let Hamas make its own mistakes and deal as best it can with the facts of Palestinian life and the Israeli occupation. The Fatah Central Committee voted Thursday night not to join a Hamas-led government.

But it is also possible that some Fatah members with good relations with Hamas, like the Gazan legislator Ziad Abu Amr, who ran as an independent with Hamas support, and a former minister of national economy, Mazen Sinokrot, will agree to join Hamas in a cabinet that probably will be led by a non-Hamas prime minister.

"My advice to Abu Mazen and to Hamas is to think of serious power-sharing," Mr. Amr said, referring to Mr. Abbas. "A partnership between Fatah and Hamas is necessary," he said. "Hamas is going to be put to the test of being a practitioner and not simply an opposition. Politics will have to be taken into account at the expense of ideology."

While Mr. Abbas won praise for pressing ahead with these elections, the result is not what he wanted and is bound to weaken his position. He gambled, but with a smashing Hamas victory he is perceived to have lost and to bear some responsibility for failing to reform Fatah and the Palestinian Authority. Mr. Abbas has said that if he cannot carry out his policies, which include negotiations with Israel, he will quit.

Israelis warned the world not to give in to wishful thinking and presume that Hamas will suddenly alter its goals. Israel and the world did not negotiate with Mr. Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization until it agreed to recognize the state of Israel in the late 1980's and disavow terrorism. Israeli politicians suggested that the process would have to begin all over again with Hamas.

"For Israelis, this is the definitive end of the illusion of a comprehensive peace," said Yossi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow at the Shalem Center, a policy research organization in Jerusalem. "There is no more credible hope of Palestinian moderation. For Israelis, it will only confirm what the last five years of terror have taught them: that the war is not about settlements, but about Israel's right to exist."

The Palestinian Authority as a serious negotiating partner no longer exists for Israel, Mr. Halevi said. "Now the era of the pretend peace process is also over," he said, and Israel will continue to act unilaterally to set its own borders, build the separation barrier between itself and the Palestinians and, in time, continue the process of unilateral withdrawal from more West Bank settlements -- so long as it can ensure that a Hamas-dominated Palestinian Authority will not use that territory to launch rocket or other attacks on Israel.

"There is now a broad consensus, that Israel will go ahead and build our borders to preserve Israel as a democratic Jewish state," said Ami Ayalon, a former director of Shin Bet now running for a seat with the Labor Party.

The Hamas victory brings the group's support for armed attacks on Israel to the fore. Hamas said it entered politics "to protect the resistance" to Israeli occupation of Muslim land, so it is unlikely to heed Western appeals to disarm and recognize Israel, which Hamas in its charter promised to destroy.

The most that successful Hamas candidates like Ahmad Mubarak would say Thursday is that if Israel pulled back to its 1967 boundaries, Hamas would consider "a long-term truce."

Fadel Saleh, a Hamas politician from Ramallah, said that Hamas would concentrate "on restoring our Palestinian home and rebuilding Palestinian society," leaving international relations to Mr. Abbas and the Palestine Liberation Organization, which does not include Hamas. But, he said, "we want to remake the P.L.O. too based on this vote," he said. "Hamas wants cooperation with all Palestinian parties and a national agreement on policy."

The death of Mr. Arafat took the lid off seething resentments of Fatah and the men Mr. Arafat brought back to the Palestinian territories from exile after the 1993 Oslo accords with Israel. Those accords set up the Palestinian Authority, and in the 10 years since the last legislative elections, in which Hamas refused to participate, one-party rule proved to be as corrupting among Palestinians as anywhere else.

"Corrupt authorities who have been in power for a long time are usually thrown out in free elections," said Daoud Kuttab, a Palestinian analyst who teaches at Jerusalem's Al Quds University. "After 40 years, it's almost natural. I hoped Fatah would get away with it, but didn't. That the opposition came from a radical Islamic group is unfortunate, but there was no other serious opposition."

Mr. Kuttab said that those who had preached democracy, from the Bush administration to the Israeli right, would have to decide if their values trumped their interests. "If Hamas respects the rules of the democratic game, we have to let the winners win," he said. "But now Hamas will have to face reality, and part of reality means dealing with Israel."

But even this process could take many months or years, he said, and the potential pitfalls were underscored Thursday when Palestinian security officials said a 9-year-old Palestinian girl was killed by Israeli gunfire near the southern Gaza town of Khan Yunis, Agence France-Presse reported. The Israeli military said soldiers fired at a "suspicious figure" who was near Gaza's perimeter fence in the area. The military said it had no information that a young girl was hit, but were checking the report.

Hamas is not likely to move against the security forces, at least for now. They are made up almost entirely of Fatah loyalists, and voted overwhelmingly for Fatah. Any Hamas effort to try to take over the security forces would almost certainly lead to clashes.

Hisham Ahmed, a political scientist at Birzeit University who has written books about Hamas, called the vote "an historic moment in every sense," but he emphasized that "these results don't reflect the real size of Fatah and Hamas in the society," because they are distorted by anger at Fatah, preoccupation with internal issues and a complicated voting system.

If Mr. Abbas and the world handle the situation intelligently, Mr. Ahmed said, "it could mark the beginning of the end of Hamas as an ideologically pure force and a beginning of a reformed Fatah." But if it is handled badly, he said, "the radicalization of Palestinian society will continue."

According to the results, the Hamas list won 30 of 66 seats at the national level and 46 of 66 seats in constituencies. It did especially well in Gaza, but polled well throughout the West Bank, too. Fatah won 27 seats on the national level and only 16 in the constituencies. The leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine won three seats while another leftist list, Badil, won two seats. The Independent Palestine list, led by the presidential election runner-up, Mustafa Barghouti, won two seats, as did the Third Way list of the departing finance minister, Salam Fayyad and Hanan Ashrawi. Four other independents won in constituencies, including Mr. Amr. Among the Fatah casualties was Mr. Rajoub.

Photos: Crowds in Nablus hung banners on public buildings yesterday to celebrate the victory of Hamas over the Fatah party in the Palestinian elections. (Photo by Rina Castelnovo for The New York Times)(pg. A10); Supporters of Hamas celebrated from the ledge of the Palestinian parliament building in Ramallah yesterday. (Photo by Muhammed Muheisen/Associated Press)(pg. A1)

Chart: "Hamas Wins Majority"

Hamas won 76 seats to Fatah's 43, according to initial results released by the Central Elections Commissions after sorting 95 percent of the ballots.

The New Parliament

SEATS FROM ELECTION DISTRICTS

HAMAS: 46 seats

FATAH: 16 seats

OTHER: 4 seats

SEATS FROM NATIONAL LISTS

HAMAS: 30 seats

FATAH: 27 seats

OTHER: 9 seats

Seats From Election Districts

NORTH GAZA: 5 seats

GAZA CITY: 8 seats

DEIR EL BALAH: 3 seats

KHAN YUNIS: 5 seats

RAFAH: 3 seats

JENIN -- A split vote was expected; Hamas and Fatah each won two seats.

NABLUS -- An exit poll indicated that Fatah would win five of six seats, but the opposite happened: Hamas won five, Fatah one.

RAMALLAH -- Fatah was expected to sweep the five seats, but Hamas won four.

JERUSALEM -- Hamas won four of six seats even though Israel had barred the party from campaigning in the city.

BETHLEHEM -- With support of the Christian minority, Fatah held on to two seats.

HEBRON -- Known as a militant center, it was no surprise that Hamas won all nine seats.

GAZA -- Hamas was expected to do well in the Gaza Strip, and won 16 of 24 seats here.

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