



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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"Different yet Similar: Governance in the West Bank and Gaza"

The Palestine Center
2425 Virginia Avenue NW
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The Palestine Center – the educational arm of the Jerusalem Fund for Education and Community Development – hosted an event to explore the similarities and differences between systems of government in the West Bank and Gaza. How have they made institutional improvements and has this effected the balance between security and liberty? How sustainable and vulnerable are these state-like systems? **Dr. Yezid Sayigh**, Professor of Middle East Studies at King's College in London, addressed these questions and provided an overview of an evolving Palestinian political landscape. Expected speaker **Dr. Khaled Hroub** from the University of Cambridge was not able to attend.

In opening, Dr. Sayigh elucidated the forces behind the fundamental breakdown of the Palestinian system: **a lack of coherent governance, a polarization of politics, and the militarization of many institutions**. Yet despite many of these intractable problems, the governments in both the West Bank and Gaza, which he views as increasingly divergent, have succeeded in stabilizing and consolidating their internal rule. Both have also showed an ability to learn and innovate. To that end, Sayigh highlighted two areas of particular interest:

- Security
 - Until June 2007, the territories had a fundamental lack of law and order – "since then, both governments have established a modicum of law and order... The outcome [of EU assistance for security forces] has been, to some degree, an improvement of professionalism of various police forces, an improvement of technical abilities – but severe problems remain," including a lack of functioning democratic systems.
 - In Gaza, there was a sharp learning curve post-2007. The government rebuilt its police force and activated reconciliation committees to operate on the neighborhood level. This improved basic security in many areas, and there are significantly fewer armed men on the streets. Although Sayigh conceded that some attribute this to tactics of intimidation, he maintained that the overall security situation has improved since the Hamas government views it as a public good.
- Economy
 - Overall, the economy in the West Bank is growing, partially as a result of increasing freedom of movement for Palestinians. **However, much of this growth also comes from public funding and external aid rather than private investors**. Sayigh noted that banks are still reluctant to issue loans.
 - The Gazan economy is almost entirely cash-based, generated in large part from the smuggling industry that emerged after 2007. The Palestinian Authority also set up firewalls on banking services to prevent the Hamas government from siphoning off money for terrorist activities, prompting Hamas to set up its own makeshift banking

system. Sayigh feared that this, combined with Gaza's cash-based economy will inevitably lead to higher levels of corruption and other problematic long term implications.

Pivoting to commonalities, **Sayigh said that both governments are hugely dependent upon foreign aid, neither truly controls its territorial security, and neither has clear mechanisms to leverage Israeli concessions on the issue of full Palestinian autonomy.** In terms of political progress, **"The West Bank government is entirely unconstitutional. Hamas' government is partially constitutional, but still on dubious grounds and has huge legitimacy problems."** One of the primary problems, Sayigh said, is that both governments are in a holding pattern politically, unable to do much more in terms of economic advancement, security, or autonomy.

Because both are caught between the dueling forces of domestic and international pressure, a number of internal fissures have emerged that threaten both governments' legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinian people. Hamas' efforts to crack down upon rocket attacks on Israel have emboldened other groups within Gaza. "In the West Bank," Sayigh said, **"the 'counter Hamas' campaign has been underway for two years and has corroded the rule of law and human rights protections... There's also no functioning parliament. This creates a clear authoritarian potential, and there's certainly a repressive atmosphere in both Gaza and the West Bank."** He fears that the status quo necessarily leads to a rise in authoritarian responses to domestic challenges, in large part because the two systems can't alter their external environments.

Looking forward to 2011, when Fatah's two-year state-building plan will end, Sayigh wondered if the international community will choose to recognize a Palestinian state, particularly since he maintains that Palestine's level of governance is already higher than many countries in sub-Saharan Africa by any official indicator. However, even if certain actors confer statehood status, Sayigh stressed that "much is left to be desired" since Israel still controls all of the crucial arteries that feed into Palestinian territories. **He also worries that the "evolutionary paths of each system will make it very difficult for them to reintegrate. Politically, socially, culturally reintegrated them into one system of government – it is hard to see how that can work."** As things currently stand, neither system has the democratic infrastructure to sufficiently respond to their own constituencies, much less integrate into a unified Palestinian polity. "If you want to promote an ethic of democracy and human rights, you've got to make it clear that there are certain expectations for alternative methods of confronting the reality," and Sayigh insists that there is a dearth of popular trust in political institutions which may be one of the forces precluding a Gaza-West Bank reintegration.