



المركز الفلسطيني
للبحوث
السياسية والمسحية
Palestinian Center for
POLICY and
SURVEY RESEARCH

Critical Policy Brief

Number 4/2022

Birzeit Student Elections: Why Hamas Won and Fatah Lost



Alaa Lahluh and Walid Ladadweh

Strategic Analysis Unit
November 2022



Alaa Lahluh: Researcher at the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, holds a master's degree in contemporary Arab studies from Birzeit University, graduated in 2003. His work is focused on democratic transformation, accountability and integrity in the security sector and the Palestinian national movement. He participated in preparing Palestine's report of the **Arab Security Sector Index** and in the **Arab Democracy Index**. A list of recent publications include "Accountability in Public Institutions that Report to PA President," prepared for **AMAN**, 2022; "The Effectiveness of Internal Audit and Monitoring in the Security Forces," prepared for the **Civic Forum to Enhance Good Governance in the Security Sector**, 2022; "The Challenges that Forced the Fatah Movement to Postpone the General Elections, issued by **PCPSR**, 2021; and "The Growing Power of Tribes at the Expense of the State and its Impact on Civil Peace in Palestine," prepared for **REFORM**, 2020.



Walid Ladadweh has an MA in sociology. He is the head of PSR's polling unit and has been a member of the Consultative Council on Palestinian Statistics during the period 2005-08. He finished his MA at Birzeit University in 2003 and completed several training courses in areas of survey and methodology research, including one at the University of Michigan in 2010 on "methods of survey research." He supervised the conduct of more than 70 polls in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and is an expert in fieldwork, data collection and cleaning, and data analysis using various statistical analysis packages. Mr. Ladadweh published various research papers including one on "Religion in Palestinian Society and Politics" presented at the a conference on Growing Popular Participation in Decision Making in the Arab World which was held in Qatar University in March 2013. He also contributed two papers to *The Second Palestinian Elections*, co-edited by Khalil Shikaki and Jihad Harb, one on "Methodology of Exit Polling," and the other on "Demographic Characteristics of Palestinian Voters: 2005-06." He has also contributed to the *Palestinian Democracy Index* in the years 2005-08. His latest work has been to co-author with Khalil Shikaki, "Can the Demographic Advantage be an Effective Weapon in the Struggle to Achieve Palestinian Rights?" published by PCPSR, September 2022.

The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR)

PSR is an independent nonprofit institution and think tank of policy analysis and academic research. It was founded in 2000 with the goal of advancing scholarship and knowledge on immediate issues of concern to Palestinians in three areas: domestic politics and government, strategic analysis and foreign policy, and public opinion polls and survey research. PSR conducts policy analysis and empirical surveys and public opinion research and organizes task forces, study groups, meetings and conferences. Its work focuses on current public policy issues with a special reliance on empirical evidence as a tool to advance scholarship and understanding.

PSR is dedicated to promoting objective and nonpartisan research and analysis and to encouraging a better understanding of Palestinian domestic and international environment in an atmosphere of free debate and exchange of ideas. PSR is registered as a nonprofit institution in the Palestinian Ministry of Justice.

This brief is the fourth in PSR series of Critical Policy Briefs for 2022. These briefs address important domestic and foreign policy-oriented issues confronting Palestinian society today.

The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR)

P. O. Box 76, Ramallah, Palestine

Tel: +970-2-2964933

Fax: +970-2-2964934

pcpsr@pcpsr.org

www.pcpsr.org

Birzeit Student Elections: Why Hamas Won and Fatah Lost

Alaa Lahluh and Walid Ladadweh

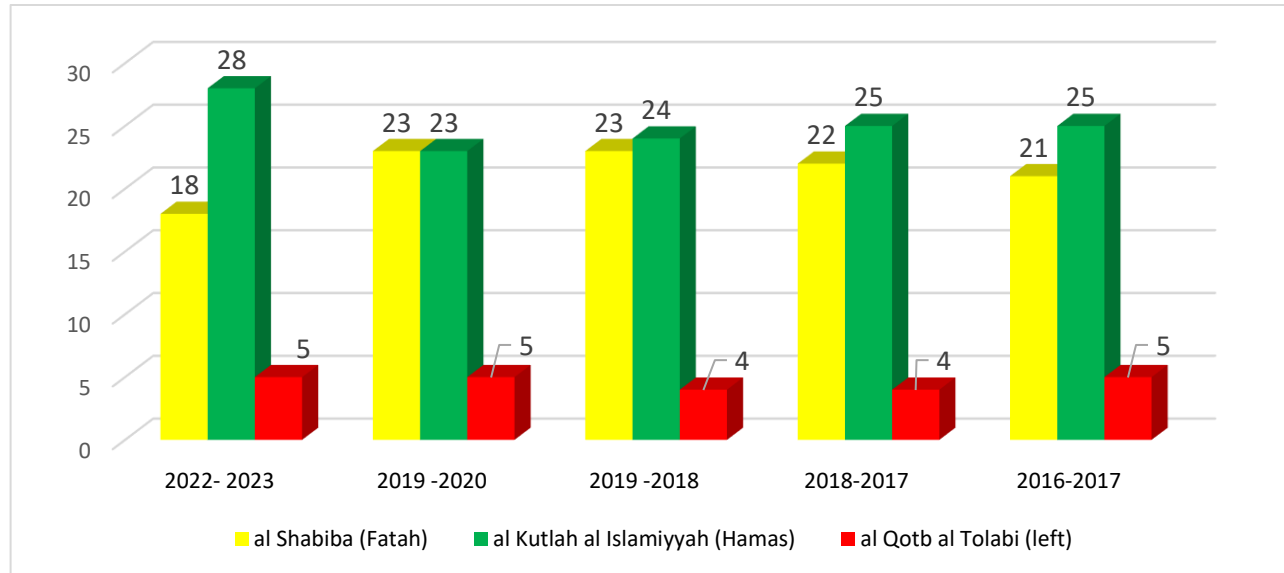
Introduction :

The results of the student council elections at Birzeit University that took place in May 2022 came as a shock to supporters of Fatah after the heavy loss suffered by its student youth movement, al Shabiba, winning only 18 seats out of 51, compared to 28 seats for the Islamic Bloc, Al Kutlah al Islamiyyah, and 5 seats for the Student Pole, al Qutb al Tollabi, that represents leftist forces at the university. These results were shocking to Fatah because of the importance of the student elections, especially at Birzeit University, for what they represent for the future of the national movement. It was shocking because the students of this university, more than other university in the West Bank, represent many of the various regions of the West Bank as well as the various socio-economic classes and political currents thereby making the Birzeit elections a barometer of the attitudes and behavior of the educated Palestinian youth. Birzeit University has a special importance in the democratic process because this university has been a beacon of democratic practices preserving democratic traditions throughout the previous years in which Palestinians were deprived of national elections, while student elections were held annually at that university except in the most difficult conditions, such as the Covid pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

These elections came amid the near-total absence of democratic life in the Palestinian territories as no national elections have been held since 2005 and 2006, when presidential and legislative elections were held respectively. Back in December 2021 and earlier this year, in March 2022, local council elections were held in the West Bank, but they were not held in the Gaza Strip because of Hamas' objection to holding them in that part of the Palestinian territories

Background:

The past five years have witnessed a strong showing by Hamas' Islamic Bloc at the expense of its main rival, al Shabiba, but without gaining a majority of Birzeit student vote. In the elections that preceded the closure of the university due to the Corona pandemic, in 2019-2020, al Shabiba was in fact able to win the same number of seats as the Islamic Bloc. The following figure shows the seat distribution at Birzeit University during the period between 2016-2022.

Figure (1): Distribution of Student Council Seats at Birzeit Student elections between 2016-2022

It should be noted that al Shabiba won all Birzeit University student elections that took place between 2007 and 2015, i.e., after Hamas violently took control of the Gaza Strip. For example, in 2008 it won 25 seats compared to 19 seats for the Islamic Bloc; in 2009 it won 24 seats compared to 22 for the Islamic Bloc; in 2010 and 2011 it won 31 seats and 29 seats respectively while the Islamic Bloc boycotted the student elections; in 2012 it won 26 seats compared to 19 seats for the Islamic Bloc; in 2013 and 2014 it won 23 seats compared to 20 seats for the Islamic Bloc.¹ During the two years that the Islamic Bloc boycotted the elections, the student turnout fell from 85% in 2009 to 58% and 50% respectively before rising again to 75% in 2012. Most of the votes that used to go to the Islamic Bloc abstained, resulting in lowering the number of votes required per seat from 117 in 2009 to 71 in the 2010 elections.²

The results of the Birzeit University student elections have opened the debate about the reasons behind Fatah's loss despite the group's greater popularity in the West Bank compared to that of Hamas as indicated by the most recent public opinion polls.³ How can Fatah's loss by such a large margin be explained despite having such a great electoral base?

Explaining Fatah's loss and Hamas' victory

The loss of al Shabiba and the victory of the Islamic Bloc can be attributed to a number of reasons, the most prominent of which are the following five:

- 1) Mistakes and blunders made by the Palestinian Authority (PA) during 2021
- 2) Mistakes made by Fatah

¹ See article by Hani al Masri, "Birzeit Elections, a turning point or a passing moment",
<https://www.masarat.ps/article/5966>

² In 2009 al Shabiba received 2540 votes and in 2010 during the boycott by the Islamic Bloc it received 2200 only.

³ See the most recent polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research:
<https://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Poll-85-Arabic-press-release%2020Sep2022.pdf>

- 3) Internal problems within al Shabiba
- 4) Hamas remains attractive to the youth
- 5) Israel unintentionally helped Hamas

1. PA blunders and poor performance:

Over the past few years, the PA has taken a series of measures that have harmed the nature of the system of government that the Basic Law and another set of key laws had established in Palestine. Accountability and oversight over the work of the president and government have been abolished and the judiciary has been weakened and its independence threatened.⁴ The year before the Birzeit University elections witnessed several events that contributed to al Shabiba's loss including the postponement of the general elections (legislative and presidential) that were scheduled to be held in May and July 2021, the perceived PA mismanagement of the import of the coronavirus vaccines, and the killing of activist Nizar Banat during his arrest by the Palestinian security services. Public concern about corruption within the PA has been aggravated by the release of various reports including that of the Office of Financial and Administrative Control on the Ezz Waqf Fund and on Khalid Al-Hassan Hospital for Cancer Diseases.

There is considerable agreement among those interviewed for this *Brief*, among students, university professors, the public at large, or experts on the Palestinian political scene, that the PA's blunders and unpopular behavior were the main reasons for Fatah's loss. In-depth interviews with 14 Birzeit university students from different student political currents show that all of them agree that this has been the top most important factor shaping the outcome of the student elections: the students punished al Shabiba for the "crimes" of the PA.⁵ One Birzeit University student who voted for the Islamic bloc says that the main reason for the Bloc's popularity is the link made by the students between the PA's recent actions, such as the killing of Nizar Banat, and al Shabiba. Another student says that this shift in student attitudes did not occur in previous years because the magnitude of PA plunders in recent years has been unprecedented and the student awareness of these plunders has become much greater thanks to social media and the emergence of organized student groups, on WhatsApp and other platforms, that became much more active and effective compared to previous years. A new student at the university says that new students do not mainly look at the activities of the student blocs inside the university but rather look at the political situation in the country, and since the PA's behavior has worsened in recent years, student perception of the PA is becoming overwhelmingly negative. Another student says that the main reason for the victory of the Islamic bloc is the great urge among the students to send a message to the PA and Fatah by voting against al Shabiba despite the fact that many of those students come in fact from Fatah affiliated families.

These findings are confirmed by university professors who witnessed various election rounds during past years. Reflecting the views of many, one lecturer at Birzeit University, who studied her bachelor's and master's degrees at the same university, asserted that Hamas' victory was essentially a punishment for the PA and Fatah.

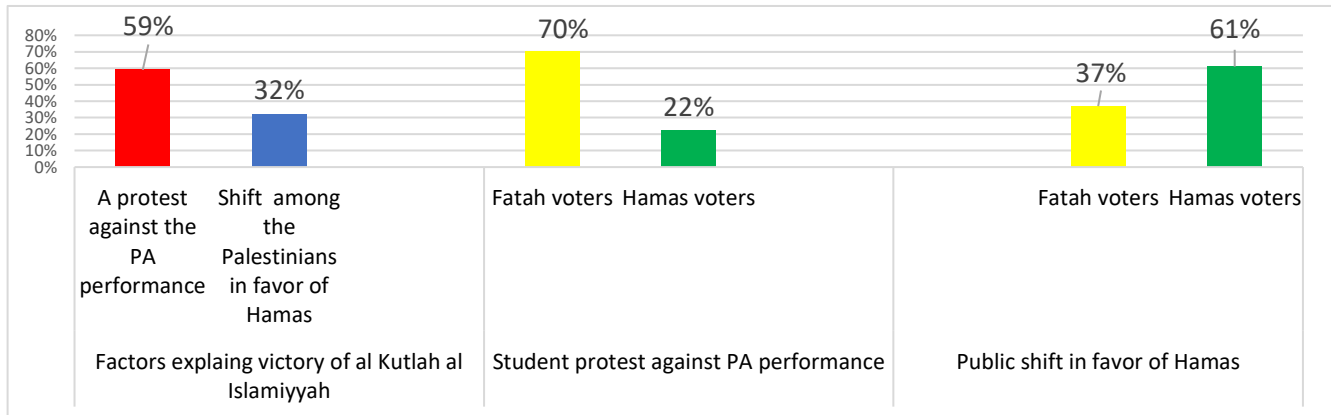
It is also the sentiment of the Palestinian public. The results of a public opinion poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research right after the Birzeit University elections showed that 59% believe that the reason for the victory of the Islamic Bloc is a protest by students against the performance of the PA, while 32% of the Palestinian public believe that the reason for the Islamic Bloc

⁴ See, Khalil Shikaki, "Can a Newly Elected Parliament Repair the Damage Done to the Palestinian Political System in its Absence?" *Critical Policy Brief*, PCPSR, January 2021: <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/831>

⁵ The 14-student interviews were conducted during the period 8-18 October 2022.

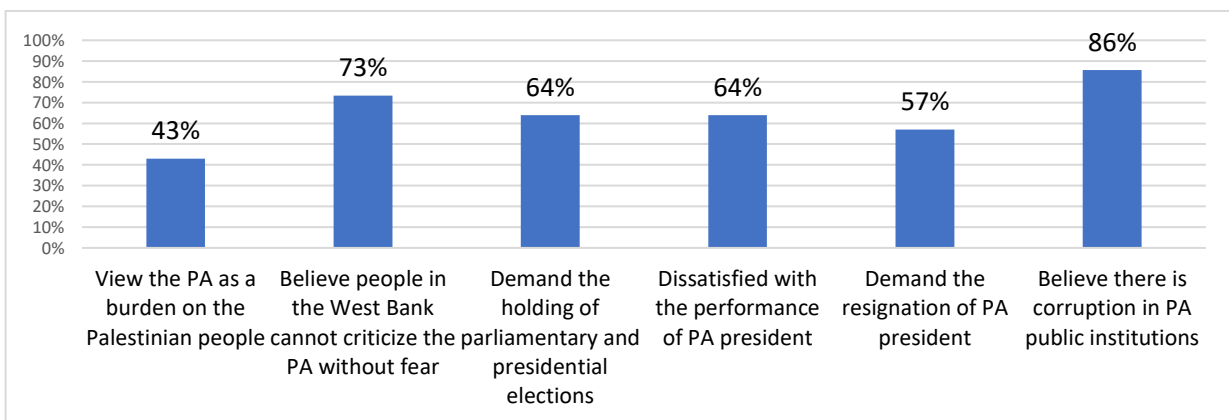
victory is a shift among the Palestinian people towards greater support for Hamas.⁶ But as can be seen in the following figure, while 70% of the likely Fatah voters think the vote for the Islamic Bloc was a punishment for the PA rather than a reward for Hamas, only 22% of likely Hamas voters think agree with that statement.

Figure (2): Reasons for the Islamic Bloc victory in Birzeit University student elections as expressed by the Palestinian public (PCPSR's [poll # 84](#), June 2022)



In this context, it is useful to consider the attitudes of Palestinian youth in general towards the PA. The results of the latest polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research conducted before the Birzeit elections indicate that the youths' perception of the PA performance is highly negative. This negative perception leaves its impact on Fatah as well thereby reducing public support for it. As Figure (3) below indicates, the majority of 86% of the youth believes in the existence of corruption in PA institution, 73% think people cannot criticize the PA without fear, 64% are dissatisfied with the performance of president Abbas, and 57% want the president to resign.

Figure (3): Attitudes of youth between the ages of 18-22 regarding selected issues related to the PA (PCPSR's [poll # 83](#), June 2022)



⁶ PCPSR poll #84, June 2022: [Public Opinion Poll No \(84\) | PCPSR](#)

2. Mistakes made by Fatah:

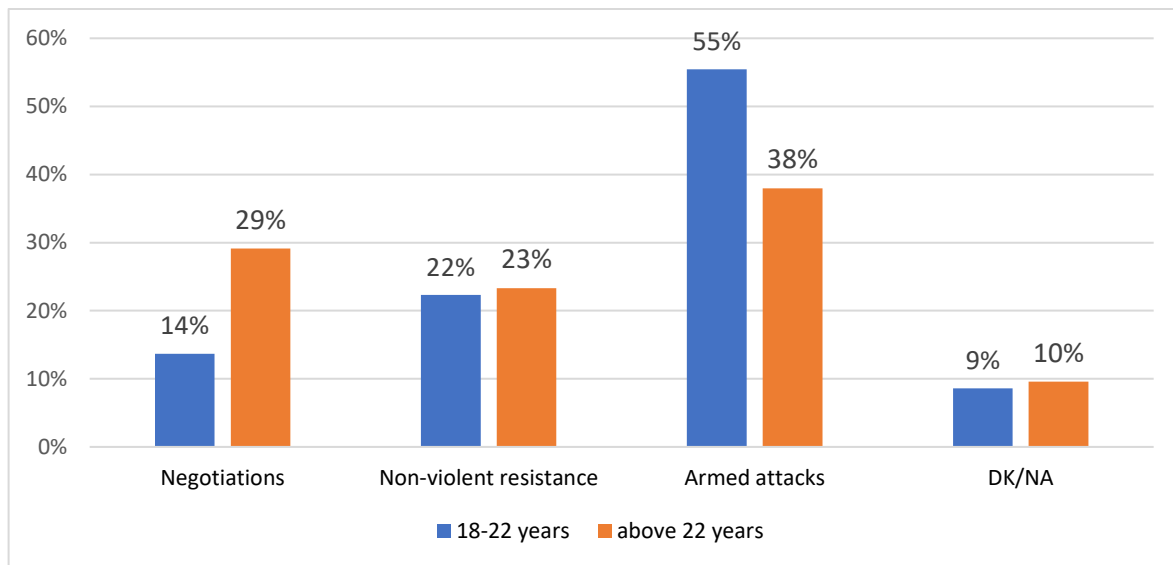
Fatah seems to lack a vision and strategy for how to deal with al Shabiba as a youth sector that represents its future. The movement seems to want to make its youth group a subordinate rather than a partner. It provides no guidelines for how the youth should relate to the Israeli occupation, a topic of the utmost importance to students and young people in general. To make things worse, Fatah lacks a clear vision on how to organize Palestinian society and deal with the day to day living conditions. Fatah's failure in allowing its youth movement to develop its own national vision denies al Shabiba the ability to take the initiative and press the national leadership in the direction most favored by Palestinian youth.⁷

On top of that Fatah finds itself unable to distinguish itself from the PA, to the contrary, it provides full support to PA policies including those rejected by the overwhelming majority of the public. The example most cited by students and others is the manner in which Fatah dealt with the killing of Nizar Banat. Instead of distancing itself from the incident, Fatah mobilized its base and brought it to the streets to defend the PA in the face of public anger. This episode served as a dangerous precedent portraying Fatah as a party that assaults liberties and freedoms, rather than defending them, in total contradiction with Fatah's values enshrined in its literature. Worse yet, Fatah dismissed its own Shabiba coordinator at Birzeit University and the organizing body working with him because the group issued a statement condemning the killing of Banat and rejecting repression and restrictions of freedoms. One student said that shortly before the elections, the Islamic Bloc focused its campaign on this and similar incidents to demonstrate how al Shabiba was no longer representing the aspiration of the youth and that, to the contrary, it was being used by the PA as a local militia to crack down on non-violent protests by the Palestinian civilians. Hamas distributed photos showing how Birzeit students from al Shabiba were taking part in counter demonstrations defending with the PA and its security officers. Reaction by the students to these images were decidedly negative generating a great deal of resentment against their own colleagues at the university.

Above all, Fatah has over the past years lacked the "revolutionary" discourse adopted by the movement's political rival, Hamas. Given the fact that Fatah has gained most of its popular base in the sixties and seventies of the last century as a result of its "revolutionary" discourse and action adopted and practiced by the movement in that past period. University students are considered to be among the most radical age groups in Palestinian society, one that most likely finds itself highly attracted to the "revolutionary" discourse that Fatah has now abandoned. PCPSR public opinion polls have shown, as indicated in the Figure (4) below, that a majority of 55% of the youth believe that armed struggle is the best means to achieve Palestinian goals of ending the occupation and establishing an independent state compared to only 14% of the youth who believe that negotiations are the best means. This of course is not the position adopted by the PA or the Fatah movement.

⁷ An interview with Ibrahim Khraishah, former member of Fatah's Revolutionary Council and a former head of Birzeit Student Council. The interview was conducted on 11 September 2022.

Figure (4): The most effective means of ending the Israeli occupation according to Palestinian youth between the ages of 18-22 vs. older Palestinians (PCPSR's [poll # 84](#), June 2022)



3. Al Shabiba's internal problems:

Al Shabiba made its own significant contributions to its defeat. The following problems characterized the group's behavior at Birzeit University in the months and years before the latest elections and doomed its chances of winning:

- ✓ *Al Shabiba accepted to subordinate itself to the Fatah movement without any attempt to differentiate its position from that of the larger political movement:* Al Shabiba at Birzeit University lost the leadership role when it acceded to interferences from Fatah in its internal affairs, for example by allowing it to appoint, rather than elect, the group's coordinator and organizational body, thus subordinating itself to that of the larger movement.⁸ One Birzeit University student, who voted for the Islamic Bloc, says that on top of existing links between al Shabiba and the PA, the group was in no position to declare any dissenting views because it was fully controlled by its mother organization, Fatah. In toeing the line, al Shabiba, therefore, had no choice but to throw its full weight behind the PA plunders, regardless of how distasteful and unpopular they were. With this in mind, students had no choice but to vote for its rival, the Islamic Bloc.⁹
- ✓ *The absence of Al Shabiba organized activities and mobilization campaigns among the students compared to that of Hamas:* One student says in her explanation of the advantage the Islamic Bloc had that while al Shabiba's student activities were ad hoc and lacked consistency, the Islamic Bloc was much more organized and active in organizing student activities.
- ✓ *Visible internal disagreements existed within al Shabiba's own ranks and were based on geographical and regional bases:* Conflicts within the ranks of al Shabiba were perceived by other students as evidence of discrimination practiced by the group against certain groups and geographic areas rather than disagreements based on an open exchange of ideas and genuine

⁸ Interview with Ibrahim Khraishah.

⁹ Interview with student on 12 October 2022.

disagreements over policies. These perceptions turned students off and led them to stay away from the group.¹⁰

The failure of al Shabiba to act as a professional student union: Students expect their syndicate or union to aggregate their interests and protect them in negotiations with the university administration. Some students felt that, on occasions, al Shabiba failed to do that. They stressed that to be successful al Shabiba needed to pay greater attention to the needs of the students, as students, by helping to create an environment conducive to learning and scholarship. Indeed, many say the Student Pole, a rival, was the most successful in promoting pro student programs.¹¹

- ✓ *The absence of democratic practices within al Shabiba at Birzeit University:* As indicated earlier, the leadership of al Shabiba before the latest student elections was appointed by the Fatah leadership. While some limited forms of mini elections continued to be seen in its activities, the group has stopped its previous practice in which its entire leadership was elected by a general conference of all members.¹² This lack of democratic practices has generated disappointment among the students, including among its own ranks, leading to indifference regarding the outcome of the student elections. Al Shabiba could not sell itself to the students as a democratic movement when it shunned democratic practices within its own ranks. It is worth noting that the election defeat forced Fatah to reevaluate its policy and to allow al Shabiba to hold its own elections; indeed, a new coordinator was elected but was soon arrested by the Israelis.

4. Hamas remains attractive:

Hamas has controlled the Gaza Strip since June 2007, and its control has contributed to a decline in its popularity for the following 8 years, until 2015, except for short periods during its armed confrontations with Israel. Despite the fact that Hamas does not offer a better model of governance than Fatah, it did manage to regain popularity as a result of a series of measures adopted by the PA and referred to earlier. Hamas prevents any democratic life in the Gaza Strip, where no local elections have been held, as has been done more than once in the West Bank. It does not allow student elections to be held in Palestinian universities located in the Gaza Strip. It interferes in trade union elections, allowing some and preventing others. The repression by the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip of the *Bedna Neish* (We Want to Live) movement back in 2019 contributed to the loss of the Islamic Bloc's popularity at Birzeit University. In that year, al Shabiba won more student votes than the Islamic Bloc.¹³

However, Hamas has been able to capitalize on its rhetoric regarding the resistance to occupation and the fact that it did engage in repeated armed confrontations with the Israeli army at a time when the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, championed by the PA, was dead and buried. The May 2021 war between Israel and Hamas led to a major spike in that movement's popularity that benefited its student

¹⁰ Interview with Ibrahim Khraishah. One student said that chaos, disagreements and conflicts in al Shabiba's ranks were widespread and visible to all to see while student members of the Islamic Bloc expressed courtesy and respect to each other in a show of solidarity and discipline.

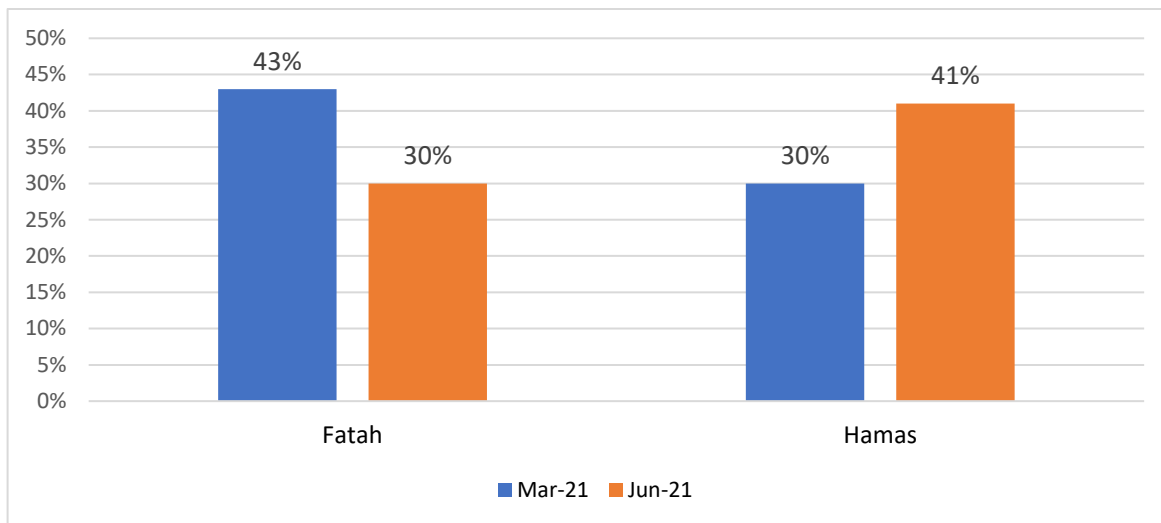
¹¹ In a dialogue with students on 13 August 2022, six out of ten students testified that the Student Pole (the left) was the most effective in presenting the students with a student-friendly platform but that the students did not vote for it because they did not consider it a viable rival to al Shabiba or the Islamic Bloc.

¹² Interview with Ibrahim Khraishah.

¹³ Interview with Hasan Farraj, a member of Fatah's Revolutionary Council and the person in charge of al Shabiba in the movement, on 17 August 2022.

group, the Islamic Bloc. Within three months, Hamas managed to increase its popularity by one third as can be seen in the following figure.¹⁴

Figure (5): Voting intentions before and after the May 2021 war between Hamas and Israel (PCPSR's polls # 79, March 2021 and # 80, June 2021)



5. How Israel, inadvertently, helps Hamas:

Days before the elections, the Israeli occupation forces carried out a series of arrests against a number of activists and candidates of the Islamic Bloc at the university. Hassan Farraj, a member of Fatah's Revolutionary Council and the person in charge of al Shabiba in the movement, believes that this interference by the occupation helps to increase the level of sympathy for the students of the Islamic Bloc and thus impacts the electoral preferences of the students. Farraj adds that these arrests create sympathy for those arrested by the occupation.¹⁵ This was supported by a number of students, those who voted for al Shabiba and those who voted for the Islamic Bloc, who asserted that the arrests by the Israeli army contributes to increasing the popularity of the detainees and their student faction.

Recommendations:

The loss of al Shabiba and the victory of the Islamic Bloc can be attributed to a number of reasons, the most prominent of which is the mistakes and blunders made by the PA during 2021. Fatah and al Shabiba made their own mistakes as well; and Hamas was able to capitalize on its increased popularity in the aftermath of its May 2021 war with Israel.

The study concludes with a set of recommendations for the Palestinian Authority, Fatah, Hamas, and al Shabibah at Birzeit University.

¹⁴ Compare the findings of PCPSR's poll #79, in March 2021 ([Press Release: Public Opinion Poll No \(79\) | PCPSR](#)) with that of PCPSR's poll #80, in June 2021, one month after the war with Israel: [Public Opinion Poll No \(80\) | PCPSR](#)

¹⁵ The interview with Mr. Farraj took place in Ramallah on 17 August 2022.

To the PA:

- A policy of no-interference in student elections, as well as other student matters, especially by the Palestinian security services, is recommended. Such interference, when it occurs, reflects negatively on the results in light of the students' rejection of this PA behavior.
- It is recommended that the PA maintain the democratic process in the rest of the universities and unions and encourage the holding of elections in locations where they are not held.

To Fatah:

- The most important recommendation to Fatah is similar to the one made to the PA: stop the interference in the affairs of al Shabiba; give your youth the necessary space to make their own decisions and to act as a trade union serving the interests of its student base.
- Fatah should also reformulate its national program to be in sync with the national sentiments. For Fatah youth to win, they need to be seen as part of a leading movement engaged in the national struggle for liberty and freedom.
- Similarly, Fatah needs to be seen by the students as a movement in tune with the pulse of the public on local matters even if that means having distinctly different views than those of the PA.
- In particular, Fatah needs to reestablish its democratic credentials by holding its General Congress and electing its leadership in elections that are free of fear and intimidation with full representation to all sectors of its base.

To Hamas:

- The single most important recommendation to Hamas is to allow elections to be held regularly in local bodies, universities, trade unions, civil associations, etc., and allow more freedoms to dissenting activities and protests, and enable people to elect their representatives in their local councils. It is inconceivable that Hamas would pay tribute to its victories in West Bank universities while preventing elections and restricting freedoms in the Gaza Strip.

To the Shabiba:

- The single most important recommendation to al Shabiba is to move forward with strengthening its internal democratic practices and to hold internal elections for its bodies, as happened recently after the Birzeit University loss where its youth leadership was elected by the students.
- It should combat all negative phenomena within its ranks, such as regionalism and factionalism that lead to apathy, the dispersal of efforts, and the dispersal of votes.
- It should not embrace or defend unpopular PA policies as its own; as a youth movement it should strive to encourage critical thinking and open discussion of unpopular PA measures.

Birzeit Student Elections: Why Hamas Won and Fatah Lost

November 2022

This brief is the fourth in PSR series of Critical Policy Briefs for 2022. These briefs address important domestic and foreign policy-oriented issues confronting Palestinian society today.

The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR)

PSR is an independent nonprofit institution and think tank of policy analysis and academic research. It was founded in 2000 with the goal of advancing scholarship and knowledge on immediate issues of concern to Palestinians in three areas: domestic politics and government, strategic analysis and foreign policy, and public opinion polls and survey research. PSR conducts policy analysis and empirical surveys and public opinion research and organizes task forces, study groups, meetings and conferences. Its work focuses on current public policy issues with a special reliance on empirical evidence as a tool to advance scholarship and understanding.

PSR is dedicated to promoting objective and nonpartisan research and analysis and to encouraging a better understanding of Palestinian domestic and international environment in an atmosphere of free debate and exchange of ideas. PSR is registered as a nonprofit institution in the Palestinian Ministry of Justice.

The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR)

P. O. Box 76, Ramallah, Palestine

Tel: +970-2-2964933

Fax: +970-2-2964934

pcpsr@pcpsr.org

www.pcpsr.org