



The Real Palestinian Pandemic: Political Sclerosis

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,801, November 5, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A generation-old political sclerosis among the Palestinians is likely to end in anarchy and warlords unless some form of autonomy with links to Jordan is supported by the international community.

To be effective, politics requires leadership and organization—and to be effective over the long term, changes in leadership and organizational renewal are also required.

In the so-called “Arab Spring,” there was little leadership or organization among the opposition. The evidence for this is that in the only two countries where the opposition was effective, Tunisia and Egypt (briefly), the opposition did have leadership and organization. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood had both but eventually succumbed to an even more powerful organization, the Egyptian army, which had the ability to renew the leadership by abandoning Mubarak in favor of General Sisi. In Tunisia, the highly organized an-Nahda movement (affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood), under a charismatic leader, formed the nucleus of the first ruling coalition after the revolution. It is still the only organized political force in the country despite its drop in popularity.

But establishing political organizations and achieving political power are not enough. If those things are to be maintained, leadership change and organizational renewal are required, with the one dependent on the other.

This is the major problem the Palestinian political movement has been facing for at least one generation if not longer.

A good example of the political sclerosis within Palestinian politics is Nayef Hawatmeh, leader of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)—a terrorist who made headlines 50 years ago as a minor member of the Arafat-George Habash-Hawatmeh triumvirate.

In 1969, he broke away from Habash to form his own organization after securing lavish support from the Soviets and their vassal states. Five decades later, in his mid-eighties, he still heads the same “revolutionary” “Marxist” organization, the only difference being that he does so from the comfort of his home in Amman. He long ago made peace with the Jordanian monarchy he worked so tirelessly to destroy.

The problem is not only Hawatmeh’s permanent leadership but the organization itself. The DFLP lost what little popular support it enjoyed when the Iron Curtain fell, as it was the Soviet machine that awarded scholarships to DFLP adherents, trained its terrorists, provided hospitals to tend to its wounded, and most importantly provided spas and five-star residences to the DFLP’s senior members. The Soviet Union availed the DFLP of these advantages while the populations of the satellite states that provided them, such as Hungary, Bulgaria, and East Germany, were nearly starving. Little wonder that after the fall of the Iron Curtain, those newly free countries never invited the likes of Hawatmeh again.

Yet Abbas’s PLO and the Palestinian Authority continue to pay off the *fasa’il*, the assortment of sclerotic organizations and factions (including the DFLP) on the permanent payroll, at the expense of the population governed by the PA.

So institutionalized are the PA’s payoffs to these organizations that they have a term of their own—*muhasasat*—that describes the system of quotas used to allot them. All the organizations have head offices in the PA as well as public relations offices, and their officials (at least before the COVID-19 epidemic) traveled at public expense (indirectly financed by the EU or by states) to regional and international conferences. These officials enjoy the pleasure of being hosted, sometimes with great fanfare, by states hostile to Israel such as Malaysia.

The factions’ officials are part of the “revolutionary” Palestinian cause of “resistance.” They express their solidarity with that cause (and, of course, with the third world) while staying at five-star hotels in world capitals.

Occasionally, of course, members of their scant rank and file engage in terrorism.

That Mahmoud Abbas, financed by the EU, is so lavish with these organizations is hardly surprising. He and the PLO's Fatah faction he heads are part and parcel of the same pathology. He heads an organization that has witnessed only one leadership change in its 70 years of existence, and this only occurred when Yasser Arafat—whom Abbas loathed—died in 2004. At that point, Abbas succeeded Arafat as chairman of the PLO and head of Fatah. He was elected to the presidency of the PA in elections that took place in 2005, but his term was only supposed to be four years long. No elections have taken place in the 15 years since, and Abbas has continued as PA president up to the present day.

One could try to calculate the vast prior costs of this sclerosis to Palestinian society, but those massive costs are dwarfed by the expense of such a system continuing into the future.

Sclerotic leadership and a dwindling organization mean that in a power vacuum, the possibility of a transition to a better scenario is zero. Look at what happened to the so-called "Arab Spring."

And a power vacuum is inevitable in the PA. Abbas, who is at least in his mid-eighties, will not live forever. The organizations he pandered to are aging and ineffective, leaving the situation ripe for competing warlords and Hamas to fight it out for the succession—a likely scenario for a movement that has, in one form or another, been failing for a hundred years.

Palestinian sclerosis portends a time warp backward to a bleak existence—unless political leaders around the world grasp that some form of autonomy with assured links to Jordan, the PA's gateway to an Arab world that lives in peace with Israel, is infinitely better than either an anarchic Palestinian state beside Israel (the real two-state solution) or a one-state solution.

Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.