The four Gs

Palestine Report (PR) Online interviews Mahdi Abdul Hadi, director of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, PASSIA

PR: Hamas is poised to join the PLO. Why is this significant?

Abdul Hadi: This is based on Sheikh Ahmed Yassin's doctrine of two years ago, which had four components. The first was to go for a truce, not necessarily a signed or formal agreement, but understood to be for the national cause and for survival. Item two was to share political power in shaping the Palestinian future. This starts with accepting to run for elections to local government and then for the Legislative Council. This Hamas needs to do without being involved in what came out of the Oslo Accords. It is a Palestinian house and they should be in the house.

The third component is to challenge Fateh and the other factions and improve Hamas' weight in society by running in elections, to be legitimized and have their power base recognized as well as their agenda. Finally, to accept a Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with East Jerusalem as its capital and a solution to the refugees' issue based on UN Resolution 194.

All of these components have exactly the same wording as the PLO charter of 1988. In other words, this is the historic transformation of Hamas. It is a clear statement of intent to become a political party, to become officially recognized and legitimized and effective in society.

PR: This is a major transformation…

Abdul Hadi: An historical transformation…

PR: Will this not have an effect down the rank-and-file of Hamas?

Abdul Hadi: When you talk to people in the year 2005, it's different to talking to people in 1995. It's a different political environment, a different component in society and there's a new political culture governing Palestinian society.

Palestinians are living in a prison. Every city, every town, every village is a prison, surrounded by a wall, and governed by a gate, a guard and a gun. With these three Gs, Palestinians are looking to the fourth G, the big G, God. This means, "how can I maintain my culture, my heritage, my identity, without surrendering in this prison? How can I develop a different environment in this prison?"

This has led people to focus on stopping the bleeding, and this means entering into a truce. It means to share political power through elections, and to develop the house. And finally, accepting, painfully, this culture of the prison, in a transition to survive.

PR: So there is a popular mandate?

Abdul Hadi: I will not say there is a popular mandate. But people are very realistic and people are very aware of the culture they are subjected to, whether the prison is in us, or we are in the prison. In either case, the question is how to overcome the culture of the prison without surrendering.

This has meant for leaders of Hamas, inside and outside, as it has meant for the Fateh leadership as well as civil society, that people should work together to stop the bleeding in order to maintain their

identity and culture and develop society in this status quo. So the focus is on health, education, transportation and social services in order to maintain the daily function in society.

But there is no real vision for how to get out of prison. There is no Palestinian strategy for how to change the political environment. The wall is there, the settlements are there, the settlers are governing people's lives, and they are hijacking the future of Palestine as well as Israel.

PR: What effect will Hamas' move have on Fateh?

Abdul Hadi: This has been a longstanding challenge to Fateh. Fateh is not anymore the only political party governing society, and Fateh is facing many challenges, not necessarily between the old guard and the young guard, but with its very agenda. Fateh has undergone several transitions in recent years. It has gone from a military resistance movement to a governing political faction governing, from negotiators to develop a political agenda and environment to a combination between a resistance and a non-violent movement as well as player on the international arena. The challenges before Fateh is a crisis of leadership and a crisis of vision for the future.

PR: Do you foresee that Hamas' move could spell the end of Fateh, or can the movement recover?

Abdul Hadi: It is too early to see where this is taking us. Basically the common ground between Fateh and Hamas is that both agree on the path of stopping the bleeding, sharing political power, competing in elections and accepting the thesis of a two-state solution. There is also a third component, the civil society and the private sector. The alliances could be between Fateh and civil society, or Hamas and the private sector, or some mixture of them all, with the leftists thrown in to boot.

We have yet to see what alliances we will see in the coming elections or whether it is going to continue to be black and white – this is Fateh, this is Hamas, and this is an independent group and between them are fragmented, democratic groups not able to unify their forces based on the competition between the egos of the personalities involved and the elites of the NGOs.

PR: On an overall strategic level, will anything change?

Abdul Hadi: Change is very much needed to overcome the beating and the criticism, and the self-criticism we engage in without looking beyond. We know the mistakes, we know the corruption and the need for reform, and we know what are the priorities.

But what is the agenda? Can we sit together and develop a strategy. Where do we go from here if the wall is going to stay, if the settlements are going to stay and we are stuck in these cantons in Nablus, Hebron, Ramallah, with Jerusalem isolated and the only way out is to the east, through Jericho to the East Bank?

Where is our economy? Our labor? Our national agenda? Do we only react to Israeli policies or do we have a plan of action, internally, regionally and internationally? Or do we only have slogans, in which case we'll find ourselves living in a prison for a long, long time time.

PR: What kind of strategy are you suggesting?

Abdul Hadi: Can we make a combination of a massive non-violent movement with regional coalition building? Can we reach public opinion in Israel that a two-state solution is dead, and we are now going for a bi-national state, which means the end of Zionism and the idea of an exclusively Jewish state?

We have to raise serious questions about where we are going before we lay a strategy. A strategy is not like people meeting in Herzliya and coming up with a five-year strategy based on the Likud agenda. Here we don't have Palestinian Likud or Labor, we only have people committed to their

struggle for freedom and independence for the past hundred years. Now they are wearing different political shirts. It's time to give up these different shirts and think together as human beings who have with the muddy Israeli military boots over our heads for the last 37 years.

PR: The US recently has taken a very pro-Israel line with respect to settlements. Will Hamas' decision pressure the US to take a step back from this?

This is another challenge facing the Palestinian leadership. Do we have a bridge with Washington? Do we have a strong, visible presence in Washington, on Capitol Hill, in their media and public opinion there? Do they understand our situation or is it only the Israelis setting the agenda?

When Washington talks about reshaping the Middle East, what do we say? Accept it, challenge it, amend it, confront it? We don't have a strategy. We only react. We need a vision to move ahead. All factions need to share the responsibility. All factions, with no exception, are responsible for the situation we are in. We did not reach this situation as a result of the actions of only one faction. Every Palestinian is responsible in one way or another, and it's time to accept that responsibility to move ahead.

PR: Are you optimistic?

Abdul Hadi: I am very pessimistic. We need to move now to face the challenges ahead, and we need to move ahead together, and not separately.

Published 30/3/05
Palestine Report