On May 18, 2022, the annual elections for the Birzeit University Student Union were held. In the elections, the Hamas faction won 28 out of 51 seats. Its rival, the Fatah faction, won only 18 seats. This is not the first time that Hamas has won a majority of seats in the Birzeit Student Union elections. However, this is the first time it has won by a landslide (which seems to have surprised it). The election results received widespread media coverage and aroused considerable public interest.

Hamas’s victory in the midst of escalation in the security situation and tension with Israel is an indication of the widespread support for the movement among the Palestinian public and among the younger generation in particular. Spokesmen described the victory as "historic" and it served as an opportunity for a significant show of power by Hamas throughout the campus. Celebrating Palestinians emphasized that the victory reflects the growing influence of Hamas in Judea and Samaria and the Palestinian public’s dissatisfaction with the deficient functioning of the PA, which is headed by Fatah. In light of the defeat, Fatah has begun to do some soul-searching. Sources in the PA expressed concern over the erosion of Fatah’s status. Some blamed the PA and Mahmoud Abbas for the defeat.

The elections at the universities, in which the university administration allows the representatives of the organizations to compete on an equal footing, is a tool that makes it possible to examine the true power of the organizations among the younger generation in Judea and Samaria. Hamas’s landslide victory is further evidence of the establishment of Hamas’s status and the decline in Fatah’s popularity among young people. The results of the vote may also stem from the younger generation’s anger over Fatah and the PA’s conduct vis-à-vis Israel, the security and economic coordination, human rights violations (the death of Nizar Banat), the violation of freedom of expression, and the corruption that has pervaded its institutions.

Hamas’s victory at Birzeit University, a leading university and a national symbol for the Palestinians, could also affect the election results at other universities and institutions in Judea and Samaria.
Judea and Samaria. It is also liable to encourage young people affiliated with Hamas to increase their presence and visibility in the public space and in clashes with Israeli security forces.

The Student Union elections

- According to official results presented at a press conference, the Hamas Islamic Bloc faction won 28 seats (5,068 votes), the Fatah faction won 18 seats (3,379 votes) and the PFLP student cell won five seats (888 votes). It was noted that the student cell of the People’s Party and the student cell of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine did not win a seat in the election. According to Dean of Students Dr. Iyad Tumar, who also chaired the Election Committee, 9,782 out of 12,521 students at the university voted, which means that the turnout was 78.1% (Birzeit University website, May 18, 2022).

- In an interview, Asid al-Qaddoumi, a representative of Hamas’s Islamic Bloc at the university, said that they had not expected such a landslide victory over Fatah. According to him, the victory in the election is proof of the Palestinian street's support for the "resistance" option and a rejection of the security coordination and the concessions to Israel (Al-Jazeera Net, May 19, 2022).
The victory represented an opportunity for social media users to list factors which, in their opinion, led to the failure of the Fatah movement. Factors mentioned included the assassination of Nizar Banat (a Palestinian human rights activist who visited the PA and was killed by its security forces on June 24, 2021), the suppression of demonstrations, the appointment of unfit people to key positions, excessive intervention by the security apparatus, government corruption, lawlessness in Jerusalem and the lack of a political horizon.

A correspondent for Al-Jazeera noted that Hamas’s landslide victory surprised the Palestinian street as well. He noted that elections are generally an indication of the mood in the Palestinian street and political inclinations in Palestinian society. According to Palestinian social media activists, the factors that contributed to Hamas’s success were its adherence to the idea of “resistance,” the increase in support that it has enjoyed since Operation Guardian of the Walls (May 2021) and the recent terrorist attacks on Israeli territory. Another reason for the victory mentioned by activists on social media was that voting for Hamas was in fact a punitive measure against Fatah, which represents the PA, which adheres to security coordination with Israel (Al-Jazeera Net, May 19, 2022).

On the other hand, commentator Abdul Ghani Salameh argued that the election results do not fully reflect the Palestinian mindset. In his opinion, the results cannot predict the results of the general elections in the PA, because the student public does not necessarily reflect Palestinian society as a whole. At the same time, he believes that the election results should be viewed objectively and lessons for the future should be learned from them (An-Najah website, May 23, 2022).

Hamas praised the election results, referring to it as a victory in the fateful battle against Israel (the “occupation”) in its attempt to disrupt democratic life and harm Hamas’s student...
According to Hamas, the victory is a tribute to the movement and to the Palestinian people, and emphasizes the popular support for the idea of "resistance" (the Lebanese Al-Mayadeen Channel, May 18, 2022).

According to Saleh al-Arouri, deputy head of Hamas's political bureau and the official in charge of Hamas's activity in Judea and Samaria, the democratically conducted elections in Birzeit proved their ability to hold transparent and fair elections expressing the will of the Palestinian people (QUDSN YouTube channel, May 18, 2022).

Saleh al-Arouri praising the victory in Birzeit (QUDSN YouTube Channel, May 18, 2022)

According to Fathi Hamad, a member of Hamas's political bureau, the victory, despite attempts at intimidation and detentions (on the eve of the election, Israel detained several Hamas activists from Birzeit), is proof of support for the "resistance" which is the only way to liberate Palestine and the holy places and to reject the approach of normalization and security coordination. He called on students at other universities to also vote for Hamas's representatives (Hamas website, May 18, 2022).

Fatah has begun to engage in soul-searching. Fatah sources blamed the PA and Mahmoud Abbas for the defeat. In light of the election results, Fatah’s secretary in Ramallah Muwaffaq Sahweil submitted his resignation. He also demanded the establishment of a commission of inquiry to investigate Fatah’s defeat in the election (Kull Yom website, May 19, 2022). Fatah’s regional secretaries in Judea and Samaria have decided to freeze activity at Fatah’s offices until the necessary organizational steps are taken (PRESSB website, May 22, 2022).
The Fatah office in Qalqilya is closed in protest over the Fatah list’s defeat in the elections (Shehab Twitter account, May 23, 2022)

- **According to Jibril Rajoub, secretary of Fatah’s Central Committee**, Fatah is paying the price for the PA’s mistakes. He noted that in the wake of the election results, the nature of the relationship between the PA and Fatah should be discussed and lessons should be learned. He also noted that the Fatah Central Committee would examine the issue and learn the lessons (Palestinian Television, May 19, 2022).

- **Former Fatah official Nasser al-Qudwa** (who was ousted from Fatah after running on an independent list) noted that the election results highlight the increase in support for Hamas in comparison with Fatah. According to him, the votes received by the Hamas list are punitive measures against the leadership of the Palestinian Authority, which caused the destruction of the situation in the Palestinian arena (Araby21, May 21, 2022). Al-Qudwa also criticized the conduct of the PA and its leaders, who caused defects among Fatah’s student cells and did not reorganize Fatah (QUDSN website, May 20, 2022).

- **Khalil Shahin, a Palestinian commentator and researcher**, cast doubts on Fatah’s seriousness when it comes to rethinking. According to him, Fatah fully understands that support for it has decreased, and this is the main reason behind the postponement of the general elections that were planned for 2021. Shahin added that Fatah is paying the price for its conduct and for the conduct of the PA’s leadership (Al-Jazeera Net, May 19, 2022).

- On the occasion of the victory, the Hamas student cell held a rally attended by hundreds of people waving Hamas flags and wearing green scarves and green clothes. The announcer on
the stage called out "Yahya Ayyash University, the university of shaheeds." In response to the victory parades, Fatah Spokesman Jamal Nazzal said the university administration should be ashamed of letting its campus be mocked and the university be turned into a place that allows ISIS-style military parades (Watan.net, May 20, 2022).

Yahya Ayyash, codenamed The Engineer, was a graduate of Birzeit University and one of the founders of Hamas’s military wing. He was responsible for many suicide bombing attacks. He was eliminated in a targeted killing in 1996.
Previous election campaigns

- This is not the first time that the Hamas faction has won a majority of seats, but this time it was a landslide victory. An analysis of a graph comparing the election results of Fatah and Hamas since 2015 reveals the following data (QUDSN Twitter account, May 19, 2022).

According to the attached graph, it can be seen that:

- In 2022, the Hamas list won 28 seats compared to the Fatah list, which won 18 seats.
- In 2021, no elections were held due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In 2020, the Fatah and Hamas lists won the same number of seats, 23 each.
- In 2019, the Hamas list won 24 seats, compared to the Fatah list, which won 23 seats.
- In 2018, the Hamas list won 25 seats, compared to the Fatah list, which won 22 seats.
- In 2017, the Hamas list won 25 seats, compared to the Fatah list, which won 21 seats.
- In 2016, the Hamas list won 26 seats, compared to the Fatah list, which won 19 seats.
- In 2015, the Fatah list won 23 seats, compared to the Hamas list, which won 20 seats.

Graph comparing the election results for 2015-2022 (QUDSN Twitter account, May 19, 2022)
The university is located in Birzeit, north of Ramallah. It was granted university status in 1976. It is one of the most prominent institutions of higher education in the PA. As such, it attracts outstanding students with a high level of political awareness, and first-rate lecturers, including foreign lecturers and Palestinian lecturers from the so-called Palestinian diaspora. Many of the university’s alumni hold key positions in the Palestinian leadership (such as PA Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh). However, its alumni also include terrorists such as Marwan Barghouti, one of Fatah’s leaders currently incarcerated in Israel, who headed the student union as a student, and Hamas operative Yahya Ayyash.

The University administration generally turns a blind eye to the activity of the student cells. However, in December 2019, the administration decided to prevent students from carrying out activity of a military nature within the student factions at the university. In accordance with this decision, the factions representing the PFLP and Hamas were prohibited from...
carrying out activity to mark the anniversary of the establishment of their organizations. According to University Vice President Ghassan al-Khatib, this is a decision that was made several years ago but has not been implemented in practice due to student opposition. The President of the University also noted that the University does not take action against the supporters of the "resistance" but its role is to talk about the issue and not to carry out military actions that Israel is liable to use to damage the University's image. According to Sameh Abu Awad, secretary of the University employees union, several entities have stopped funding the University due to the activity of the student union. In this context, he noted that France had not provided aid to the university for the past four years. In light of the University's decision, the student council announced an indefinite strike until the policy of restricting its freedom of action is terminated (Shehab Twitter account, December 18, 2019).

The Hamas student cell

> Since its establishment, Hamas has attached importance to activity among the student public in Judea and Samaria. This is part of its general perception, in the spirit of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, whereby activity in the area of dawa (religious-cultural indoctrination) constitutes a central element in shaping Hamas's public image and preserving its power. One of the most prominent bodies in this context is the Islamic Bloc (Al-Kutla al-Islamiya), Hamas's student cells, which operate at Palestinian institutions of higher education. The Islamic Bloc has been perceived as part of Hamas and as its epicenter since the movement's early days (1987). According to Hamas's documents, Hamas's Islamic activity at universities is one of the sources of power that enabled the movement's official establishment and rapid growth.
The activity of the Islamic Bloc at institutions of higher education consists primarily of taking over the student council. Victory in the elections for the student union guarantees Hamas control over the agenda of the student council and the university in general, enabling it to wield considerable influence on the student body and to receive funds from the university. In addition, the Hamas student cell serves as a tool for mobilizing public support in the struggle against the PA.

Hamas also sees the Islamic Bloc as an important lever for locating and recruiting students for its operational needs. This is, inter alia, for the simple reason that the human element at universities is perceived as high-caliber: these are educated young people, with leadership ability, considerable Islamic ideological, political and religious awareness, high motivation, and loyalty to the movement through their activity within the Islamic Bloc.
Appendix

Involvement of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University in terrorist activity, incitement, and promotion of terrorism

Examples of involvement in terrorist attacks

- On January 25, 2016, there was a stabbing attack in Beit Horon (near Road 443, which leads to Jerusalem). Two terrorists arrived at Beit Horon’s grocery store and stabbed a young woman to death. Upon entering the store, they were pushed outside by shoppers. They started to flee. Before fleeing, they managed to stab another woman. A security guard shot and killed them. Three improvised pipe charges that did not explode were found close to the store. They were thrown by the terrorists during their flight. The two terrorists who carried out the attack studied at Birzeit University, where they probably became acquainted with each other (Facebook page of Hussein Abu Ghosh, January 26, 2016).

Right: A civilian inside the Beit Horon grocery store pushing the two terrorists with a shopping cart, trying to prevent them from entering (security camera footage, YouTube, January 25, 2016). Left: The scene of the stabbing attack in Beit Horon (PalTimes, January 25, 2016)

- On July 27, 2016, a young Palestinian woman tried to attack the Kalandia vehicle checkpoint. She was lightly wounded by the security guards’ fire. A knife was found in her bag, as well as a scarf of the Birzeit Islamic Bloc. The investigation revealed that she was living in the Kalandia refugee camp and was a second-year student at Birzeit University (Facebook page of the Birzeit Islamic Bloc, July 26, 2016; Hamas - Nablus district’s Facebook page, July 30, 2016).
Birzeit Islamic Bloc activists were also involved in terrorist attacks during the Second Intifada. For example, Birzeit University students were involved in the Sbarro Restaurant attack in Jerusalem (August 9, 2001). Following this attack and another one at the French Hill junction, six Hamas operatives were detained due to their involvement. Noteworthy among the detainees was Mohammad Abu Libda, a prominent member of the Birzeit Islamic Bloc (he was held in prison for about two years, was released on July 17, 2003, and returned to study at the university).

In 2002, the Israeli security services exposed a Hamas operative network led by Mahmoud Sharitat, who led the Birzeit Islamic Bloc. Among other things, the network was responsible for an attempted attack at Café Tayelet on the Tel Aviv promenade (October 11, 2002) and the suicide bombing attack on bus no. 4 in Tel Aviv (on September 19, 2002), in which six passengers were killed and 71 were wounded.

Birzeit Islamic Bloc activists arrested on suspicion of involvement in terrorism

On July 14, 2021, the Israeli security forces detained several dozen activists of the Hamas cell in the Birzeit University student union. The activists were detained in Turmus Ayya, north of Ramallah, after arriving for a visit at the home of terrorist Montaser Shalabi, which was demolished by the Israeli security forces. According to the Israeli security forces, some of the detainees engaged directly in terrorist activity which included transferring funds, incitement, and organizing Hamas’s activity in Judea and Samaria. The detainees were taken in for questioning (IDF Spokesperson’s office, July 14, 2021).

During a series of arrests carried out by the Israeli security forces in March 2020, they exposed and arrested members of a network affiliated with Hamas. The network members
planned to carry out attacks in Jerusalem and against the Israeli security forces in Ramallah. Three Palestinians were detained, one of them having an Israeli ID card. The three met during their studies at Birzeit University, where they were active in the Hamas student cell (Kutla) (Israel Security Agency, April 22, 2020).

According to indictments filed against two young Palestinians, activists of the Hamas cell at Birzeit University, in 2015, operatives of the Hamas military wing in the Gaza Strip set up a clandestine cell of the military wing operatives from Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip, whose purpose was to recruit terrorist operatives in Judea, Samaria, and inside Israel to carry out attacks. A special effort was made among Palestinian students studying engineering and technology. This attempt was exposed in the wake of the arrest of the two young Palestinians. Their questioning revealed that they had been recruited by Hamas’s military wing in the Gaza Strip through Facebook. As part of their recruitment, they underwent various types of military training, assisted in the transfer of funds earmarked for terrorist actions, and were also instructed to carry out a terrorist attack. The attack was thwarted due to their arrest (Israel Security Agency, October 3, 2018).

On March 7, 2018, Israeli security forces arrested Omar al-Kiswani, a resident of Beit Iksa (northwest of Jerusalem), who was chairman of the student union and head of the Bloc cell at Birzeit University. He was arrested on suspicion of involvement in terrorist activity. His arrest, made on campus, triggered a series of condemnations on the part of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian organizations, calling for international intervention. His investigation revealed that he had contacted Yassin Rabi’, a Hamas operative in the Gaza Strip, and also Hamas operatives in Turkey from whom he received funds intended to promote Hamas’s activity at the university. Kiswani received the sum of €150,000. The funds, which were hidden in various sites around Judea and Samaria, were used to promote Hamas activity (Israeli newspapers, May 3, 2018).
Examples of promoting attacks and glorifying their perpetrators

- The Hamas cell at Birzeit University organized a visit to the home of terrorist Montaser Shalabi, who carried out a shooting attack in Tapuach Junction, in which a young Israeli was killed and two others were wounded. Before the visit, Hamas published an official pamphlet calling on students to take part in a visit to “the family of the hero who carried out the heroic Za’tara [Tapuach junction] action.” The pamphlet also noted that “your presence is a national duty” (Facebook page of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University, July 12, 2021).

- On July 14, 2021, a student delegation arrived in Turmus Ayya. They had their picture taken near the terrorist’s demolished house, waved Hamas flags, and carried a picture of Montaser Shalabi with the logo of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University (Facebook page of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University, July 15, 2021).

- On October 9, 2016, there was a vehicular and shooting attack at Ammunition Hill in Jerusalem, in which two Israelis were killed and five others were wounded. The Israeli security forces shot and killed the perpetrator (Jerusalem Police Spokesperson’s office; ZAKA Search and Rescue, October 9, 2016). The Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University issued a poster in his memory.
On July 11, 2016, the Hamas-affiliated Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University posted the following on its Facebook page: “Bring back the days of blast, blow up the buses … Bring back the days of blast, humiliate the IDF soldiers.” The post was accompanied by a video posted on the YouTube channel of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, entitled “Song of the Blood of the Liberated.” The video shows a masked Palestinian watching videos and photos of terrorist attacks (some real and others staged), clashes on Temple Mount and in Judea and Samaria, and bodies of terrorists from the scenes of the attacks. In the video, the masked Palestinian is shown going to carry out a stabbing attack, after watching those videos and having been inspired by them (Facebook page of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University, July 11, 2016; YouTube channel of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, June 25, 2016).
Selected photos from the video

Poster issued by the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University following a shooting attack in which a couple was murdered (October 1, 2015) near Itamar. The poster praises the operatives who perpetrated the shooting: “Blessed be your hands, our resistance fighters” (Facebook page of Hamas’s Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University, October 1, 2015)

Rallies and demonstrations

- On December 18, 2019, despite the ban by the university’s administration, the students commemorated the Hamas establishment day with a parade and a rally, where masked participants could be seen and flags of the Hamas military wing were waved. The events took place after the university’s administration decided to evacuate the university and suspend studies on that day (Facebook page of the Birzeit University, December 16, 2019).
In December 2018, Hamas’s Islamic Bloc held a rally under the slogan “Resistance creates victory.” Before the rally, the Islamic Bloc held a procession around the campus, waved the movement’s flags, and chanted slogans in favor of the “resistance.” Hamas’s senior operative Hassan Yusuf spoke at the rally, saying that Hamas is ready to continue on the path of “resistance” and confront the “occupation” until the Palestinians realize their goals and achieve their freedom (Hamas’s website, December 12, 2018).

On December 16, 2015, the Islamic Bloc conducted activities to commemorate the 28th anniversary of the establishment of the Hamas movement. The operatives organized a “military parade,” during which they marched on campus with their faces masked, wearing uniforms, carrying rifles, and waving Hamas flags. They later put on a brief performance simulating the killing and capture of Israeli soldiers. A speech by Khaled Mash’al, greeting the activists of the Islamic Bloc at the university, was played in one of the auditoriums (Facebook page of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University, December 16, 2015).
Right: Military parade conducted by activists of the Islamic Bloc. Left: A brief performance put on by the activists, in which they kill an IDF soldier and capture another (Facebook page of the Islamic Bloc at the Birzeit University, December 16, 2015)

- On October 28, 2015, an exhibition dedicated to the wave of terrorism at that time opened at Birzeit University. Organized by Islamic Bloc activists, it presented installations inciting against Israel and calling for the continuation of resistance, as well as installations glorifying the terrorists who carried out the attacks in the current wave of terrorism (Facebook page of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University, October 28, 2015).

Right: Poster presented in the exhibition, with the text, “I’m a student at Birzeit and I have the option of resistance.” The students signed the poster to express their agreement. Left: Israeli flag spread on the floor at the entrance to the exhibition so that visitors can step on it (Facebook page of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University, October 28, 2015).

- On September 17, 2014, the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University organized a rally to mark Hamas’s victory in Operation Protective Edge. During the rally, Islamic Bloc students marched on campus with their faces masked, wearing shirts of Hamas’s military wing. The demonstrators waved Hamas flags and posters. After the march, the students held a rally in one of the university’s halls, where weapons used in the operation, such as the new sniper’s
rifle and the R-160 rocket, were displayed (Facebook page of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University, September 17, 2014).

Right: Members of the Islamic Bloc waving Hamas flags and a sign with the logo of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. Left: The rally, presenting a model of a sniper’s rifle and an R-160 rocket fired by Hamas during Operation Protective Edge (Facebook page of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University, September 17, 2014)

On June 4, 2014, students at Birzeit University held a procession of solidarity with the Palestinian prisoners who were on a hunger strike in Israeli prisons. The procession escalated into clashes with the Israeli security forces. The demonstrators sabotaged the Ofer Prison gate. According to Palestinian media reports, five Palestinians were wounded during the clashes (Palestine al-Aan; WAFA, June 4, 2014).

Birzeit University students confronting Israeli security forces in front of Ofer Prison (WAFA, June 4, 2014)