



Fatah Conference: August 2009 A Major Opportunity Denied

Fatah – which defines itself as a nationalist movement – is the dominant force within both the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the PA. There is no way to understand the possibilities for resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without understanding its policies.

Contrasted routinely with Hamas, Fatah is seen as “moderate.”

Its constitution,^[1] however, tells another story. Written in 1964, when Israel did not yet control the West Bank and Gaza, it uses terms such as “liberation” to refer exclusively to Israel *within* the Green Line, which it calls “Palestine.” The constitution states:

- Liberating Palestine is a national obligation.
- UN projects, accords and resolutions, or those of any individual country which undermine the Palestinian people's right in their homeland are illegal and rejected.
- The Israeli existence in Palestine is a Zionist invasion with a colonial...base...
- [A Fatah goal is] complete liberation of Palestine, and eradication of Zionist economic, political, military and cultural existence.
- Armed public revolution is the inevitable method to liberating Palestine.
- This struggle will not cease unless the Zionist state is demolished and Palestine is completely liberated.

Many well-informed persons are unaware of this Fatah constitution. And many of those who are familiar with it believe it is an anachronism: That is, as Fatah itself has changed, post-Oslo, its original constitution, which has remained static, is rendered irrelevant.

The fact, however, is that Fatah has two faces. We see this revealed in the “Phased Program” adopted by the PLO in 1974. (Fatah was, and is, by far the largest and most influential faction of the PLO.) This program was an acknowledgement that “total liberation” in one fell swoop had become unrealistic; instead there was to be a “Strategy of Stages” — to “give the appearance of moderation” while “total liberation” would be pursued slowly over time as Israel was weakened.

The summer of 2009 was not simply post-Oslo, it was also post-Annapolis. What is more, the new American president, reaching out to the Arab world, had made resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict a centerpiece of his administration.

It was an auspicious time for Fatah, if it truly was moderate, to come forth with a stance that definitively demonstrated this. It was the moment to renounce the positions of its pre-Oslo constitution to and speak in unambiguous terms about compromise, end of conflict, and recognition of Israel’s right to exist.

As it happened, Fatah had an extraordinary opportunity to do just that: In early August 2009, Fatah’s Sixth General Congress was held in Bethlehem.

This was a remarkable event historically, for even though its constitution requires the Congress – which is Fatah’s highest authority – to convene every five years, there had been no conference for 20 years.

Now some 2,000 delegates – most selected by Fatah head Mahmoud Abbas and his associates – came together, presumably prepared to establish new policies and elect new representatives to Fatah’s decision-making bodies: the 21-member Central Committee and the 120-member Revolutionary Council. Since the Congress had last met before Oslo, and since many of the leaders elected earlier were now either old or deceased, there was considerable international expectation that genuine changes for Fatah, reflecting new realities, might emerge from the Congress.

On the eve of the Congress, (Arabic-speaking) journalist and commentator Pinchas Inbari, writing for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs,^[2] provided insight into the process that was about to unfold. Two documents would be discussed and approved at the Congress: The Political Program, which could be seen as promoting a political process, and the Constitution, referred to by Inbari as the “Internal Order.”

Here we see Fatah’s two faces. The Political Program, which moves in the direction of a political solution, “tries to accommodate international expectations and seems designed to mobilize international legitimacy...” It doesn’t overtly reject the concept of “armed struggle,” and occasionally speaks of a “struggle of all options,” which would include “armed struggle.” But most frequently it refers to “struggle” more generically. This includes a variety of other options, such as peaceful demonstrations, with “armed struggle” alluded to as something from the past.

The “Internal Order” – as is clear from its term of reference – is intended for use in house (and includes procedural matters). As described above, it rejects negotiations and fervently and unambiguously embraces “armed struggle.”

The key to a genuine change in Fatah, then, would be modification of its “Internal Document.”

Hopes were high, as the Congress began on August 4:

“We have made mistakes,” said Mahmoud Abbas – head of Fatah and PA president – in his opening address. “Twenty years is too long. [This conference should be a] platform for a new start.”

But his words also carried a subtle endorsement of violence:

“Although peace is our choice, we reserve the right to resistance, legitimate under international law...

“We are not terrorists, and we reject a description of our legitimate struggle as terrorism. This will be our firm and lasting position.”

There was a nod early during the proceedings to Fatah’s terrorist past, as a moment of silence was called for the martyrs [i.e., terrorists] of Palestine, and reverence was duly expressed for Yasser Arafat. Discussion was held regarding whether Arafat had been poisoned; in the end, a resolution declared Israel responsible and called for an investigation. (In July, hard-liner Farouk Kaddoumi, secretary-general of the Central Committee, had accused Abbas himself of being involved in Arafat’s poisoning.) After its first day, Conference, proceedings deteriorated. In good part this was a reflection of enormous party rifts – old guard vs. new, hardliners vs. pragmatists, representatives of one region vs. those of another. Anger was expressed about persons not invited to the Conference and the manner in which nominees for the Central Committee were selected, indicating discontent with Abbas’s tight-fisted control. Commented one Fatah official: “There is so much corruption that is occurring from those who hold

high positions that I don’t think we can come together ...”^[3] Ahmed Qurei, chief PA negotiator during Annapolis negotiations, was so angry when he discovered that he had lost in the Central Committee elections that he questioned the vote-counting process, declaring that Fatah’s electoral fraud was even greater than Iran’s.

On-going tensions so delayed proceedings that the Conference had to be prolonged by some days.

About half of the new members elected to the all-important Central Committee were from the “young guard,” but this is no assurance of increased moderation or revitalization in Fatah. Those who are considered “young” average about 50 years in age (compared to the age of “old guard” members, which is often over 70 years).

Two men elected from the “young guard” to the Central Committee elicit the greatest enthusiasm with regard to hope for change: Marwan Barghouti and Mohammad Dahlan, seen as pragmatists who, each in his way, might unite the party and combat corruption. There is more than a bit of irony in this regard, as Barghouti is serving multiple life sentences in an Israeli prison for his terrorist involvements, and Dahlan has been identified by the CIA and others as being directly associated with terrorism as well.

As it is, Dahlan came in only 10th of the 18 new members who were being elected. The biggest vote getter was Muhammad Ghneim, 71 (who, as an Abbas ally, helped to draft the list of attendees). A hard-liner opposed to Oslo, he for years remained self-exiled in Tunisia. Committed to the “total liberation of Palestine” he has vowed to keep the term “armed resistance” as part of the lexicon of Fatah’s program. A co-founder of Fatah, with Arafat, Abbas, and others, he has continued to maintain close ties with Abbas.

Coming in second was another Abbas ally, Mahmoud al-Aloul, former member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council; he had been a close associate of terrorist Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) before Israel killed him in 1988.

As to increased moderation in Fatah policy, it would be difficult to say that any progress was made at the Congress. According to veteran Palestinian analyst Hussein Agha, “There was no real political discussion in Bethlehem at all.”^[4]

A revised “Political Program,” contained in a 40-page document, was presented to the attendees for approval. It downplayed

the concept of “armed resistance” but did not overtly reject it. (It was represented as a practice of the past that would have to be re-evaluated now.)

While it accepted negotiations in principle, across the board it advocated a hard-line: the suspension of peace talks until all Palestinian prisoners are released from Israeli jails, all settlement-building is frozen, and the Gaza blockade is lifted. Some analysts saw in this position an attempt to accommodate Hamas, with which Fatah was scheduled to discuss reconciliation shortly after the conference. Others interpreted this as a necessary attempt to mollify hard-liners within Fatah.

Meyrav Wurmser, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the Hudson Institute, described the Fatah position thus: “... What Fatah gives, if even somewhat vaguely, it then takes in starker terms. Whatever more peaceful language it adopted, was completely contradicted elsewhere in the document.”

With regard to the critical “Internal Document,” presented as a re-write at the conference, there was no change in substance: “armed resistance”(violence and terror as the means of achieving a Palestinian state) was unambiguously embraced and all international peace initiatives were rejected.

“It is a declaration of war on the State of Israel,” declared Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz (Likud), echoing a sentiment expressed by many.

[1] <http://middleeastfacts.com/middle-east/the-fatah-constitution.php>.

[2] http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DRIT=1&DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=442&PID=0&IID=3062&TTL=Will_Fatah_Give_Up_the_Armed_Struggle_at_Its_Sixth_General_Congress?#

[3] Sousan Hammad, who was present at the Conference, writing for Menassat, a website from Lebanon reporting on the Arab world.

[4] Cited on Electric Intifada, August 17, 2009.