



FEATURES

Understanding Hamas' Victory in Jerusalem

“The Last Bullet in the
 Palestinian Rifle”

Omar Karmi

A Palestinian queuing to vote shows his
 Jerusalem identity card.

On 25 January, the day of Legislative Council elections, all Jerusalem candidates agreed to meet outside the main post office on Salah Eddin Street in East Jerusalem.

Their gathering was meant to signal a show of unity—across party lines—in defiance of Israeli restrictions on the elections. Only four candidates were missing from the line-up. Fearing arrest, the four Hamas candidates had decided to take a rain check. Each had already been detained at least once in the run-up to the vote.

Even considering the general obstacles that all Palestinian candidates faced in trying to campaign in Jerusalem—from being detained to being turned out of the city—the four Hamas members running in Jerusalem faced an uphill struggle, with a total Israeli ban placed on their campaigning.

Yet, despite having to work clandestinely, despite the detentions and harassment, despite being accused by other Palestinian factions of giving up Jerusalem when the movement declared that legislative elections

should go ahead even without the city, and despite never running for elections before, Hamas took all four non-allotted seats in Jerusalem (a further two seats were set aside for Christian candidates).

“In effect, Israel voted for Hamas,” said political analyst Mahdi Abdul Hadi, head of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, PASSIA. “The message of Hamas was very succinctly conveyed when Israel arrested and re-arrested the movement’s candidates. People voted for steadfastness under the banner of ‘no’.”

Ahmed Attun, one of the successful Hamas candidates, didn’t see the ban on campaigning as a hindrance.

“We moved among the people. We went door-to-door to explain our positions. All our members volunteered and we covered 30 districts in Jerusalem. We didn’t need the media, and we didn’t need the posters,” Attun said in an interview. “We worked hard and we were disciplined.”

Attun argued that Hamas’ discipline and political program won the day. That program, he said, is aimed mainly at assisting Jerusalemites in “maintaining their steadfastness.”

“Jerusalem will be a top priority after many years of Palestinian, Arab and Muslim neglect. The first step in the PLC and government is to legislate laws that will assist Jerusalemites in facing the [Israeli] policies of house demolitions, land confiscations, as well as fight unemployment, drug abuse and develop the education and health sectors.”

It’s a costly program, he conceded, with “more than 80 percent of Jerusalemites in need of financial support.” The money, he said, would come “first and foremost from the Arab and Muslim world.”

“In addition, we all know the PA did not suffer any shortage [of funding] in the past, but the mechanism with which they spent that money was not appropriate. We can save part of these funds through developmental projects and concerted collective institutional activities to rectify the mistakes of the past.” The recent weeks in which the new Hamas government has struggled to break a nearly-blanket international financial boycott has made it clear how hard this task will be.

But Attun accepted that the vote was also a protest against what had come before. “We felt a strong desire from people for change after what they experienced with the PA and the neglect in the past years.”

Fateh candidates cited a break with the past and the disarray of their own party as the main reason for Hamas’ victory. “I don’t think people voted for Hamas because they think Hamas can change things,” said Fateh candidate Hatem Abdel Qader. “They voted because they were angry at Fateh particularly because of corruption.”

“But Hamas also won because the Fateh vote was split,” continued Abdel Qader. “There were Fateh candidates and those who were Fateh but ran as independents. Where Hamas had four candidates for four seats, Fateh, in effect, had 20. It split the vote. Without this disarray, I don’t think Hamas is strong enough in Jerusalem [to win].”

Nasser Qous, one former Fateh member who ran as an independent, conceded that independents such as himself had split the vote for Fateh, but blamed the Fateh leadership for earlier having cancelled the Fateh primaries. In any case, he said, Hamas won “because people were disgusted with the performance of the PA, which was headed by Fateh. They wanted change.”

“People voted to show their resentment and fear,” said Abdul Hadi. “There is a real crisis of leadership and vision for how to confront Israel in Jerusalem. In this context, Hamas organized itself as the only opposition. The Third Way [of Salam Fayyad and Hanan Ashrawi] had no presence in Jerusalem and no impact. The leftists faded as the Islamic forces rose. In Jerusalem, people did not elect leaders or representatives or heroes. They elected the opposition. It was a vote against, not for.”

Religion also played its part, according to Abdul Hadi. “People fall back on religion when they suffer. It provides a shelter. Hamas used that to its advantage.”

Both Attun and Abdel Qader played down the role of religion in their campaigns, with Attun emphasizing the unity of Christians and Muslims. Abdel Qader rejected the idea that there are “Hamas Muslims and Fateh Muslims.”

But some voters said that religion was an important factor in their decision.

“I think there is a difference between one who prays and one who doesn’t,” said Hijaz Abdel Aziz, 63, a baker in East Jerusalem who voted for the movement. “Hamas talked about values, Islamic values, and people, myself included, think that because of religion they will act with more integrity.”

“People are fed up, they feel there is no hope. They want change. Religion is important because it is based on [Islamic] law. Believers will follow the law.”

Samir Qireh, 45, who owns a souvenir on Via Dolorosa, also emphasized the perceived integrity of Hamas. “Fateh was never honest about its promises. They were always too busy looking out for their personal interests. They have no credibility, but Hamas does. They won because people trust that what they say they will do. Even Christians voted for Hamas. Hamas promised us to regain our lands and rights and people believe them.”

And there, perhaps, lies a deeper truth about Hamas’ victory, not just in Jerusalem but across the board. For all the disarray of Fateh, and the alleged corruption and



Palestinians wait to vote in the main Israeli post office on Salah ad-Din Street in Jerusalem.

mismanagement in the Palestinian Authority, ultimately Fateh, and the Oslo Accords basket into which the movement had laid its eggs, failed to secure Palestinian independence and an end to Israeli occupation.

The message constantly hammered home in the Hamas campaign was that 15 years of negotiations had not only been fruitless, they had led to a reverse in Palestinian fortunes. It was a message readily received by a Palestinian public reeling from humiliation after humiliation, whether the remote control detention of Yasser Arafat in his “presidential” compound in Ramallah, the checkpoints, the settlements, or the wall running through Jerusalem—all condemned by the international community but continuing apace.

One of the first measures taken by Israel after the formation of the Hamas-led government and a suicide bombing claimed by Islamic Jihad was to threaten to rescind the Jerusalem residency papers of the Hamas parliamentarians.

“Hamas is right,” raged one Christian hairdresser in his shop in the heart of the Christian Quarter of the Old City. “Negotiate about what? Look at them [the Israeli

army]. They took the security forces [during Israel's March Jericho prison raid] and put them in their underwear for the entire world to see, and Britain and America let them. They do what they want, when they want. They don't care about agreements, they only care about power."

The man, who refused to be identified for this article, said he hadn't voted in elections. "But if they are held again, I will vote Hamas. I don't care if they are Muslim or Christian or from Mars. They are right. Israel has no respect for us, and all we can do is show them the same lack of respect back."

It is a response not lost on Attun. "We realize that Israeli obstructions on our activities is part of the price we will pay as long as we are under occupation. It is the price all Palestinians are paying. But we remain determined. Israel does not grant us legitimacy. Our legitimacy comes from our people on our land."

He recalled that in a final campaign meeting in Hizma village on the eve of elections one voter had stood up and addresses the four Hamas candidates.

"He warned us. He said, 'we will give you our votes, but if you fail us, we will not trust anyone again. You are the last bullet in the Palestinian rifle.'

"God willing, we will not fail this man."

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