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Palestinians Divided Over Future Under Hamas

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Asked a routine question about the 2006 Palestinian elections yesterday, Khaled abu Ahmed slipped off his sandal and used it to beat his head several times to demonstrate his remorse for voting Hamas. "We wanted change and reform," he said. "We thought they would bring prosperity. We thought they were people who knew God. But, believe me, they don't know God."

He was standing outside his white goods shop in al Khawaja street, where the first intifada famously began 20 years ago and where the yellow flags of Fatah have recently begun to flutter obtrusively above many of the houses. Before the elections and the subsequent international boycott, he said, he used to make between £1,200 and £1,400 a month. Now, he said, thanks to closures and two years of only sporadic payments to public employees, he is lucky to make £25. "People have no money to buy anything," he said, pointing to the street's many shuttered shops. "We have been occupied by the Turks, the British, and the Egyptians," he added, his voice rising rapidly. "We were occupied by Fatah and now we are occupied by Hamas. And the best of these occupations was by the Jews."

Mr Abu Ahmed, an angry man but as ardently nationalist as the next Palestinian, was being deliberately provocative of course. And it worked.

Hearing him, a passing bearded cyclist, Hamas supporter Omar Hamad, 37, stopped in his tracks and shouted: "You are talking only for yourself, not for the Palestinian people."

Mr Hamad levelled the blame for Gaza's ever deepening economic crisis on the emergency Ramallah government of President Mahmoud Abbas for sanctioning its isolation. "We Palestinians did these closures ourselves," he said.

The incident demonstrated that polarisation between the factions-which cost the lives of another three Fatah militants on Tuesday night in Gaza City when their car exploded apparently on the way to attack a Hamas post-is spreading to their civilian supporters. A telephone poll yesterday by Near East Consulting said that most Gazans oppose rocket attacks on Israel, do not regard the de facto Hamas government as legitimate, and support a peace agreement with Israel-the still distant goal of yet another meeting between Mr Abbas and the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Jerusalem yesterday.

And while the poll - accurate or not - will no doubt encourage Israel and the US in their belief that the continued economic misery of Gaza will eventually turn it against Hamas, there is no obvious mechanism for change as long as Hamas opposes the fresh elections Mr Abbas threatens from time to time.

But at least some Hamas supporters appear to be having doubts. After years of unemployment, Jabalya lawyer Farid Ahmed, 30 now has a job in one of Hamas's military "courts." And he is adamant that Fatah were "thieves" and the economic blockade is a "conspiracy" between Israel and the EU. "The positive is that the people have security; the negative is that the borders are closed. " How would he vote in another election? "I don't know," he says thoughtfully.

* Israeli and Palestinian leaders took a first small step yesterday toward a long elusive peace deal, asking aides to write down the principles that will guide future negotiations. The joint declaration will be the centrepiece of the U.S.-hosted Mideast conference in November, which is to relaunch peace talks that collapsed in January 2001.

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[3] http://www.americantaskforce.org/israeli_elections

[4] http://www.americantaskforce.org/palestinian_elections