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## STRUGGLE IN A POST-CHARISMA TRANSITION: RETHINKING PALESTINIAN POLITICS AFTER ARAFAT

ALI JARBAWI AND WENDY PEARLMAN

*Drawing on Max Weber's three kinds of legitimate domination, this article proposes the concept of "post-charisma transition" to describe the transformation of a political system in which authority is legitimated by a leader's personal stature. As illustrated by recent Palestinian politics, such a transition may result in attempts at institution-building when a successor to a charismatic leader bolsters legal forms in order to derive authority that his personality alone cannot command. Whereas charisma was an important facet of Yasir Arafat's rule, Mahmud Abbas's lack of charisma has rendered him unable to govern the system that Arafat bequeathed him. Analysis of Abbas's dilemma sheds new light on the legislative elections of 2006 and subsequent events, including the latest developments in the Gaza Strip.*

MOST COMMENTATORS CONSIDER the main dynamic in Palestinian politics today to be a power struggle between the Fatah and Hamas movements. We suggest, however, that the Fatah-Hamas face-off is the latest twist in Mahmud Abbas's struggle for authority over both parties and the political system he inherited from Yasir Arafat. For nearly four decades, Arafat dominated the Palestinian national movement by the strength of his personality, his embodiment of the national cause, and his ability to maintain Palestinians' attachment to him by maneuvering around domestic and regional landmines. In the absence of strong institutions and rule of law, Arafat's revolutionary charismatic legitimacy became an important part of the glue that held Palestinian politics together. Lacking such charisma, Abbas, Arafat's successor, has been at pains to assert his authority in a political system that he is expected to lead, yet is unable to rule.

We suggest that Palestinian politics is in the midst of a special kind of regime change that can be called a "post-charisma" transition: the shift from a form of rule in which authority is legitimated by a leader's exceptional stature to a new kind of regime. The concept draws upon Weber's insight that any political order

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not ruled by perfect democracy or brute force derives from people's belief in one or more of three pure forms of legitimacy: rational-legal legitimacy, based on impersonal rules; traditional legitimacy, based on custom and legacy; and charismatic legitimacy, based on awe and faith in an extraordinary individual and his calling.<sup>1</sup> Given charismatic legitimacy's dependence on a leader's remarkable qualities, it will inevitably expire with the leader himself unless it undergoes a transformation. As Weber explained:

If [charismatic authority] is not to remain a purely transitory phenomenon, but to take on the character of a permanent relationship . . . it is necessary for the character of charismatic authority to become radically changed. Indeed, in its pure form charismatic authority may be said to exist only *in natu nascendi*. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both.<sup>2</sup>

While the transformation of charismatic authority may begin during a leader's lifetime, it accelerates with his passing and the challenge of succession. Anticipating this eventuality, Weber put forth various means of finding a replacement empowered to carry on the former leader's legitimacy: the charismatic leader himself can name his successor; his inner circle can do so; this inner circle can search for a person who possesses properties meeting the criteria of charisma; the leader's position can be transferred to a blood heir; divine revelations or oracles can identify a suitable replacement; or the leader's charismatic aura can be dissociated from his person and transformed into an objective good or office.

Weber predicted that this adaptation of charismatic authority to the demands of the everyday—what he dubbed the “routinization of charisma”—would not be easy. “As a rule,” he wrote, “routinization is not free of conflict.”<sup>3</sup> Heightening such conflict is the fact that many charismatic rulers avoid naming successors who might undercut their power or building institutions that constrain their monopoly on decision-making. Under such circumstances, a post-charisma transition may be shrouded by uncertainty and its outcome is likely to be the product of struggle.

The idea of a post-charisma transition does not constitute a perfect framework for analyzing post-Arafat politics, because the Palestinians lack a monopoly on coercion, a prerequisite for any genuinely legitimate domination. As Israel exercises control over Palestinians at least as much as does the Palestinian leadership, military occupation and resistance to that occupation are realities that cannot be ignored in interpreting any development in Palestinians' political or territorial space.

Nevertheless, these concepts offer grounds for a novel interpretation of recent events. Employing these theoretical tools, this article begins with a brief historical sketch of the role of charisma in Arafat's leadership of the

Palestinian national movement and proceeds to reconstruct the transition to a post-charisma present. We argue that difficulties in Abbas's struggle to assert personal authority eventually led him to turn to institutions in the hope that they would provide him with the leverage that his lack of charisma could not command. It was thus in order to save his presidency that he needed to revitalize the Palestinian parliament with new elections. Illustrative of the uncertainty of post-charisma transitions, however, the surprising electoral results of January 2006 did not settle the problem of legitimate authority in Palestine, but rather ushered in a new set of challenges.

### **LEGITIMACY IN PALESTINE**

The foundations of contemporary Palestinian politics were forged in the late 1960s with the rise of Fatah and other commando groups that rallied for an independent Palestinian armed struggle. These organizations gained legitimacy on the basis of ideology and deed, and they brought this legitimacy with them when they joined the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in and after 1969. As the Palestinian political system developed, however, it was the charismatic authority of Yasir Arafat that became the ultimate, effective source of legitimate domination.

Arafat won the loyalty of a large portion of Palestinians on the basis of his historic prestige as reviver of the national liberation struggle and father of the national family. He broadened his charismatic legitimacy by meeting vast numbers of Palestinians face-to-face, representing Palestinians before the world, and tirelessly defending the nationalist cause. Arafat's authority echoed Weber's characterization of charisma as a revolutionary force insofar as he pioneered the stance that Palestinians must take their fate into their own hands. His rule reflected traits definitive of charismatic authority, such as advancing an inspiring mission, winning followers' personal devotion, and being regarded as a person capable of great feats. Arafat thus became an icon of national pride for his supporters and of terrorism for his enemies; for both, he was a symbol of Palestine itself.

Several arguments can be raised against the claim that Arafat's charisma was a main constituent of legitimate domination in the Palestinian political order. First, the PLO had a complex proto-state apparatus, including a parliament, a network of mass organizations, a bureaucracy, and military forces. Not only did Palestinian national institutions exist, but Arafat came to power through such institutions, wrestled with them, and used them to govern. Nevertheless, the formal system of institutions remained subservient to an informal system built on personal loyalties and exchange. Arafat moved back and forth between the formal and informal systems and even pitted one against the other in order to concentrate his power, validate his policies, and constrain the opposition by absorbing it. His ability to maneuver around institutions would have been

significantly more constrained had he lacked charisma, or had rational-legal domination played a larger role in the Palestinian system. Challenges to Arafat's domination of the PLO certainly existed, but they were often spearheaded by other charismatic personalities and thus did not represent a competing, depersonalized logic of rule.

Second, Arafat's Fatah movement did not appear to be a charismatic configuration. Officially, Fatah consisted of a democratic "General Assembly," intermediary "Revolutionary Council," and executive "Central Committee." Within these legal bodies, leading figures mobilized resources, followers, and alliances in order to compete with Arafat. Furthermore, two major defections, Abu Nidal in 1974 and the Abu Musa rebellion in 1983, were dramatic testimonies to the limits of Arafat's ability to command deference from all Fatah cadres. Nonetheless, Arafat's authority was both an important part of the glue holding Fatah together and the final source of power and resources in the movement. To a great extent, cadres' allegiance grew from the feeling of an almost personal relationship with the "Old Man," and secondary leaders' leverage stemmed from their relative proximity to him. The structure of authority in Fatah could thus be seen as a series of concentric circles. Arafat was the nucleus of one circle formed by his deputies and advisors, each of whom was the nucleus of his own circle of assistants, who likewise served as nuclei for other circles, all the way down to the grassroots. The person of Arafat was all the more important in Fatah because it did not possess a clear ideology. While other factions had programmatic disagreements that led splinter groups to break away, Fatah kept most internal disputes within its ranks—at least as long as its members agreed on the fundamental question of Arafat's charismatic authority.

Third, it is undeniable that Arafat never ruled by charisma alone. As Weber emphasized, the three forms of legitimate domination are ideal types, and real-world situations inevitably manifest a mix of these and other forms of power. In the Palestinian case, Arafat deployed his charisma in conjunction with relentless efforts to intimidate, marginalize, and co-opt would-be dissenters. Corruption and toleration of subordinates' corruption thus played an especially central role in consolidating the system with Arafat on top. In this sense, the post-charisma transition in Palestinian politics commenced while Arafat was still alive. As years passed and the revolutionary goal that Arafat embodied remained elusive, the relative weight of charismatic personalism to patronage-based personalism increasingly shifted in favor of the latter. Nonetheless, even as more Palestinians became critical of Arafat's style of rule, he invoked his charismatic powers of persuasion and inspiration to make the *fact* of his rule largely beyond contestation. In the shadow of this charisma, other types of authority did not develop into independent sources of domination.

With the Oslo agreement, the Palestinian political system narrowed to center on the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip at the expense of those in

the diaspora. As the new Palestinian Authority (PA) effectively overshadowed the PLO, both Arafat's use of charisma and its limits came into relief. On

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*As Arafat's charismatic authority waned, he compensated by enlisting sources of traditional authority, allying his rule with large clans and undermining civil society groups that had flourished through the first intifada.*

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the one hand, international recognition and popular election elevated Arafat's status as never before. On the other, the shift from armed struggle to state-building, in addition to a new influx of funds, fed the centrality of neopatrimonialism.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, when the vitality of Arafat's charismatic authority waned, he compensated not by strengthening institutions, but by enlisting sources of traditional authority. He thus allied his rule with large clans and hastened the decline of the forward-looking civil society groups that had flourished before and during the first intifada. He neglected instituting

law and principles of good governance and bypassed the Palestinian Council and judicial system whenever possible.<sup>5</sup>

The outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000 was the exception that proved the rule of Arafat's charismatic domination. Trapped between his obligations under the Oslo process and popular frustration with its failure to achieve statehood, Arafat opted neither to lead the new uprising nor to suppress it. Rather, he let it take its own course. Israeli repression escalated the militarized confrontation, yet still Arafat did not put his charisma to use by taking a clear public leadership role. As the president's charismatic authority had been the glue holding together a fragmented system, his decision not to exercise decisive authority opened the door to a free-for-all between competing groups. When Israel and the United States declared Arafat irrelevant, he gave the green light to further fragmentation and haphazard violence so as to send the message, "Either deal with me or there will be chaos." Eventually, it was not clear whether Arafat lacked only the incentive to use charisma to impose order or also the capacity to do so.

In the spring of 2002, Israel invaded most West Bank cities and encircled Arafat in his Ramallah compound. The Quartet (the European Union, Russia, the United Nations, and the United States) demanded Palestinian reform as a first step on the road map for Middle East peace. It was thus that Mahmud Abbas emerged at the forefront of Palestinian politics. For years, Palestinian politics had been transitioning from a system in which legitimate domination was based primarily on charisma to one based secondarily on charisma. That transition now accelerated toward a post-charisma phase.

### **PLAYING BY THE OLD RULES**

In 1997, the Palestinian Council ratified the Palestinian Basic Law to serve as the PA's interim constitution. The bill sat on Arafat's desk until 2002 when, under external pressure, he signed it and later approved amendments that transferred powers from the presidency to the new position of prime minister. Imprisoned in his office, Arafat had little choice but to appoint the United

States's preferred choice as head of government. In March 2003, Mahmud Abbas was sworn in.

Abbas's emergence as the new Palestinian leader typified the paradox of succession in a regime based on charismatic authority. Like Arafat, Abbas could claim status as a founding member of the Fatah movement and as a Palestinian leader for four decades. Yet unlike Arafat and other historic figures, he did not gain fame as a military leader or command his own following. Rather, he was soft-spoken, worked behind the scenes, and relentlessly advocated negotiations.

Abbas's political survival depended on his ability to convince Palestinians that he was a legitimate leader rather than a quisling chosen by the Americans to replace Arafat. However, Arafat remained the supreme embodiment of Palestinian political authority and continued pulling strings in the background, such that no other authority could prevail. Abbas articulated his reverence for the president but could not assuage the latter's resentment or mute his drive to retain control. Instead, Arafat continually attempted to undermine the prime minister, belittling him as a Palestinian "Karzai" and giving him only those powers that he was forced to relinquish.

Unable to move Arafat, Abbas tried to move around him. His strategy was to develop his own personal authority by meeting the demands of the external powers and winning their cooperation in the form of measures that would improve Palestinians' dire situation. Abbas had to gamble on his capacity to deliver meaningful change, as this was the only means of bolstering his credibility. He thus pledged adherence to the road map and negotiated a unilateral cease-fire with Hamas and other factions. He then looked to outside forces for recompense. For his plan to work, Abbas needed Israel to help strengthen his hand by fulfilling its commitments to release prisoners, dismantle small settlements, and ease closure. He needed the United States to help him by pressuring Israel to take these steps. These short-term confidence-boosting measures were necessary to extend Palestinian public support for the cease-fire and pave the way for a resumption of real negotiations. Both were critical if the prime minister were to attain political authority that could rival that of Arafat's charisma.

However, neither the United States nor Israel came to Abbas's aid. Israel did not ease the closure, the chief cause not only of Palestinians' daily suffering but also of the drop of over half the population below the poverty line. Instead, it undermined Abbas's personal credibility by arresting hundreds of activists, assassinating a number of leaders, and attempting to assassinate a Hamas political leader. After three months in office, polls showed that more Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza would deny Abbas's government a vote of confidence than give it.<sup>6</sup> In mid-August 2003, an unauthorized Hamas cell carried out a suicide bombing in Jerusalem, Israel assassinated a senior Hamas official, and Palestinian armed factions announced that the cease-fire was over. Abbas continued to call for an end to violence, but it was beyond his limited authority to compel anyone to listen.

Arafat both took advantage of and contributed to Abbas's weakness. Under the watchful eyes of the Americans, Arafat transferred formal control over most PA organs to the prime minister. Yet, as the PA was bankrupt and barely functioning, this hardly served as a political tool in Abbas's hands. Rather, the real source of domination in Palestinian politics remained Arafat's charismatic prestige and the informal system of political relationships that answered to him alone. Arafat continued to control his loyal cadres and many PA security force branches, thereby making it impossible for the prime minister to carry out the road map obligation to dismantle militant groups. In addition, Arafat remained at the head of Fatah and the PLO and used these bodies to outmaneuver the prime minister and to create contexts in which others criticized him. Polls showed that Arafat remained the most trusted public figure in the Palestinian territories,<sup>7</sup> and that his performance earned more favorable reviews than that of Abbas.<sup>8</sup>

After five and a half exasperating months in which his initiatives were stunted by Arafat on the one side and Israel and the United States on the other, Abbas submitted his resignation in October 2003 in an angry speech to the Palestinian Council. His strategy of balancing external and internal pressures in an effort to increase his personal authority had come to naught. Abbas left the West Bank and did not see Arafat again until he was called to his bedside during the last days of his life.

### **BARGAINING FOR LEVERAGE**

Arafat's death in November 2004 appeared to accelerate the transition to legal-rational legitimacy that had begun with the waning of the president's authority under prolonged siege. Respecting to the letter the PA's constitutional rules of succession, the speaker of the Palestinian Council assumed executive power for 60 days, during which time seven candidates campaigned to become the PA's second president. Fair elections took place despite Israeli interference, and Abbas was elected in January 2005 with some 60 percent of the vote.

Nevertheless, compliance with democratic procedures hardly meant that law had become an independent source of authority or that Arafat's charismatic legitimacy had effectively been institutionalized into "charisma of office." As Weber foresaw, "The process of routinization is . . . not by any means confined to the problem of succession and does not stop when this has been solved."<sup>9</sup> Arguably, the real choice of president was made not at the ballot box but when Fatah power-brokers decided that Abbas was the default figure to represent their movement. Moreover, the electoral instruments that granted Abbas legal prerogative did not guarantee him effective power. Real authority in Palestinian politics remained personalized, and Abbas's personal authority remained weak. Had Arafat chosen and supported Abbas as prime minister, he might have bestowed some of his own status upon him. Yet Arafat had instead used his charisma against Abbas, degrading and obstructing him for all to see. With this experience fresh in their memories, Palestinian political figures held Abbas



in no awe and would not defer to his leadership unless it suited their own interests. Palestine thus entered into the throes of a post-charisma transition that would not be settled without a struggle.

Unable to inspire obedience by virtue of charisma, Abbas once again had to earn his authority by political deed. He thus embarked upon a new effort to establish his personal legitimacy using the same two-pronged strategy that he had invoked as prime minister. He sought to mobilize internal commitment to ending the armed intifada on the one hand and to press for external concessions that would increase his popular support on the other. Thus, upon declaring a cease-fire with Israel, the new president set to work making the agreement effective on the Palestinian scene. In March 2005, he commenced negotiations with representatives of major Palestinian groups and announced a *tabdi'a*: an open-ended extension of the period of calm that had taken root during the previous months. In exchange for Hamas's agreement to halt attacks against Israel, Abbas promised it new parliamentary elections and entry into the PLO.

Abbas then looked for three badly needed kinds of cooperation from Israel and the United States: conciliatory gestures such as lifting checkpoints and releasing prisoners; a resumption of genuine negotiations toward a political settlement; and financial assistance to the PA. The first two steps were important for sustaining a supportive atmosphere in public opinion. The latter was crucial for carrying out a sweeping reform of the PA security sector, which would hinge on financially enticing senior officials to retire and intifada fighters to lay down their weapons.

Again, Abbas's hopes in each area went unfilled. Israel removed some checkpoints but put others in place<sup>10</sup> and released a fraction of Palestinian prisoners but detained far more new ones.<sup>11</sup> Israel evacuated some 8,000 settlers in its unilateral disengagement from Gaza but moved forward with plans to confiscate Palestinian land and expand other settlements in the West Bank.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, international aid to the PA fell short of its needs.

Abbas had bargained that satisfying external demands for security would earn him the support he needed to compensate for his lack of charisma and personal clout. Instead, Israel and the Bush administration repeatedly called him a "disappointment." In spite of many months of work, his personal authority was no stronger than when he first took office. Authority in the Palestinian post-charisma transition remained up for grabs.

### **TRYING TO ASSERT CONTROL**

With his strategy for winning external support coming to naught, Abbas had no cards to play when he faced the greatest challenge to his effort to build authority: reining in the situation of confusion and lawlessness that had emerged in the Palestinian territories after more than four years of violence, siege, and economic collapse. During the course of the intifada, Israel had cut Palestinian communities off from each other, refused to transfer the tax monies on which the PA depended, and prohibited policemen from carrying arms. As

the central government practically ceased to function, Palestinians retreated into traditional forms of localistic and clan-based organization, family and gang feuds surged, and in some districts power-brokers came to act as warlords with their own small fiefdoms.

Abbas had pledged to recreate political cohesion under “one authority, one law, one gun.” The main defiance of this injunction came not from Hamas, a disciplined organization that promised to silence its weapons, but from Fatah. While Arafat had served as the point of consensus uniting the movement, Abbas possessed nothing akin to this personal influence. As the post-charisma transition accelerated, Fatah’s traditional configuration of rival subgroups came to the fore without any overriding authority capable of stitching it together into a disciplined whole.

Many analysts described Fatah’s fragmentation in terms of a rivalry between its “old” and “young” guards,<sup>13</sup> an analytic simplification often mistaken for an empirical reality. Given Fatah’s power structure of concentric circles radiating from a charismatic core, any schematic for representing the movement had to be based on affinities of interest, not generational cohort. On this basis, fragmentation within Fatah is better identified in terms of three broad camps: the “establishment” figures who traditionally held political and economic power over the movement and the machinery of the PA; “aspirant” leaders who enjoyed local-level legitimacy but were denied participation in vital national decision-making; and “street strongmen” who formed the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade to serve as a militia through which Fatah participated in armed activity during the second intifada.

In the vacuum brought about by Arafat’s death, figures from each of these coalitions jockeyed for position. In doing so, all came to challenge Abbas’s leadership. Abbas struggled to disarm militias, integrate them into the PA police, and merge eleven security forces into three. Yet many Fatah militants refused to hand over their weapons, and some continued to use them in incidents ranging from storming government buildings to kidnapping foreigners. While some of this disorder was spontaneous, its more serious manifestations stemmed from an alliance between members of the establishment and street strongmen. Certain high-ranking Fatah figures sought to create turmoil in order to prevent Abbas from implementing the reforms that would undermine the grip on power they had acquired by Arafat’s grace. Certain intifada fighters wanted to lash out at the system they accused of taking them for granted. Establishment figures thus provided pay and cover for rank-and-file gunmen, who in turn created mayhem. The tumult illustrated that those willing to sabotage Abbas’s policies could be found throughout Fatah and that the movement itself was disintegrating into competing cliques. By the close of 2005, many of the president’s directives were systematically ignored and he was barely on speaking terms with some of his own security chiefs.

Meanwhile, some Palestinian factions ignored Abbas and continued to launch attacks on Israel. Islamic Jihad carried out suicide bombings that claimed five Israeli lives during the course of 2005, and various groups continued firing

home-made rockets from Gaza into Israel. The Israeli army also ignored Abbas, making some 2,000 incursions into Palestinian areas and killing more than 700 Palestinians during the course of the year.<sup>14</sup> Caught between Israel and Palestinian militants, Abbas was powerless.

The president had tried to resolve his domestic dilemma through various means. He had attempted to muster external aid, Israeli concessions, and progress on the political track as leverage in the domestic arena. He had sought to assuage the demands of aspirants for reform, without provoking the obstructionism of the establishment. He had tried to bring street strongmen to obey the central government through a combination of carrot and gentle stick. Yet each effort came to naught. Abbas could not rule as long as he was trapped inside the political house that Arafat built, which forced him to rule by personal clout that he did not have. His only hope was to do away with the old system and forge a new one based on a different kind of legitimacy.

It was thus that Abbas shifted from the ineffective endeavor to increase his personal authority to a novel attempt to compensate for his relative weakness by increasing the authority of law and institutions. Unable to count on Fatah to support his position as party leader, he looked to empower the Palestinian Council to be his ally. If power-brokers in his own movement would not listen to him, his best option was to try to bring them to listen to an invigorated legislature. Those who looked upon the president with derision could not but obey a new partnership between the president and parliament, both chosen by the Palestinian public. The president thus wagered his political future on the sole means of legitimizing a new institutionalized political order: parliamentary elections.

For some, Abbas's call for legislative elections seemed a natural continuation of the presidential elections and the transition to a legal-rational regime that they espoused. Yet this development represented a significant shift in the underlying struggle for authority in Palestine. Its logic held that, rather than fighting to persuade Palestinians to respect him as Arafat's replacement, Abbas would try to replace Arafat's system with a new one in which citizens obeyed the law because it was the law. Abbas was not necessarily a great democratic reformer. He turned to elections as a way of legally reining in the party and society he had been unable to govern personally. He was a weak leader at the end of his political rope who figured that he had either to rationalize the political system or step aside.

### **TRANSFORMING THE SYSTEM**

The first Palestinian parliament had been elected in 1996. As Hamas and other anti-Oslo factions had boycotted those elections, 68 of the Palestinian Council's 88 members were Fatah affiliates. Even given this friendly composition, Arafat systematically flouted the parliament and ignored its legislation.<sup>15</sup> Although many reformers pressed for a second round of elections, none were held during Arafat's presidency.

When Abbas promised to hold new legislative elections in March 2005, Hamas announced that it would participate. As the first scheduled date for elections neared, surveys suggested that Hamas would win about 30 percent of the vote.<sup>16</sup> Hamas's entry into the legislature with a strong minority presence would serve both its interests and those of the PA president. For Abbas, inclusive and contested elections would invigorate the Palestinian Council, and in doing so would help him confront both his internal and external problems. On the internal front, Hamas's election to the parliament could make it a counterweight to Fatah, pushing it to unify and discipline its ranks. Hamas's integration into the PA system could also bestow upon it the burdens of governance, thereby forcing it to moderate its militancy. The shaky *tabdi'a* would then become a permanent cease-fire, and Abbas would at last see a return to the peace process.

At the same time, a parliament with a strong and vocal minority could offer Abbas a new source of leverage vis-à-vis Israel and the United States. As in a classic model of two-level games, domestic opposition could help him get more out of negotiations on the argument that otherwise he would not get agreements accepted at home.<sup>17</sup> Israeli negotiators had used this technique throughout the Oslo process. Arafat had tried to do likewise, protesting at Camp David that if he accepted Israel's proposal his Palestinian constituents would kill him. At that time, Israel had dismissed Arafat's plea on the grounds that his sweeping personal control of the Palestinian arena rendered his fear disingenuous. In contrast, Abbas hoped that having Hamas as a political party in parliament would illustrate to Israel and the United States that Palestinian negotiators faced genuine political constraints. Hamas could be a bargaining chip in negotiations—but one that would itself be constrained by being within the political system.

For reasons of its own, Hamas was ready to be that parliamentary opposition. Elections offered the movement an escape from the pressures that had come upon it. In the wake of 9/11, the United States and Europe had placed Hamas on the list of terrorist organizations and on that basis prohibited its receipt of monetary transfers. Assassinations of the organization's top leaders eliminated its paramount strategists and forced remaining leaders to go underground in fear for their lives. Becoming a strong minority in parliament would offer Hamas protection as the political situation developed and time to convince its cadres of the need to adjust the movement's program, should this become necessary. At the same time, this gradual transition into a political party would not force Hamas to trade the familiar status of opposition for the unfamiliar burdens of running a government.

Both Hamas and Abbas thus stood to gain from the institutionalization of political authority and the revitalization of the legislature as a main arbiter in the PA system. Transforming legitimate domination in Palestinian politics from charisma or traditionalism to institutions would clarify, protect, and concretize the power due each of its major players. Moreover, it would limit the maneuverability of those who attempted to influence national decision-making

through the extralegal channels of coercion and disruption. These channels would be open as long as the foundation of authority remained anything other than rational-legal.

If Abbas and Hamas stood to gain from new elections, the party that stood to lose was Fatah. Fatah benefited from Palestinian society's retreat into its more traditional forms. As long as the political arena was unregulated by charisma or law, those with guns, money, and followers reigned—and it was in Fatah, more than in any other party, that these multiple localized centers of power were found. Rationalization of the system through elections would jeopardize this advantage. The Fatah establishment stood to lose the posts that they monopolized by virtue of blocking fair competition; aspirants stood to lose to the degree that voters would punish the entire movement for its faults; and street strongmen stood to lose because their influence sprang from the very vacuum that the new lawmaking body would fill. Fatah's trepidation regarding a formal face-off with Hamas increased as the latter triumphed in municipal council elections throughout 2005. Fatah members pressured Abbas to postpone parliamentary elections once and then went to great lengths to disrupt them. In the course of the primaries, gunmen caused havoc by storming election offices, burning ballot boxes, and making threats. Fatah aspirants defied Abbas when they registered their own independent list, although the power of the establishment eventually made them back down.

On 25 January 2006, over one million Palestinians cast their ballots. Palestinians went to sleep to predictions of a Fatah victory and awoke to reports that Hamas and independents who ran with Hamas had won 78 of the 132 seats. If Abbas had sought a new balance of forces to counter intransigence within his own party, he certainly got it. In the process, however, he also received an entirely new obstacle in his quest for authority: forced cohabitation with a political movement whose program was at loggerheads with his own. With this, the Palestinian post-charisma transition veered into uncharted terrain.

### **WRESTLING FOR POWER**

Abbas had sought a gradual shift in the character of legitimate domination, engineered from above. Elections turned the entire system on its head in one sweep from below. The president's new dilemma, moreover, was codified by law. The modifications to the Basic Law, tailor-made to fortify Abbas's government in 2003, now served to empower a government of Hamas members whose ideology was at odds with his own. Abbas had hoped that law-bound institutions would strengthen his hands, but instead they tied them.

Elections were to have created a strong opposition that would bring Hamas to order and induce Fatah to unify its ranks. In theory, Fatah's electoral defeat could have been an opportunity for its critical self-reflection and rebuilding on the bases of accountability and cohesion. Instead, the defeat saw the perennially ruling party resolved to reclaim power as soon as possible and by any means

necessary. The movement's street strongmen showed no patience for the hard work of internal reconstruction, while its establishment figures fought against it, aware that they would be its first casualties. Abbas gained some new leverage over Fatah by virtue of being the last refuge of its access to money and formal power. Yet a sizable portion of the movement now made him the target of their wrath, blaming him for having held elections in the first place.

External reactions to the elections exacerbated the crisis. Israel refused to deal with the PA or to transfer its custom revenues. The United States and the European Union announced that it would cut off aid to the PA until Hamas recognized Israel, denounced terrorism, and complied with all previous agreements. Refusing to capitulate to outsiders' conditions, the Hamas-led government was unable to pay the public employees' salaries on which more than a third of the Palestinian workforce depended. By September 2006, the World Bank registered that GDP per capita in the Palestinian territories had dropped 27 percent while the real poverty rate had risen to 67 percent.<sup>18</sup>

With Hamas vowing to prove it could govern and Fatah determined to make it fail, the post-charisma transition ushered in unprecedented internal conflict. In Gaza, Fatah-affiliated security force members took their guns to the streets to demand their salaries and a new Hamas-loyal security force took to the streets to hold its ground. Before long, Fatah and Hamas were kidnapping, assassinating, or attempting to assassinate each others' members. The political authority once concentrated in Arafat was now split between two movements of equal strength. In the legal and economic vacuum, alarming phenomena emerged, including a 50 percent increase in crime, the bombing of Internet cafes, and warnings that al-Qa'ida-like sympathies were on the rise. The post-charisma transition seemed to result not in the routinization of charisma but in society's self-destruction.

Weak vis-à-vis both Fatah and Hamas, Abbas became the equivalent of a lame-duck president. In a throwback to Arafat's style of governance, he resorted to having the outgoing Palestinian Council pass last-minute laws that increased his power and issued presidential orders placing official media and security forces under his control. When this failed to settle the balance of authority in his favor, Abbas attempted to revive the practice of interfactional pacts that had been staples of cohesion in the PLO. Nevertheless, the informal bargaining that Arafat had used with finesse crumbled in Abbas's hands. Abbas shocked national dialogue talks when he warned that he would call a public referendum if factions did not adopt a consensus program penned by Palestinian leaders in Israeli jails. Hamas rejected the ultimatum, Abbas backed down, and soon the entire "Prisoner's Document" controversy was overshadowed by another flare-up with Israel. At a loss for other strategies, Abbas threatened to call for early elections but was hard pressed to counter Hamas's accusation that such a call amounted to a coup d'état. In February 2007, Hamas and Fatah accepted the Mecca accord, but the new unity government did not breach their differences. Regardless, the refusal of the United States and the European Union to accept the unity arrangement or lift sanctions doomed the initiative.

The ironic twist of the Palestinians' post-charisma transition was that Abbas's quest for institutionalization had brought Hamas, typically viewed as a movement that appealed to religious sources of legitimacy, to become a champion of rational-legal authority. During its nearly twenty years of existence, Hamas had justified its actions by invoking the authority of Islam and a sacrosanct view of the national interest. Now, however, it insisted on the most secular of forms of authority: the Basic Law that formed the constitutional basis of the political system and the verdict of the ballot box. Hamas asserted its right to rule based on the legality of the institutional processes that brought it to power. Were Abbas to maneuver around those processes as Arafat had once done, he would be flaunting the democratic institutions he himself had championed. Furthermore, if he took the controversial step of calling for new elections, there was no guarantee that he would defeat his opponents.

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What the Palestinian arena was witnessing was more than a struggle for power. It was a conflict-ridden post-charisma transition. Moreover, it was a transition whose unexpected outcomes illustrated the uncertainty of this kind of regime change. As the old charismatic rules of political life no longer applied, contenders put forth new rules as suited them and then adjusted their positions in interaction with each other. The paradoxical result was that a religion-based movement emerged as the main advocate of legal-rationalism; a president who had once insisted upon institutions came to act in increasingly haphazard ways; and the foreign powers that called for democracy refused to recognize a democratically elected government.

The crux of the Palestinian dilemma was that the institutions that could have filled the gap when personalistic rule ended were not yet sufficiently entrenched to be taken for granted as independent sources of authority. Neither were they allowed to develop. Closure continued to prevent Palestinian Council members from reaching sessions, Gaza and West Bank parliamentary activity remained severed, and Israel put dozens of new lawmakers in prison. Moreover, when Hamas parliamentarians convened debates on issues harmful to Fatah's interests, Fatah parliamentarians refused to attend, and vice versa. Unable to pull together a quorum, the work of the Palestinian Council froze completely. A gap thus continued between the expired charisma of the old political order and the institutions that were anticipated to solidify a new one.

The Fatah-Hamas struggle continued in a situation of violent attrition until June 2007, when the inevitable explosion came. Prodded by external intervention, both parties abandoned legal means and took up arms to battle for domination of the political arena. In a few bloody days, Hamas fighters ousted Fatah-affiliated security forces and took control of the PA in the Gaza Strip. Hamas claimed that it was acting in self-defense by securing Gaza from foreign-armed Palestinian "contras." Fatah denounced its rivals as killers.

Whether the new de facto division of the political system amounted to a coup or an anti-coup, the devastating effect on the transition to rational-institutionalism was the same. Abbas's authority stood as shattered as his photograph, trampled by the Hamas members who seized the president's Gaza office. Faced with the challenge of how to regain Gaza, he had returned to square one.

## CONCLUSION

Weber warned that the routinization of charisma was bound to spark conflict. Noting that such routinization involves not only leadership succession but also transformation in the underpinnings of a political system, we call this particular form of regime change a post-charisma transition. When a post-charisma transition ends in the consolidation of a stable new political order, then Weber's foreseen routinization of charisma has reached fruition. However, until society reaches a consensus on what constitutes authority in the new era, the bases of legitimate domination will hang in the balance.

One channel by which a post-charisma transition may result in institution-building is the strategic choice of a political successor who proves unable to muster traditional or charismatic forms of authority. Unable to command deference to his own person, such a successor may find that his best chance of strengthening his position is to bolster the authority of law. Whether or not he succeeds, however, depends on his strategic interaction with others contending for influence in and over the political order.

These concepts can shed new light on current Palestinian politics. Yasir Arafat dominated the Palestinian national movement by his own charismatic blend of personal magnetism and revolutionary prestige. He bequeathed to Palestinians a political system in which law was optional and formal institutions malleable. Mahmud Abbas, as prime minister and during his first year as president, attempted to increase his authority by reaching out to both external forces and public opinion. When this failed, he turned to institutions in the hope that an empowered parliament would provide him with the leverage he could not personally command. This unexpected embrace of rational-legal modes of politics might have transformed the bases of legitimate domination if the reaction to the results of the elections had been different. Hamas's victory triggered an international boycott and extralegal tactics by those who refused to accept the results. As sources of domination, law and institutions thus continued to remain secondary to factionalism and force. The latest events in Gaza are the bloody culmination of this trend.

Ultimately, rational-legalism must be allowed to prevail. Arafat's ability to govern by charisma was due not simply to his personal aura but to the phase of political development during which he rose to prominence. As he emerged in the spotlight, the revolutionary agenda was proving that an independent Palestinian will existed and had the right to represent itself. Arafat skillfully used charisma to provide what the national cause needed at that time: a leader who could bring together diverse ideological streams, inspire a



far-flung diaspora population around a single struggle, and ward off the many forces competing to suppress or exploit Palestinian nationalism. Today, when Palestinian society is at a stage not of nation-building but of state-building, a new kind of political authority is crucial. Its aspirations can no longer be satisfied by charismatic leaders, but require institutions able to provide rule of law, security, economic recovery, and real progress toward the goal of independence. Only a rationalization of political authority can achieve such aims.

If the international community wants to strengthen President Abbas, it must do so within these rational terms. Given his lack of other sources of authority, Abbas has no alternative but to play the game of democracy and law-abiding statecraft. The president does not need more bullets, but rather the leverage that can come only from an opening of the political horizons. Short of this, Palestine's post-charisma transition will not only have failed to bring about the institutionalization of authority; it will end in a political arena under no authority at all.

## NOTES

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