

RESEARCH NOTES

THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY



Palestinian Succession

AN OVERVIEW OF INSTITUTIONAL TURMOIL

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The question of Palestinian succession has persisted for some time, fueled by Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas's repeated threats of resignation, his advanced age, and the legal expiration of his presidential term in 2009. Recently, a number of measures targeting leading Palestinian political figures and institutions as well as reports pertaining to Abbas's health have added urgency to the succession question.

This question, meanwhile, has gained currency amid a continuing Palestinian political crisis. The project of establishing a state has stalled with the stagnation of the Middle East peace process and momentous regional developments that have relegated the Palestinian issue to secondary status. Since 2007, the Palestinian polity has been split politically and geographically between the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA), which governs the West Bank, and Hamas, which rules over the Gaza Strip. All efforts aimed at achieving national reconciliation have failed. In the meantime, recent polls show that Palestinians do not trust any of their political leaders, parties, or institutions.¹

Much of the debate about succession has focused on the PA because it governs Palestinians in the West Bank—and, at least *de jure*, those in the Gaza Strip—and serves as the institutional address used by the international community. Yet

Abbas, like his predecessor, Yasser Arafat, presides over three related yet distinct Palestinian institutions: the PA, the Fatah movement, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Additionally, like Arafat before him, he holds the title of president of the State of Palestine, which—while so far merely symbolic—has assumed greater prominence since Palestine's 2012 admission as a nonmember observer state to the United Nations.

In the fog surrounding succession, one thing is certain: the orderly constitutional mechanism set forth in the PA's 2003 Basic Law, whereby an unexpectedly vacated presidency would be filled by the Palestinian Legislative Council speaker for sixty days followed by elections, will not be implemented. Instead, the successor will almost certainly be chosen by Fatah and need to be confirmed by the PLO. However, Fatah is beset by severe political dysfunction and the PLO's credibility has declined in recent years.

While both Arafat and Abbas assumed uncontested leadership of these institutions by virtue of being in the founding generation of Palestinian politics, few if any of the current contenders have the obvious credentials to smoothly succeed Abbas. The complexities presented by current Palestinian politics and the aforementioned institutional overlap have made succession an uncertain and potentially volatile process.

Much of the recent discussion about Palestinian succession has focused on identifying who might be next in line for leadership. While this is important, attention needs to be paid to the institutional framework in which succession takes place in order to stave off a destabilizing transition.

Fatah: Core of Palestinian Leadership

The next leader of the PLO and PA will almost certainly come from within the leading ranks of the Fatah movement, making Fatah succession a determining factor in the overall question of Palestinian succession.

Established in the late 1950s and formally launched in 1965, Fatah has dominated the PLO and the wider Palestinian political scene since Arafat's assumption of the PLO chairmanship in 1969 and the PA presidency upon its formation in 1994. While the Islamist Hamas movement won the PA's 2006 legislative elections, Fatah continued to control the PA's bureaucracy and security services. In 2007, Hamas violently wrested control of the Gaza Strip from the Fatah-dominated PA, but the latter remains the Palestinian address for international and most regional actors.

The Fatah Central Committee is the movement's highest decisionmaking body, followed in significance by the Revolutionary Council. Both are elected in Fatah general conferences,² the most recent of which was held in 2009.³

Besides Fatah's formal lines of authority, PA security chiefs—through their access to arms and resources and through presiding over large security organizations with personnel drawn primarily from Fatah ranks—also enjoy significant influence over the movement.⁴ Some of the most influential members of the current Central Committee are past heads of PA security agencies.

Given his role as Fatah founder, Arafat served as the group's natural leader until his death in 2004. In his later years, challenges emerged within the movement, particularly from a younger generation seeking greater influence—a group still often referred to as the “young guard,” although many of its members are now in their fifties. Yet Arafat, as with previous Fatah crises during his leadership, used a combination of

political skill, personal charisma, and stature to avert escalation and maintain power while largely preserving the movement's cohesion.

After Arafat's death, Abbas followed a relatively smooth path to the Fatah leadership. Although he had not been a major figure in the movement's early stages, he had risen since the 1980s to leadership positions and was one of a handful of its surviving founding members. An architect and signatory of the Oslo Accords, he has consistently opposed the use of violence throughout the PA's existence. In addition, he distinguished himself as one of an even smaller group from his generation who combined their status as founders with a significant local power base and international connections. While he was not the only potential leader, at the moment of succession he was the best positioned among a finite and easily identifiable group. Because Fatah was then largely intact, the transition was widely accepted by the movement's various elements.

A Movement in Crisis

The picture today is very different. In many senses, Fatah is a movement fractured and in crisis at the leadership and activist levels.

In his bid to consolidate his power, Abbas has acted against Palestinian leaders, including those in Fatah, to prevent the emergence of threats to his authority.⁵ As a result, no member of the Central Committee has managed to accumulate enough internal and external assets to distinguish himself from his competitors. Relations between members of the committee are highly competitive, with very fluid, short-lived alliances, in part because these alliances are based on highly personalized power politics rather than deep-seated and therefore stable ideological considerations. This has created a stalemate among committee members, whereby one of the few possible sources of unity is the threat of a fellow member being elevated above the rest. This situation has created a spoiler dynamic; petty dealmaking and sabotage have paralyzed the Fatah leadership, recently leading Jibril Rajoub and Tawfiq al-Tirawi, two powerful committee members and former West Bank security chiefs, to voice dissatisfaction with Abbas's leadership style.

In addition to its internal dysfunction, the current Central Committee excludes significant Fatah constituencies, including senior members of the “old guard,” whose relations with Abbas have been tense. It also lacks any meaningful representation from the “young guard.” The very elections that produced the current Central Committee during Fatah’s 2009 Sixth General Conference were marred by accusations of irregularities.⁶

Committee members whose relations with Abbas have soured since 2009 have been targeted and marginalized. A noteworthy case is former Gaza security chief Mohammad Dahlan, who has a long and complicated relationship with Abbas. The two men’s connection was tense throughout the 1990s, but they cooperated during Abbas’s short-lived premiership in 2003 and in the early years of Abbas’s presidency. In 2011, however, tensions with Abbas led to the expulsion from Fatah of Dahlan, along with some of his senior supporters.⁷ Owing to the former security chief’s adversarial relations with the Fatah old guard and competitors from the West Bank, his expulsion was opposed by only one Central Committee member, and on procedural grounds. Yet Dahlan’s deep roots in Fatah, particularly in Gaza, his political skills, and his access to financial resources, which he has deployed to boost supporters, have ensured he continues to command a significant following in the movement. This following is based primarily in Gaza but also in refugee camps in Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, in limited areas of the West Bank, despite his lack of official status within Fatah.

Stagnation at Fatah goes beyond its top leadership: it can be felt at various levels of the movement and is compounded by its failure to hold the Seventh General Conference. Originally scheduled for 2014, the conference has been repeatedly postponed, with inadequate preparation or inopportune circumstances cited as the explanation. It is now scheduled for November 2015,⁸ although doubts persist as to whether the plan will be carried out this time. Additionally, concerns abound that the conference, rather than serving as a vehicle for revitalizing Fatah, is being designed to further entrench Abbas’s hold over the movement’s apparatus through the engineered election of loyalists into [decisionmaking](#) roles.⁹

As a result, a number of Fatah’s important constituencies are feeling alienated. The so-called young guard—members who were active in the 1980s during the first Palestinian intifada—are largely disenfranchised and embittered.¹⁰ Activists who came of age during the 1990s and the second intifada see no path for political advancement within the movement, leaving them equally marginalized.¹¹ As for Fatah members in Gaza, a large number feel abandoned as a result of Hamas’s 2007 takeover of the territory and Abbas’s campaign against Dahlan.

Fatah Succession

The circumstances that allowed for a smooth transition when Abbas assumed the PA presidency in 2005 do not exist today. As compared with the manageable group of candidates then vying for the leadership position, today most Central Committee members see themselves as potential leaders.¹² Moreover, if the Central Committee were to choose a successor, that person would not necessarily be automatically accepted by the Dahlan camp or the other disaffected constituencies within Fatah.

This crisis does not mean Fatah will necessarily or even likely fail to elect a successor to Abbas. Large, well-established organizations tend to gravitate toward self-preservation, and Fatah has proven resilient during many crises. Some Fatah leaders are already positioning themselves for the contest. But given the fluid nature of Palestinian politics and the ever-shifting map of alliances within Fatah itself, it is very difficult now to predict which specific individual will succeed Abbas as the movement’s head. The possibilities vary widely, and the exact outcome will depend largely on the timing and particular circumstances of the succession process.



A number of scenarios can be envisioned. A Central Committee member may yet emerge as a strong candidate, particularly one with an existing Fatah constituency and with strong connections in the security establishment. Or a surviving member of the old guard, whether from within the Central Committee or not, might be seen as an acceptable lowest common denominator. Alternatively, a weak candidate may be selected as a figurehead while the power struggle continues behind the scenes. Marwan Barghouti, the charismatic young guard leader¹³ serving five life sentences in an Israeli jail with little prospect of release, may represent a convenient compromise.

Yet all these scenarios are potentially unstable, as they require the cooperation of rivals who perceive themselves as equals toward the greater interest of the organization. Such a dynamic inherently increases the chances of miscalculation or conflict. In a possibly protracted succession contest, the worst-case scenario—involving the splintering or even collapse of Fatah driven by factional discord—may be unlikely but cannot be discounted.

Even if the worst-case scenario does not materialize, the successor emerging under the current configuration will be battered and preside over a fractured movement. Such a leader will face challenges in terms of controlling Palestinian politics and will be poorly positioned to make any fateful national decisions, including on matters relating to peace.

Reinvigorating and strengthening Fatah, thus creating legitimacy for President Abbas's successor, cannot be undertaken in the heat of a succession contest, and such a process would be even harder if pursued by a successor with contested legitimacy. Steps need to be taken now to bolster and stabilize the movement. Primarily, the slated General Conference can anchor this endeavor if preceded by a preparatory process with broad movement representation and if allowed to take course without undue interference. Given the central role Fatah will play in PLO and PA succession—and in the Palestinians' ability to subsequently pursue major decisions—this matter has relevance reaching far beyond Fatah itself.

PLO: The Legitimizer

Created in 1964 by the Arab League at the behest of Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser and under his influence, the PLO rose to prominence in the late 1960s after the Six Day War and Arafat's 1969 rise to its chairmanship. The PLO was recognized by the Arab League and the UN as the "representative of the Palestinian people" in 1974¹⁴ and by Israel in 1993.¹⁵ As such, the PLO is the body empowered to negotiate and take international action on behalf of the Palestinians.

The PLO is an umbrella organization that includes various Palestinian factions, among them Arab nationalist and Marxist groups. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) do not belong to the PLO. By tradition, the PLO operates along a quota system, implemented in the 1970s and never significantly amended, whereby each component organization is entitled to specific shares of representative and staff positions. Fatah enjoys the highest representation, effectively controlling the PLO's key decisionmaking positions, followed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

A Necessary Fiction

From the early 1970s until the PA's establishment in 1994, the PLO controlled significant resources and robust organizational structures, serving as the Palestinians' de facto government. In addition to representing the Palestinians in international relations, the PLO provided the arena where Palestinian politics was exercised and key decisions were made.¹⁶

The PLO's significance started waning after the creation of the PA, given the need to establish control of a territory—albeit limited—and its people. Thus, resources, personnel, and political power were diverted from the diaspora-based PLO to the Palestine-based PA. Today, Palestinian political power and resources are effectively concentrated in the PA.

Yet the creation of the PA could not completely supersede the PLO. The PA, the product of an agreement between the PLO and Israel, itself cannot legally exercise international relations, making the PLO necessary for that function.¹⁷ Additionally,

given the uncertainty over whether a Palestinian state will emerge in the foreseeable future, the PLO continues to be seen as a possible “exit ramp” by Palestinian leaders in case the PA collapses or a decision is made to abandon it.

Most important, perhaps, is the legitimizing role the PLO continues to play. Because a significant portion of the Palestinian diaspora—including members of the PLO’s various bodies—continues to oppose the Oslo Accords¹⁸ and by extension the PA, the PLO still serves as a unifying framework for diaspora Palestinians as well as those in the occupied territories. While deep fissures exist among Palestinians, the PLO—even now, as a shell devoid of resources and power—enables Palestinian leaders to continue to formally speak for the Palestinian people writ large and make decisions on their behalf. A PA president who is not a PLO chairman, and thus lacking the PLO’s cover, will be unable to claim to represent Palestinians outside the territories.

Nevertheless, while the PLO is still legally the representative of the Palestinian people, in practice a number of important Palestinian constituencies are not represented in the PLO.

Most obviously, PIJ and Hamas are not members. This is explained by their relatively late entry to the Palestinian field—the former was established in 1981, the latter in 1987—and their Islamism facing an entrenched factional map dominated by secular forces. More recently, deep programmatic schisms have emerged following the PLO’s renunciation of terrorism and commitment to a two-state solution, putting it at odds with these two organizations, which continue to espouse terrorism and refuse to recognize Israel. The various Fatah-Hamas national reconciliation pacts¹⁹ establish a “temporary leadership framework”—which includes PLO factions as well as Hamas and PIJ—to discuss the “reform of the PLO,” yet this framework has never been activated amid mutual accusations, valid on both sides, of a lack of sincerity.

But the PLO faces representation problems aside from the absence of Hamas and PIJ. The quota system under which the PLO operates is acutely outdated. While the PFLP and other Marxist and Arab

nationalist factions were significant enough in the 1970s and 1980s to warrant substantial representation in the PLO, they have largely receded to irrelevance in recent years. Additionally, the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the PLO’s legislative body, which purports to represent all Palestinians, has not convened for a regular session since 1996.²⁰ Over the intervening nearly two decades, its membership has not been renewed, in effect excluding a whole generation and failing to capture current Palestinian political dynamics.

These PLO defects—whether its disempowerment or its lack of representation—are regularly invoked by Hamas and PIJ as well as political leaders representing other disaffected constituencies. Hamas, in particular, has taken the challenge further by establishing its own set of international relationships as a movement and as the ruler of the Gaza Strip.²¹ Despite these de facto challenges to the PLO’s monopoly on the Palestinians’ international representative status as well as repeated calls to reform the PLO, Hamas has never gone so far as to officially question the PLO’s capacity to act as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.”

The PNC’s dormancy since 1996 has severely diminished the PLO’s power and its relevance as a truly representative forum in which Palestinian politics is exercised. But the PLO has also been preserved over this time as a convenient fiction that conveys formal legitimacy on the PA’s decisionmaking and exercise of power.

PLO Succession

Procedurally, the election to succeed the PLO chairman is straightforward: the roughly 730-member PNC is empowered to elect the organization’s executive committee, which in turn elects a chairman, who serves as the organization’s leader.²²

In 2004, this process functioned in an exceedingly orderly and expeditious manner. On the morning of November 11—a few hours after Yasser Arafat’s death—the PLO executive committee met to elect a successor. Mahmoud Abbas, who until then had served as the committee’s secretary-general, was put forward as the Fatah candidate. He was elected

immediately and assumed the PLO chairmanship that same day. This decision was not contested by any Palestinian faction.

As with Fatah succession, a repeat of the smooth process that followed Arafat's death is unlikely today for the PLO. Abbas's recent attempt to convene the PNC in order to change the PLO executive committee's composition demonstrated the new dynamics at play. Whereas the committee was last reconstituted in 2009 in an uneventful and uncontested special PNC session, Abbas's attempt to replicate the process in August 2015 was a failure. His initial attempt to convene an emergency session, which would have bypassed the PNC's quorum requirements, was rejected on legal grounds.²³ Only when this gambit failed did he call for a special session to elect a new committee.

His call triggered waves of opposition. Hamas, seeing a potential opportunity to enter the PLO, insisted that the PNC session be boycotted unless it was held pursuant to the activation of the temporary leadership framework.²⁴ The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), opposed for some time to some of Abbas's policies and fearing it would lose privileges, announced its boycott of the session.²⁵ The PFLP followed suit. Dahlan-affiliated PNC members also announced a boycott, while a number of diaspora members refused to participate in a Ramallah session held under the auspices of the Oslo-created PA.²⁶ Media commentary was largely opposed to holding such a session and focused on the need to comprehensively reform the PLO. What Abbas had intended as a limited, tactical move effectively unleashed long-hidden tensions, with various actors seeing an activated PNC file as an opportunity to advance their respective interests.

Most important, however, was the reaction of Fatah members, demonstrating the centrality of Fatah politics to PLO stability. While the movement officially endorsed the session, behind the scenes key Central Committee members voiced fierce opposition.²⁷ The opposition was motivated primarily by internal Fatah politics relating in particular to Central Committee member Saeb Erekat. The proposed PNC session was presumed to confirm Erekat's recent appointment as PLO secretary-general. While the position does not

confer any automatic entitlement to future PLO leadership, its holder is considered *primus inter pares*. After the precedent set by Abbas's own promotion from secretary-general to chairman after Arafat's death, Central Committee members were concerned that PNC endorsement of the committee changes would improve Erekat's chances in a future leadership contest, a prospect that unified members who would otherwise be rivals toward opposing the proposed PNC session. In response to all these pressures, the PNC meeting was postponed.

Besides being a political setback for President Abbas, this episode demonstrates the contentious and unpredictable nature of PLO dynamics at the moment and raises the need to address PLO-related tensions before an actual succession is at hand. If not addressed in advance, a succession dynamic could trigger such tensions at a moment of heightened volatility and political sensitivity.

Of course, the dynamics of a succession process will not be identical to those of choosing a new PLO executive committee. The magnitude and urgency of such a decision will presumably prompt a degree of pragmatism and compromise lacking in more-mundane proceedings. But the main lesson from the recent experience is that the PLO leadership cannot depend on automatic endorsement of or even passive acquiescence to its decisions. The vigorous opposition it elicited reflects a fractured PLO seen by a wide and varied segment of Palestinians as anachronistic, in need of reform, and unauthorized to make fateful decisions in its current configuration. Absent changes in the PLO, choosing a new chairman may prove to be a contentious process.

While changes to the PLO are necessary, comprehensive reform of the PLO will not be possible in the short or medium term. For such reform to occur, Hamas—and, of lesser consequence, PIJ—will have to be integrated into the organization. This raises two fundamental questions not yet ripe for a solution. The first relates to the PLO's and Hamas's respective programs: simply put, will the PLO change its program, abandoning support for the two-state solution and readopting armed struggle to accommodate Hamas, or will Hamas change and adopt the PLO's program?

The second question, though related, is more political: which organization would lead the new PLO, Hamas or Fatah? At a time when each rival seems to believe time is on its side, neither is in a hurry to concede leadership to the other.

While comprehensive PLO reform may not be currently possible, at a minimum, the PNC's composition must be revisited. Old components such as the PFLP and DFLP cannot be removed at this stage, with the PLO as brittle as it is, but new blood can be injected through appointing a younger, more varied, and more active membership. What happens within Fatah, and possibly at its scheduled conference, will strongly influence the prospects of such a revitalization process. If the conference generates a more robust and broadly representative movement, Fatah will be empowered to make sufficient changes in the PNC—whether to its formal representatives or to representatives of specific “civil society” sectors affiliated with it—to attract the critical mass necessary to project an image of PLO revival. If, however, the Fatah conference fails to produce credible, substantive changes, then this failure will reflect further on the PLO, perpetuating its stagnation.

The new chairman will need to be prepared to have his legitimacy questioned and assailed from multiple rejectionist quarters. Hamas will almost inevitably brand the post-Abbas PLO as illegitimate. While this would be a departure from Hamas's reaction to Abbas's 2004 appointment as PLO chairman, it aligns with the organization's subsequent rhetoric toward him and reflects Hamas's emboldened stance. The intensity of the campaign against a successor—and the decision whether to use the succession dynamic to formally challenge the PLO's status as the sole representative of the Palestinian people—will be determined by Hamas based on its own calculations. But the extent to which such Hamas decisions will gain traction beyond its core supporters will depend on the Palestinian public's perception of the PLO. If the organization continues to be seen as stagnant and unreformed, the Hamas (and non-Hamas) offensive will meaningfully chip away at the PLO's legitimacy and, by extension, its ability to bestow legitimacy on the new PA leader.

PA: The Ultimate Prize

Critics of the Oslo Accords, signed by the PLO and Israel, routinely point out the many limitations under which the PA operates. The PA, a product of the Oslo Accords, is a subsidiary of the PLO that operates in territories occupied by Israel, which continues to exercise overall authority, when not *de jure* then *de facto*. The PA does not have the right to engage in international relations—a right reserved for the PLO—and operates under a slew of other limitations.²⁸

Yet in reality, the PA is the undisputed center of Palestinian political life. To some extent, this position is explained by its unique governing role. For the first time in modern history, the PA has enabled the Palestinians to govern themselves on their land. The historical record has shown that the lack of such autonomy comes with high costs. Until the late 1960s, the Palestinians were bystanders who watched as Arab countries appropriated the Palestinian issue. In the 1970s, the PLO and Palestinian factions lived as guests in Jordan and Lebanon until overstaying their welcome after getting drawn into local politics and confrontation with the host authorities. In Tunisia, where the PLO was based for most of the 1980s, the Palestinian leadership was geographically distant from Palestinian land and watched as control slipped through its fingers during the first intifada in favor of local West Bank and Gaza leaders.

As a result, when the PA was established, President Arafat poured all resources at his disposal into consolidating his control over the population and territory of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Financial, human, and security resources were diverted from the PLO to the PA, effectively turning the PLO into a shell to be used when needed while remaining too weak to ever pose any challenge to Arafat's authority. International aid and institutions of governance and security represented additional assets for the exercise of politics. To cement his rule, Arafat populated the PA at all levels with Fatah cadres; he simultaneously ensured that the PA was run by loyalists while making Fatah dependent on PA resources, which he directly controlled. By centralizing power in the PA—a process that might have been inevitable anyway—Arafat succeeded in

making the PA presidency the single most powerful position in Palestinian politics.

Yet the process of accumulating the means, and trappings, of power was not without pitfalls, which emerged early on. The fiery, revolutionary mode of leadership undergirding much of Arafat's appeal conflicted with running a nascent government engaged in a peace process with yesterday's enemy. The need to balance the two worlds created lasting suspicions among Israelis, who noted the continuing revolutionary rhetoric and attendant practices, and mistrust among Palestinians, who picked up on the accommodationist facets of his policies.

The impulse to concentrate exclusive power in the PA left the Palestinian diaspora, the PLO's traditional power base, feeling abandoned and ultimately drifting out of the PLO's sphere of influence. Using the PA institutions to cement Arafat's power shattered the carefully cultivated image of an austere Palestinian leadership dedicated solely to the cause and replaced it with one of corruption and poor governance that extended to Fatah by virtue of being the ruling party. Most fundamentally, however, Arafat bet everything on the hope that the Oslo process would produce an independent Palestinian state. Owing in part to his own policies and behavior, this bet failed.

Abbas inherited the powers and vulnerabilities of the PA presidency, and during his tenure amplified both. Today, power is almost exclusively concentrated in the office of the PA president. Authorities that devolved to the cabinet as a result of the reforms enacted in the years just before Arafat's death, particularly in the security sphere, are again firmly in the hands of the president. Policies were established to block potential political competitors and to crush those who did manage to arise. Dissent, opposition, or even differences of opinion were punished.²⁹ Yet while the office of the Palestinian president is now at its strongest relative to other PA institutions, overall the PA is weaker than ever. It lost the Gaza Strip to Hamas, the peace process is in tatters, and no alternative path to statehood has been identified. Public trust in the PA and its leaders is at an all-time low.³⁰

This complex picture represents the context in which PA succession will take place.

PA Succession

According to Article 54 of the PA Basic Law, as paraphrased earlier,

If the office of the President of the National Authority becomes vacant...the Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) shall assume the powers and duties of the Presidency of the National Authority, temporarily for a period not to exceed sixty (60) days, during which free and direct elections to choose a new President shall take place.

In line with the trend established in this paper, a mechanism that operated smoothly after Arafat's death has virtually no chance of working today. As for the specifics, the PLC speaker is from Hamas; Fatah is unlikely to accept him as interim president and will probably argue that since the PLC's term is expired, the position of PLC speaker is also vacant. Nor are elections likely. Despite numerous "national reconciliation" agreements committing to holding elections, and even though the president's and the PLC's terms have long expired, Hamas and Fatah have resisted the call for elections. Both feel entrenched in their respective territories and are unwilling to risk losing control. Additionally, neither will allow its rival to build the political machinery needed to freely and effectively campaign in the other's area of control. Absent true national reconciliation that transforms "national unity" or "national consensus" governments into true power-sharing entities—a prospect that seems extremely unlikely—there is no reason to expect either party's position on elections to change.

As things stand, the next PA president will most likely be appointed by fiat rather than popular election. In other words, by default Fatah's candidate will be anointed by the PLO as Palestinian president.

While Hamas has emerged as a real competitor for Palestinian leadership, it is poorly positioned to take over the PA presidency. It has suffered significant erosion in popularity due to its dismal record of governing Gaza, lack of credibility of its "resistance" program, and its role in perpetuating Palestinian disunity. Nor can its religion-based ideology replicate Fatah's past ability to unite the overwhelming majority of Palestinians under its wide nationalist banner. Additionally, Hamas is a designated terrorist organization not only in the West

but also in key Arab countries. Political, regional, and logistical considerations thus make Hamas a highly unlikely contender for succession at this point.

Similarly, a scenario in which an independent figure emerges as the next Palestinian leader is far-fetched. Fatah controls the levers of power and all relevant institutions, and even if it fails to unite behind a candidate, it can unite against one. Over its long history, Fatah has always been suspicious of actors from outside the organization. The strong Fatah opposition to former prime minister Salam Fayyad was the most recent example of this tendency.

While the PA Basic Law's provision on succession is unlikely to be implemented, finding a legal cover for appointing a Fatah candidate as successor will not be difficult. The PLO can invoke its status as the senior most Palestinian political body to justify ignoring the PA's Basic Law. A more dramatic scenario would be a Palestinian announcement annulling Oslo—while *de facto* continuing with the current security, tax, and civil arrangements with Israel—and relabeling the PA as the “State of Palestine.” This latter act would be largely symbolic but would enable the PLO to appoint the “president of the State of Palestine.”

Whether such legalistic solutions take hold will depend on a number of factors rooted in real politics. Fatah will need to quickly select a candidate who is accepted by the movement, enjoys the support of key security, economic, and political power centers in the PA, and is internationally acceptable as president. Fatah can only do this if prior steps are taken to restore the movement's cohesion and to allow for a political process within it to narrow the pool of potential candidates to manageable proportions. The PLO's stagnation will also need to be addressed. Internal steps—especially *vis-à-vis* the organization's constituent factions—must be taken to address the weaknesses and discord exposed in the recent attempt to hold the PNC meeting. Overall, major steps, even if they fall short of comprehensive reform of the organization, will need to be taken soon to begin rehabilitating the PLO's image among Palestinians enough to withstand a potential assault by Hamas and others on its legitimacy during the sensitive transition phase.

Abbas holds the keys to managing all these processes. Having accumulated almost absolute power over the PLO and Fatah's formal institutions, he is responsible for deciding whether to initiate reforms in them. If succession is to be stable, he must act early enough to allow these reform processes to assume sufficient momentum to be ready for his departure.

In addition to institutional reforms in Fatah and the PLO, Abbas can begin to empower certain individuals in order to create a more stable, manageable pool of potential successors. Indeed, Arafat's tradition of allowing a small group of “second-tier” leaders to operate throughout the history of Fatah and the PLO contributed greatly to the smooth transition after his departure.

But for empowerment to be effective, it should be approached not as the mechanical process of simply bestowing titles—such as the proposed creation of the position of vice president, devoid of any authorities—but as a political one in which individuals are allowed to develop constituencies and accumulate real political power. Indeed, trying to impose a successor who lacks a discernible political base could backfire and generate opposition to Abbas from within Fatah and the PLO, as the recent attempt to convene the PNC showed. This model requires that Abbas be willing to delegate some of the authorities and levers of power he has gathered lately and to relax his grip on Palestinian and Fatah politics to allow for the emergence of viable successors. Anointing a weak heir apparent, a tactic familiar in many authoritarian systems, or one who is not allowed to empower himself might muddy the succession process rather than clarify it.

In addition to reforms in Fatah and the PLO, the PA itself needs reformation. The credibility of Abbas's successor will derive not only from the credibility of the entities who select him but also from the credibility of the institution he will lead. The stature of the next PA president will be diminished if he is seen as leading a brittle, ineffectual, and corrupt institution.³¹ Without significant reform of the PA, the next Palestinian leader will start his term with a deficit in legitimacy, hindering his ability to stabilize the PA.

External Actors: Not All Politics Are Local

No discussion about Palestinian politics is complete without addressing the role of external actors. Egypt and Jordan, given their geographic and historic connection to the Palestinian issue, have significant leverage that extends into the minutiae of Palestinian politics. Israel, as the occupying power under whose authority the PA operates, also has significant influence on the Palestinian arena. Saudi Arabia, while rarely engaged in the specifics of Palestinian affairs, holds great sway due not only to its financial resources but also to its leading role in the Arab world. The United States, as the world and regional superpower and the undisputed leader of the peace process, cannot be ignored.

These countries, along with other members of the international community committed to peace and stability in the Middle East, have an interest in a successor who will be committed to the two-state solution, opposed to violence and terrorism, and capable of stabilizing the Palestinian arena. And they will—to varying degrees, in different ways, and with limits—strive to help bring about this outcome.

For the Palestinians, external considerations will not determine who the next Palestinian leader will be, but could help determine who it will not be. In particular, the Palestinians are highly unlikely to choose a leader unacceptable to major international or regional stakeholders or unable to work effectively with them. At best, external actors may be able to help bolster the position of some candidates, although overt endorsement or transparent support for specific candidates—particularly by the United States or Israel—could backfire. Ultimately, the decision will be overwhelmingly based on domestic dynamics, with external influence diminishing as the contest heats up.

External actors can, however, have much greater influence in helping fashion a context that allows for a comparably stable, or at least less destabilizing, succession contest. The United States, leading an international coalition of the willing—and many European capitals seem to be currently willing—can revive a focus on Palestinian governance reform. This will help rehabilitate the PA domestically and also create a new setting in which Palestinian politics can be exercised.

For their part, Arab countries can support this international effort in the same way they supported the reform process that began in the last years of Arafat's rule. They can also be quite effective in pushing the Palestinians on reinvigorating the PLO and—to a lesser extent—Fatah. Given continuing security cooperation, Israel can be more forthcoming with steps to improve the West Bank situation, and in the process enable those Palestinian leaders who eschew violence to demonstrate the utility of their approach.

Conclusion

The way Palestinian succession unfolds has implications for U.S. policy and interests in the Middle East. The more disorderly or prolonged the process, the higher the likelihood of disruptive outcomes, whether internal violence that will inevitably reach Israel or, in an extreme case, PA collapse. Even if violence is avoided, a weakened leader who emerges from a compromised succession process will also have difficulty maintaining stability in areas under his control. At a moment when leadership is necessary, particularly during tense episodes of potential violence, a weak Palestinian leader—or a leadership vacuum—will ensure the scales tip toward escalation.

In the longer term, achieving a two-state solution—an outcome repeatedly identified as a U.S. interest—requires a Palestinian leader who feels stable at home and has the legitimacy to make the difficult compromises necessary to reach a deal. A Palestinian leader whose legitimacy is contested or who rules over a fractured, weak polity will always be pulled toward extreme postures and rejectionism in order to cover his legitimacy deficit.

Free, fair, and democratic elections are the best way to ensure stability and legitimacy. Indeed, in the long term, nothing else will guarantee the viability of the Palestinian polity. But such a process is highly unlikely in the impending Palestinian succession.

Instead, all evidence suggests that the next Palestinian succession will be a top-down multi-institutional process occurring amid complex political circumstances. Given the split with Hamas, the PA's formal succession mechanism is unlikely to operate. Instead, Fatah will need to select a leader from within its ranks,

and such a leader will need the PLO's endorsement to achieve legitimacy.

Yet Fatah leaders are locked in a stalemate that is preventing clear potential successors from emerging. The alienation of two generations of Fatah activists—those who emerged in the 1990s and those emerging now—has deepened the associated sense of stagnation and further weakened the movement's general appeal and credibility. The PLO, while maintaining its legal status as the representative of the Palestinian people, is a shell with no real power or resources. Its quota system and lack of self-rejuvenation have severely depleted its credibility.

Succession by its very nature engenders uncertainty, but the crises in the key Palestinian institutions—the PA, Fatah, and the PLO—compound this uncertainty exponentially and could render the process highly destabilizing. In the end, these institutions will lean toward finding a successor out of self-preservation, but given their current weakness, the succession will be messy and likely result in a leader who emerges

wounded, vulnerable, and ill equipped to control post-succession Palestinian politics. Moreover, if today's circumstances persist, the uncertainty could trigger fragmentation or even implosion in Palestinian political institutions.

These challenges cannot be addressed in the heat of the contest precipitated by President Abbas's departure from the scene. Instead, the goal of ensuring a stable and stabilizing Palestinian succession should be pursued through measures that can be undertaken today, measures that must focus on

- addressing the weakness of the Palestinian institutional structures,
- preparing them to respond to the challenges of succession,
- and upholding order throughout the process.

Only through such preparatory measures can the Palestinian leadership avert the most troubling outcomes outlined here.

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