**The Prison Guard**The Fatah Primaries produced clear results, but few solutions

by Isabel Kershner

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IT IS MIDDAY IN RAMALLAH'S downtown Manara Square, a busy intersection of streets with a small island in the middle, where a bunch of schoolchildren are kicking off a campaign for law and order in the Palestinian territories with a small but noisy demonstration. The youngsters, pupils of the private Friends School of Ramallah, whose vision includes education toward non-violence as a means of resolving all conflicts, hold signs-in Arabic, English and French saying things like "Yes to the rule of law. No to weapons chaos," the term used by Palestinians to describe the plethora of illegal arms in the hands of gangs and militias who do not answer to any authority, and "I want to play with toys, not guns."

Loud music is blaring out of speakers on the makeshift platform. The few dozen supporters and onlookers who have gathered are almost outnumbered by rifle-bearing Palestinian Authority policemen milling around in various kinds of uniforms, each belonging to a different branch of the security forces.

The message is clear, yet confusing. The young people of Ramallah want the PA to follow through on the election pledge of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) to impose order, or as he puts it, "one law, one authority, one gun." But the song that some of the pupils are singing along to, belting out the words with gusto, is a rousing, martial-sounding intifada anthem extolling self-sacrifice for the homeland. And one of the speakers, a school teacher, condemns the lawlessness and anarchy and calls on the PA to take measures against it, and in the next breath takes care to specify that he is not, heaven forbid, referring to the "sacred weapons of the resistance."

Suspended somewhere between the end of the intifada, with all its perceived failures and successes, and an uncertain future, many Palestinians find themselves torn between moderation and militancy, and are opting for both. Like a fault line, the same inner contradictions run all the way through the Palestinian body politic, most recently emerging in the heart of the establishment — Fatah, the mainstream secularist faction that dominates the PA.

In the days before the schoolchildren's demonstration, Fatah had held primaries for the first time in Ramallah, to choose its candidates for the national Palestinian Legislative Council elections scheduled for late January. The primaries have also taken place with varying degrees of success in other parts of the West Bank, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. The brainchild of the party's "young guard," who wanted to prevent the old guard veterans of the Fatah Central Committee, the movement's "politburo," from fixing the candidate lists, the ballots were also meant to spruce up the movement's image that has been severely tarnished by years of infighting, cronyism and corruption, and to usher in a cleaner, more democratic era.

The outright winner in Ramallah, and indeed all the West Bank, was Marwan Barghouti, the young guard leader and locally revered intifada militia chief now serving five life terms in an Israeli prison after being convicted of terror charges and conspiracy to murder. Barghouti came in with over 30,000 votes, or 90 percent of those cast. Second place in Ramallah was taken by young guard Barghouti ally and parliamentarian Kaddura Fares, while the top spot in Jerusalem went to Hatem Abd al-Qader, another Barghouti ally who, like Fares and many others of the young guard, is a Hebrew-speaking graduate of Israeli prisons.

In other West Bank cities like Nablus and Jenin, the top places were taken by fighters of the Fatah-affiliated Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, some wanted by Israel. In Gaza, the primaries were canceled after rival gangs of gunmen, all affiliated with Fatah, stormed polling stations and swiped the ballot boxes because of disputes over whose names did and did not appear on the lists. The only Central Committee member identified with Yasser Arafat's old "Tunis" cronies who dared run in the Ramallah primaries, Saher Habash, came last with just over 2,000 votes.

Despite the clarity of the results, they still leave many of Fatah's problems and dilemmas unresolved. As the movement heads into an election battle against the disciplined, impeccably organized Hamas, its leadership crisis continues, along with a lack of cohesive self-definition and vision. The imprisoned Barghouti, who is not expected to be released by Israel any time soon, serves as a symbolic metaphor for his people, who say they feel imprisoned by the system of Israeli security walls, fences and checkpoints going up around the West Bank, but cannot at this stage offer practical solutions. The old guard, who invested decades of loyal service to Arafat in order to maintain their positions of power, are bitter and resentful. And when it comes to dealing with Israel, the paths of both resistance and negotiation are currently blocked, by the cease-fire and Israel's refusal to talk until the PA clamps down on the militias, causing confusion over how to proceed.

Among the thin crowd gathered in Manara Square is Saher Habash, the embodiment of the defeated old guard, sporting an Arafat-style khaki safari suit and black-and-white keffiyeh neatly folded round his neck. Asked about the sweeping victory of the young guard, he tells The Report, "We support them, especially Marwan Barghouti. These are the sons who carry the flag." Though Habash has acquired a reputation as one of the staunchest opponents of generational change and reform in Fatah in recent years, he would clearly rather be identified now with the winning side.

After all, enough mistakes have already been made by the "historical" leadership. It is Habash who remarks that the date is November 29, the anniversary of the U.N. vote on Resolution 181, the partition of Mandatory Palestine, which paved the way for the establishment of the State of Israel and would have given the Palestinian Arabs some 45 percent of the territory had they not turned it down. Habash now rues the day of the resolution that in his opinion, "created only one state because of the biased position oftheU.N."

Also standing in the crowd is Qais Abu Lei!, the secretary general of the leftist Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine in the West Bank, a militant leader with a moderate voice. The recent "political earthquake" in Israel, he suggests, shows that "Israelis are beginning to believe that if they go toward peace, they will find a partner on the Palestinian side," and that the compromise is the 1967 borders giving the Palestinians a state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. "I am not speaking of the borders of 181, that would have represented a 50:50 split," he declares, "but ones that leave 78 percent with Israel and 22 percent with us."

But the Palestinians know they will be lucky to even get close to that today. Prime Minister Sharon has made it clear that there will be no progress until the PA clamps down on the illegal weapons and terror militias. Asked if the PA is doing enough to control the chaos, Abu Leil says, "They simply cannot. It is a political question. With the weak legitimacy of the present Palestinian leadership, they cannot even control their own security services. There are 200,000-300,000 people walking around with weapons in their back pockets." Abu Leil says that the upcoming elections may give the PA more credibility, allowing it to tackle the issue. It is not clear, however, how willing the militants topping the Fatah slate in Jenin and Nablus will be to help with that.

Half an hour later, the demonstration disbands as columns of khaki uniformed Cub Scouts from the nearby Al-Amari refugee camp march by in military formation, with drummer boys and drummer girls setting the pace. Over at Fatah headquarters in Ramallah, three activists are sitting on a balcony outside the otherwise deserted offices with nothing to do. They agree to speak on condition of anonymity. The young guard, headed by Barghouti, represents "the balance between the resistance and negotiations," one of them offers, citing the need for both tracks. "They will preserve the legacy of Arafat and his guidelines for a solution based on the 1967 lines." The policy on weapons is to "hide" them, but not to disarm the militias, they add. As for the mayhem the armed rival Fatah gangs caused in Gaza the day before, the activists remark that "not everyone who calls himself an Al-Aqsa member is really Fatah," and that what happened there was an "isolated incident."

In the meantime, they suggest, Abu Mazen's law and order campaign will be limited to dealing with stolen cars, "then gradually, after seeing how people react, perhaps the PA will move on to more measures."

WHIILE MANY ISRAELI POLITICAL leaders spent their formative years in the military, the new generation of Palestinian leaders spent theirs in Israeli prisons. Kaddura Fares, Barghouti's No. 2, spent 14 years in jail from 1980-94 for belonging to a Fatah cell that engaged in what he calls military operations. One day last spring, a middle-aged fellow prisoner was waiting outside Fares's Ramallah office to strike up an old acquaintance. He was wearing a gilt-colored watch that had been removed by his Israeli interrogators 20 years ago, and was not immediately returned. The man related that when he saw an Israeli prison guard wearing the gilt watch on his wrist, he got Fares, the elected spokesman of the Palestinian security prisoners at the time, to negotiate it back.

The experience inside has made the young leaders both pragmatic and determined. The most prominent victors of the Fatah primaries have spent the "cream of their lives" in Israeli prisons for what they believed, says Mahdi Abdul Hadi, chairman of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs and a prominent analyst. "On getting out, they did not give up their dreams. On the contrary, prison has empowered them and made them even more committed."

But he acknowledges the old guards' point that "being in prison for a few years does not constitute enough credentials" to usurp their seats. With Arafat gone, the challenge for Fatah, Abdul Hadi says, is not only to find a leader, but also "a vision, a shared mission,, and to stay in power." He calls Abu Mazen a member of a "national political elite, not a leader; a representative for a transitional phase," while the young guard, he says, is best equipped to improve life in 'the prison.'

"All Palestinians are in prison," he contends, referring to the ever-pressing restrictions on movement. "So what do you? You elect a representative to serve, not to lead; to share the goods of the prison. To deal with the water, electricity, sewage, education and health."

And while the prominent young guard victors like Barghouti, Fares and Abd al-Qader are thought to be ultimately committed to a negotiated solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on the 1967 lines, militancy and moderation are still vying for control in the new Fatah. In the meantime, the movement still represents different things to different people.

"Like Arafat," Abdul Hadi observes. "When you wanted him to be a militant, he was a militant, when a terrorist, a terrorist, and when you wanted a negotiator, he was a negotiator." .

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