Palestinian Authority

The Palestinian Authority (PA) is the body which governs and administers Palestinian areas in the West Bank. It was established as a result of the 1993 Oslo Agreement between Israel and the PLO, and came into being in 1994, overseeing Palestinian population centers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, since the 2007 Hamas takeover of Gaza, the PA no longer governs the Gaza Strip. The PA President effectively serves as the representative of the Palestinian people in the international community, and represents the Palestinians in negotiations with Israel.

Long-time PLO chairman and Fatah leader Yasser Arafat was the first President of the Palestinian Authority, until his death in 2004. He was succeeded by Mahmoud Abbas, another long-time PLO and Fatah official who is widely known by his nom de guerre, Abu Mazen.

According to the Oslo Accords, the PA was intended to be an interim structure that would be succeeded by an independent, democratically elected Palestinian government following a final peace agreement with Israel.

In January 2005, Abbas was elected to a four-year term as Palestinian president, which was due to expire in 2009. However, subsequent elections were repeatedly delayed over the years, and Abbas remains in power.

Elections were also held in January 2006 for the Palestinian Legislative Council, which saw a surprise victory by Hamas, which won 74 seats of the 132 seats, with Fatah winning just 45. The outcome resulted in significant tensions between
Hamas and the Fatah-controlled PA, which culminated in the violent takeover of Gaza by Hamas from Fatah in June 2007.

Hamas and the Palestinian Authority remain bitter rivals. There have been efforts since 2007 to reconcile the two groups, but aside from a series of dramatic announcements, such reconciliation agreements have had little impact and have been of short duration.

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) work closely with PA security forces on maintaining stability and combating terrorism in certain West Bank cities. At times, the IDF has credited the PA with preventing violence against Israeli targets, and believes that absent a strong PA, terror groups like Hamas could fill the vacuum in the West Bank. Yet, the PA is also often criticized for not preparing the Palestinian public for the concessions that will be required in a peace agreement with Israel and for encouraging or tolerating the spreading of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic propaganda, and the veneration of terrorists.