

Reforms in Palestine

[Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi](#),

*Head of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA),
Jerusalem*

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Summary

The pressing need for real political, social, economic and internal security improvements within the Palestinian Authority (PA) was clearly recognized and actively pursued by important elements within Palestinian society long before the pressure and interference of outside parties was brought to bear upon its leadership in this regard, and certainly far prior to the recent full-scale Israeli assaults on the Palestinian population centers of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).

Indeed, shortly after Israel completed operational preparations for its initial 'Field of Thorns' military plan for the reinvasion of PA-controlled areas (September 1996), Palestinian civil society leaders and independent political activists stepped up their demands for broader representation and increased answerability within the PA. A little later, they did so in response to US-Israeli measures taken under the guise of the Wye River Memorandum of 1998, which saw private sector and non-PA affiliated welfare and financial institutions forcibly closed. Since that time, vocal and proactive support for independent and responsible Palestinian-initiated reform has grown throughout the non-governmental sector.

Any careful appraisal of the PA-Israel agreements and conditions covering the period 1993-2000 will confirm that opportunities for developing the foundations necessary for true improvements in the vital security, economy and society sectors have been purposefully eroded in the name of 'Israeli security.' This acknowledged, the prevailing conditions in the PA cannot be viewed as a product of some mysterious and innate Palestinian desire for poor government, but as the inevitable and predictable result of a systematic series of carefully drafted US and Israeli measures imposed upon a weak and weakening political entity under ever deteriorating circumstances.

More recently, with the breakdown of the bilateral Oslo process, the outbreak of militarized conflict and rapid economic disintegration within the Palestinian territories, fresh internal debate has sought to pinpoint immediate and concise components and mechanisms for speedy Palestinian reform. Again, this debate has preceded and been unrelated to the impositions and interferences of outside parties and Israel's military assaults.

This paper will highlight examples of past debates in Palestinian society on the issue of reform, offering brief explanations of the difficulties and delays these debates encountered in their attempts to reach concrete action. After then discussing the most recent reform steps initiated by the PA, I will bring the issue up-to-date by introducing and assessing the four focal areas of reform that are currently being addressed: Elections for Leadership; Security; Humanitarian and Development Aid; and Finance and Economy.

Palestinian Debate on Reform

On 4 September 2001, PASSIA hosted a workshop entitled: "*Towards a Palestinian Strategy in the Face of the War of Attrition.*" Representatives of all political factions, businesses, women's organizations and the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), as well as academics and professionals, were in attendance. There, a draft document was put forward for discussion, suggesting, "*A White Coup d'état,*" and identifying five core components; proposing specific ideas for reform in each of these, together aimed at bringing about its achievement.

In addressing the first component, covering the realm of administrative centrality and stability, it was proposed that President Arafat declare 'martial law' and reappoint the current West Bank and Gaza district governors as *military* governors, unifying the various existing security bodies into one, and enforcing existing Palestinian legislation without exception or exclusion. Such a drastic measure acknowledged the existing militarized state of affairs in the OPT and the absence of a democratic bilateral political horizon, but in doing so was posited only as an immediate, 'interim' phase lasting up to a year or possibly two.

In harmony with this first component, the second, covering the realm of internal security, was to be addressed through the dismissal of all existing heads of the separate security apparatuses. A list of ten names was put forward, with proposals for political 'compensation' floated in the form of alternative postings as diplomatic representatives in distant countries, being a preliminary stage toward their retirement.

The third component, again covering the administrative foundation for reform, was met with the proposed formation of a 'technocrat government', not exceeding 15 members, charged with drafting a national development plan for education, health, transport, economy, development, housing, etc., and having no direct link with political parties or negotiators. This division of the administrative and planning from the political and inter-party bodies, was intended to create and maintain a clear separation between the PA (administrative) and the PLO (inter-party political). As such, it was envisioned as a means of extracting the immediate and constant necessities of the PA from the long-term and shifting needs of the political structures, while denying neither the ability to properly conduct their representative duties.

The fourth component, covering the above-mentioned political realm, was approached with a suggestion that the PLO establishment take responsibility for political negotiations and work (in a manner not dissimilar to that of the Jewish Agency in the 1950s), focusing on Palestinians in the Diaspora, refugees, fundraising and the mobilization of solidarity with and support for the Palestinian right to independence, self-determination and viable statehood. In this work, the PLO establishment would not be dependent upon, nor authoritative over, the PA technocrat government.

The final, fifth, component, covering the realm of leadership and answerability, was tackled with a proposal for democratic elections, carried out with respect for the rule of law. These elections would be conducted an estimated six months following the commencement of the above processes and would see the Palestinian electorate cast votes for the position of President, members of parliament and for seats on local municipalities.

Palestinian reactions to these ideas varied. There was much debate, sloganeering, and considerable skepticism concerning the possibilities for implementation. Some adopted a total and principled opposition to the idea of martial law, but could offer no alternative immediate solution applicable to the current crisis and the military Intifada, nor a plan to arrest Palestinian society's potential descent to the human and political catastrophe witnessed in Lebanon (i.e., so-called "Lebanonization" - the absence of the rule of law creating circumstances wherein every faction holds its own 'funds and guns,' and is jealously opposed to coordination or power-sharing, resulting in inconclusive internecine competition for control over neighborhoods, refugee camps or villages). The most vehement criticism of the *white coup d'état* stemmed from objections to the dismissal of all heads of the existing security apparatuses and unifying their organizations into one body. Some expressed caution with regard to the likelihood of implementing such a step, while others concluded that there could never be a true *coup d'état* from within the PA which would not eventually lead to a political storm, power-rivalry and eventual bloodshed.

Despite these serious doubts and an understandable degree of cynicism, at the end of the day, these reform ideas were reported and subsequently floated in many Palestinian organizations, eventually 'percolating' to foster debate among political elites, as well as within concerned diplomatic missions.

Ten days after this seminar a separate workshop was hosted by Birzeit University's Center for International Affairs in Ramallah. There the focus was placed on the dual issues of reform and corruption. A draft paper was submitted by one of the participants, emphasizing four principal areas of concern:

- a. Problems stemming from the centralization of authority in the office of the President;
- b. the nature of a weak government, crippled PLC, and 'all-powerful' security apparatus;
- c. the absence of the rule of law - the courts, judges and lawyers, as well as the absence of widespread respect for the law;
- d. the need for the democratization of society, encompassing a strong, visible and influential media responsive to the calls of civil society.

Again, representatives of most political factions, leading businesses, women's organizations, as well as academics and professionals, participated in the discussion. Nonetheless, divisions and caution on the major issues meant this session too ended without a consensus on immediate implementation measures or even a particular conclusion.

These two events occurred over the course of ten days in the Fall of 2001. They came not in response to invitation, coercion or interference, but as the latest expression of what has been a long-standing process of internal and dynamic debate in Palestinian society. They are described in some detail here to shed light on, and give recent evidence of, the widespread perception of the need for reform, the engagement of Palestinians in its pursuit and the mechanisms being discussed for its internal implementation.

Obstacles to Moving Forward - Past and Present

Adopting a process of internally-driven and legitimate popular reform in Palestinian politics and society has hinged upon its being broached at the highest levels in Palestinian discourse, both political and social. The primary obstacle faced at, and up until, the time frame within which the debates summarized above occurred, was that the 'President and his men' continued to underestimate the ideas, messages and general vitality of the debate in Palestinian society. At the same time, independent voices presenting or pursuing these ideas did not speak publicly, consistently or assertively enough to challenge an engrained political structure tainted by corruption and nepotism. The result of this lack of top-level 'horn-locking' over the issues was a growth in cynicism, apathy and/or frustration and a continued dismissal of the pertinence of the debate by those whom it might have challenged.

Today, as the latest chapter in the Palestinian catastrophe (*naqba*) proceeds and intensifies, the issue of reform has become unavoidably critical, both for those engaged in its debate in the past and those shielding themselves from its inevitable consequences. However, at the same time, the restrictive conditions under which the Palestinian people are struggling to live, and the unfettered support of Washington for ongoing and unprecedented levels of Israeli aggression against Palestinian population centers, institutions, leaders and figures have triggered mixed feelings regarding the issue of reform - this time being *externally-driven*. One asks, "can an illegal and brutal occupation be confronted as if corruption does not exist?" But also, "can corruption be challenged, reforms delivered and democratization pursued, all under a brutal and illegal occupation?"

Initial Steps of "Reform"

After nearly a year of heightened internal debate, and - more importantly - under siege and 'office arrest', President Yasser Arafat began to take-on-board not only the ideas for reform expressed in the past, but even took some steps to transform parts of them into reality. His initiative is too little, comes far too late and, in most instances, amounts to little more than a façade.

His first decision was to reconstitute the government, reducing its members from 31 to 21. Five new faces emerged as technocrats (Salam Fayyad - Finance, Abdel Razeq Yahya - Interior, Ibrahim Ad-Dughmah - Justice, Ghassan Al-Khatib - Labor, and Mitri Abu 'Ittah - Transport), but with no clear mandate or means of fulfilling their declared 'missions'. At the same time, those ministers who were invited to leave through the front door were seen to be helped back in via the rear window, albeit in a different capacity, but still with ministerial rank.

A further step toward reform came in the form of a declared commitment to the unification of PA security apparatuses, and the appointment of a Minister of Interior (Abdel Razeq Yahya). There was a vague, and apparently reluctant dismissal of West Bank Preventative Security head, Jibril Rajoub, and the appointment of the governor of Jenin, Zuheir Manasra, in his place. However, while superficially appearing promising steps, the President's manner throughout this process was disappointing and conformed to his old, oft-repeated style: He did not publicly issue a decree concerning the top-level dismissal, nor did he announce it in a public speech. Instead, it was leaked to the media, consigning its verification, debate and ratification to near-comic debates in the local press and satellite TV stations, wherein his ministers, and not he himself, confirmed the veracity of the leaks. The dismissal was certainly legitimate as well as sorely needed. However, the way in which it was made only underscored the weakness and lack of answerability of the Palestinian leadership.

This latest episode, conducted as it was, produced an unexpected reaction, as opponents of the dismissal (Rajoub loyalists) expressed their malcontent in the form of a veritable mutiny, exaggerating the potency of their power-base and claiming (even threateningly) rights to a 'partnership' in the Palestinian leadership. This response resulted in widespread debate over whether the PLO-PA construct has in fact become a 'company' with 'shareholders' and 'partners', rather than a national movement which demands that personal interests and egos be set aside for the good of the common cause under an elected leadership - a cause to which, without exception, everyone is committed. One wonders how much investment one, or one's ancestors, family members and friends, might be expected to make to the national cause before an unending lineage of political appointments is earned and a Palestinian 'House of Lords' evolves...

The underestimation of the intelligence of the Palestinian people that these weak and cosmetic reforms have evinced, as well as the unsophisticated struggle for power which has been allowed to erupt within the security apparatuses, has been very disappointing and depressing. Rather than instilling hope and enthusiasm in the occupied and desperate population, these measures have come as a humiliating blow to the dignity and pride of the people. That said, the Palestinian people still harbor hope that while the "*white coup d'etat*" could not be considered viable before, the upcoming election could still serve as a platform for the delivery of many long-awaited changes.

At this point, it is still too early to appraise the platform and judge the performance of the newly reconstituted government, even though they have submitted a hundred-day-plan for implementing the new *externally*-driven reforms. Meanwhile, the strict military siege and ceaseless curfews being imposed throughout the West Bank and Gaza has made it extremely difficult for this government to function and has raised serious doubts as to the willingness of the occupying power to see it succeed at any level.

Current Reform Scenarios

Today's process of reform is being guided by the hundred-day-plan (target implementation period) put forward by the PA, within which the *externally*-driven components and strategies for reform put forward by the US and its newly grafted proxy, the 'Quartet' (consisting of the UN, the EU and Russia), are to be pursued.

As posited (or insisted upon) by the external players, the realms of reform are divided into four categories: elections; security; humanitarian and development aid; and finance and economy.

In terms of elections, recent American and European fact finding/assessment missions have toured the region, interviewing, investigating, discussing, and analyzing perceived frameworks and processes upon which these will depend or by which they will be guided. Among the major obstacles identified by these bodies and their Palestinian 'partners' are:

- "Space and Access"- How will Palestinians be provided with a suitable period of time as well as the geographical freedom and access necessary to exercise their right to vote in a free election, while the Israeli military continues to maintaining total control over Palestinian space and time, keeping the population under visible, brutal and dehumanizing sieges and curfews?
- East Jerusalem - How will free democratic (and therefore inclusive) elections be held while the city of Jerusalem is kept under absolute siege and is isolated from the rest of the occupied West Bank, while Israel continues to deny Palestinian national aspirations in East Jerusalem - the historic and rightful capital of occupied Palestine?
- Election Results - Is Washington or its 'Quartet' genuinely interested in facilitating free and inclusive elections at a time when they are surely aware of the rise in the already impressive power of the Islamist political entities, particularly Hamas? The question is of increased pertinence following Israel's July attacks on Gaza and its murder of Salah Shehadeh, a top-level leader of Hamas' military wing, which was accompanied by the wholesale killing of innocent civilians, mainly young children. Many anticipate election results producing 20-30 new faces professing new political platforms, but simultaneously confirming the political dominance of the two 'tribes' - Fateh and Hamas - institutionalizing a status quo on the ground that runs against the declared preferences of the external players, not to mention the longstanding proponents of internal reform.

In terms of restructuring security infrastructure, the humiliating political storm created by the mismanagement of the above-mentioned change in the position of West Bank Preventative Security head, has tainted the measures already taken in this direction by the Palestinian leadership and underscored the dynamics making this a vital yet challenging component of reform - whether internal or external. Thus far, scenarios have been floated whereby Jordanian-Egyptian coordinated training, with Saudi sponsorship and 'Quartet/US' overall supervision is envisioned as a potential process leading to reform in the sector. However, Israeli-CIA dominance seems an inevitable prerequisite for all reform in the security apparatuses and whatever multi-national or regional scenarios are posited, these fall short of applicable work-plans at present. Regardless of the domination sought by US agencies in the security sector, history has shown that whatever training and funding is granted from outside, the absence of legitimate and responsible local implementing partners will consign the program to failure and leave the way open for resurgent power struggles and corruption.

Regarding humanitarian and development aid, two essential implementation/oversight parties are available on the Palestinian side: the municipalities and the NGOs - potentially as recipients and implementers respectively. However, these will be required to operate under the loose political umbrella of the PA, and with the support of the private sector. If the PA continues to be weak, crippled and delegitimized, humanitarian and development assistance will be compelled to continue in the shape and with the limitation of the established UNRWA system (externally guided and independent of national objectives).

A final major crisis will continue to surround the issue of finance and economy. Here engrained and interconnected dependencies within Palestinian political structures poses a serious challenge to the reform process and will prove a potential make-or-break stumbling block in implementing real fundamental reform within the service delivery and ministerial administration of the Palestinian territories. The issue is inseparable from that of elections and security and demands more than a redistribution of funds and responsibilities. Increased accountability must be instilled internally and not 'policed' externally,

for fear that the entire reform process leads merely to the streamlining of a client, or puppet, administration.

Ultimately, Palestinian society cannot stand on its feet if it continues to be used and developed as an extended consumer and captive labor market for the Israeli economy, forcibly separated from its Arab neighbors and affiliations. A 'clean divorce' from Israel, and the development of a viable Palestinian economic base, are the primary targets for true financial reform, and are central to the much-needed larger process of 'Arabizing' a solution to the conflict.

Conclusion

In closing it should be stressed that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict today needs creative thinking that addresses the relevant issues and factors through responsive reforms that lead to real implementation on the ground, rather than strategies imported from other conflict areas and enforced short-sightedly upon an enhumbed and besieged administration, itself comprised of imposed and limited security, economic and democratic formations.

However, one should bear in mind the fact that the reform process comes imposed by a US leadership that has refused to meet Arafat since coming to power, has called Sharon a "man of peace," and has explicitly stated on more than one occasion that if the election results are not to their liking they will not recognize them... As such the 'reform' has more to do with a realignment of Republican-Israeli relations in the War on Terror 'theater' and little to do with any declared long-term Mideast vision.

Independent of a concerted and long-term vision, all ideas, plans, reforms, and funds will simply become the 'ice blocks' in the construction of a grand new palace - to melt at the first change in temperature.

The Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs - PASSIA

Tel: +972-2-6264426 / 6286566 • Fax: +972-2-6282819

PO Box 19545, Jerusalem

Email: passia@palnet.com

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