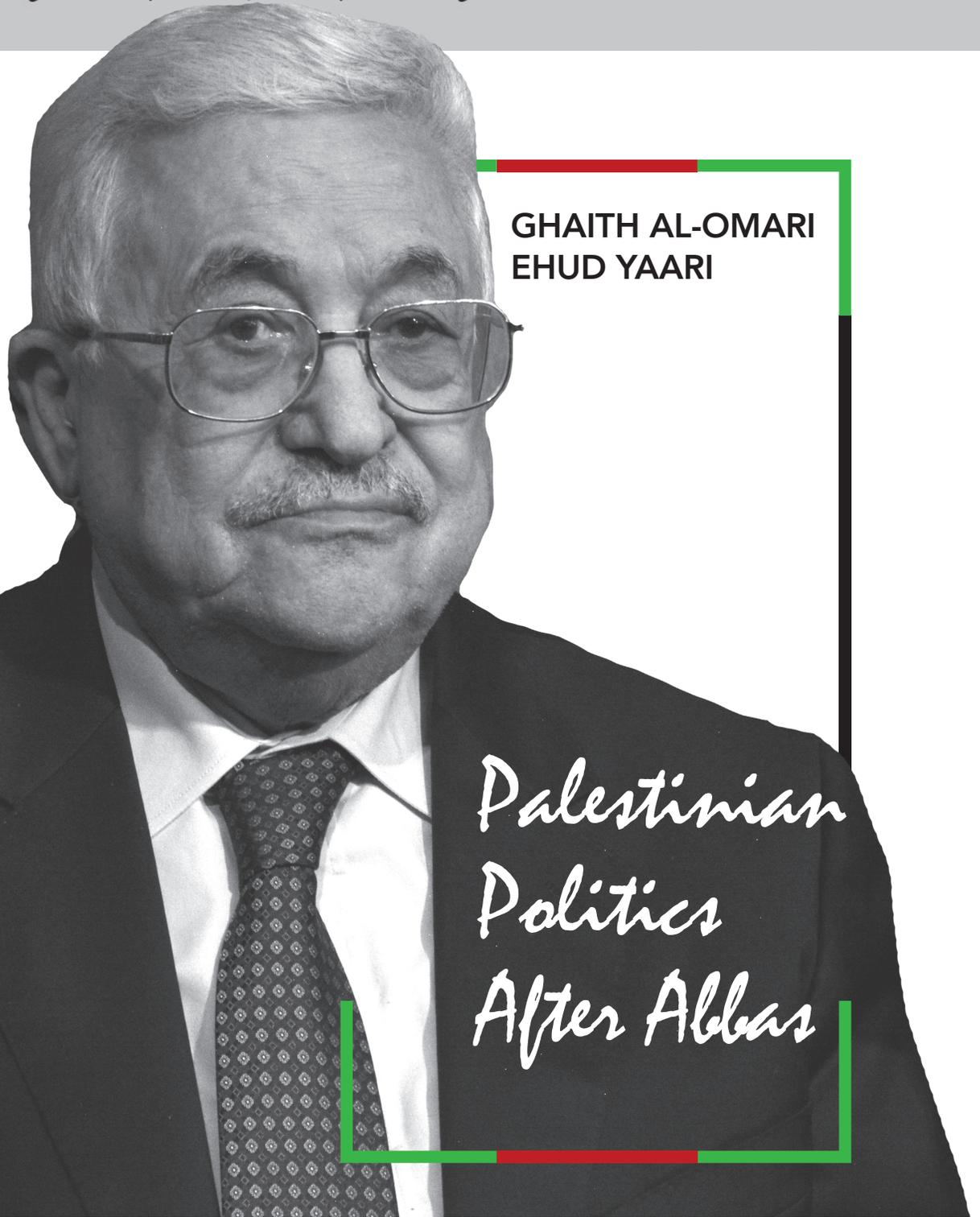


SUDDEN SUCCESSION



Examining the Impact of Abrupt Change in the Middle East



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*Palestinian
Politics
After Abbas*

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Mahmoud Abbas began serving as president of the Palestinian Authority in 2005, and although his term ended officially in 2009, he remains in power today. Throughout, he has made little effort to groom a successor, instead consolidating his control over numerous Palestinian entities and sidelining ascendant officials he perceived as threatening to his rule. Leadership roles for Abbas, who turns eighty-five in November, extend far beyond the PA presidency. They include control over the Palestine Liberation Organization, the various national security agencies, government ministries, and the Fatah infrastructure across the West Bank. Abbas also nominates district governors and personally runs PA foreign relations, managing ties with international and Arab governments alike.

The essays that follow approach Abbas's potential departure from two angles. Former PA negotiator Ghaith al-Omari focuses on institutions, exploring the ways Abbas has failed to prepare the ground for agile, democratic governance that is responsive to the people's needs. Middle East commentator Ehud Yaari looks at the current political scene, with its alliances and occasional intrigues. The coronavirus pandemic, he notes, has shifted the dynamic somewhat, appearing to empower Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, who has earned high marks for his management of the crisis.

The Coming Institutional Void in the Palestinian Territories

By Ghaith al-Omari

The question of President Mahmoud Abbas's succession has dominated Palestinian politics for several years. Abbas's age—he is now eighty-four—his numerous health scares, and waning public support have all prompted the Palestinian political elite to position for the day after his departure. Although Abbas's official term expired in 2009, no one knows even now who will succeed him. Some national-level factors, mainly the 2007 Hamas takeover of Gaza and the ensuing intra-Palestinian split, have contributed to this state of affairs. The other major factor, however, has been Abbas's pursuit of policies that have systematically undermined the emergence of strong political figures that could be potential successors.

This ambiguity poses a challenge to Palestinian and regional actors by increasing the risk of a disorderly and destabilizing succession process and exacerbating an already volatile situation in the West Bank. Such an outcome does not serve U.S. interests, yet Washington lacks the tools to affect Palestinian succession politics directly. Instead, the United States can work with regional allies, which have significant sway in Palestinian politics, to help clarify the succession process and reduce the risks for instability.

BACKGROUND

Abbas, a member of Fatah's founding generation, was one of two potential successors groomed by longtime Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. A member of the Fatah leadership from the beginning, Abbas came to prominence as architect of the 1993 Oslo Accords. In 1996, he was appointed secretary-general of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), making him effectively the organization's second man. After the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000, Abbas's relations with Arafat grew tense due to the former's opposition to the use of violence. In 2003, Abbas became prime minister in what was seen as a direct challenge to Arafat's authority. Despite the tensions, however, the two men reconciled. Abbas's rival for succession was Ahmed Qurei (aka Abu Ala), the chief Oslo negotiator who had served as prime minister upon Arafat's death.

Abbas was chosen to succeed Arafat in a remarkably smooth fashion. Within hours after Arafat's death in 2005, the PLO's executive committee met to decide on a new Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader. Abbas was put forward by the committee as

the Fatah candidate, even though no formal decision was taken by Fatah to nominate him. The quick PLO endorsement preempted other senior Fatah members from presenting themselves as potential candidates, and by the end of the meeting Abbas was anointed as the PLO and Fatah pick.

With this political cover achieved, the PA's official succession process was set into motion. In accordance with Article 37(2) of the Palestinian Basic Law, which serves as the PA's constitution, the speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) was named as interim president and a presidential election was scheduled.¹ In January 2005, Abbas won a four-year presidential term with 62 percent of the vote. Like his predecessor, Abbas became leader of the Fatah movement and the PLO.

A year later, in January 2006, following pressure from the United States, PLC elections were held. Hamas triumphed, leading to a period of heightened intra-Palestinian political tensions. In 2007, these tensions exploded into an armed confrontation between Hamas and Fatah that ended with Hamas taking over the Gaza Strip. Since then, the Palestinian polity has been split and the constitutional system has been practically suspended, with no elections taking place. Upon its expiration in 2009, Abbas's term was indefinitely extended by the PLO's Central Council.

SUCCESSION AND INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESS

Part of what enabled a smooth succession after Arafat's death was the relative strength of key Palestinian political institutions, particularly Fatah and the PLO. Today, these institutions are undergoing serious crises, which will limit their ability to play a stabilizing role during the coming succession.

The PA: Perpetual Crisis

The only certainty about Abbas's succession is that it will not follow the procedures stipulated in the Basic

Law. According to the Basic Law, the PLC speaker would be appointed interim president for a sixty-day transitional period, to be concluded by a presidential election. Since the PLC speaker is a Hamas member, however, this option was never realistic or politically viable, particularly since Hamas's takeover of Gaza. To preempt a constitutional crisis, Abbas in April 2016 formed a Constitutional Court, which in December 2018 issued a decree dissolving the PLC. Although Hamas rejected the decree, the dissolution means that Abbas's successor will be chosen by an as-yet-unspecified mechanism—most likely, a PLO body upon the recommendation of Fatah—that will then be approved by the Constitutional Court.

Yet such a process would produce an immediate legitimacy deficit for the next Palestinian leader. In addition to his appointment inevitably being contested by Hamas, the PA suffers from its own legitimacy problem. The latest polls indicate that the vast majority of Palestinians view the PA as corrupt, and around half regard it as a liability for the Palestinian people. Around half also harbor suspicions about the independence and efficacy of the judiciary.²

As a result, no PA institution is strong enough to influence the succession process, with the notable exception being the PA security forces. The PASF, which was reconstituted after the second intifada (2000–2005), is well resourced and capable of effectively undertaking its responsibilities of maintaining law and order and fighting terrorism. PASF leaders themselves are not cohesive, however, and some are aligned with various succession hopefuls. If the PASF were involved in succession, the forces would be unlikely to act as a unified, stabilizing unit.³

Fatah: Not What It Used to Be

Given the weakness of the PA, Abbas's successor will be chosen by Fatah—the central Palestinian faction since the 1960s and the political movement that dominates both the PLO and the PA. This does not reflect a new dynamic. Even when the constitutionally mandated succession process was in operation after Arafat's death, Abbas's election was a foregone

conclusion once he was presented as the Fatah candidate.

Fatah remains a central actor in the Palestinian political system, but its ability to legitimize Abbas's successor has eroded significantly. In 2005, Abbas was one of only two potential successors groomed by Arafat and had time to secure significant support within the movement's leadership. Today, Abbas has not groomed potential successors—to the contrary, he has methodically prevented their emergence.

During his four decades leading the Palestinian national movement, Arafat maintained power through balancing strong personalities across the political spectrum and within Fatah. As a result, Fatah and the PLO always had a small pool of credible potential successors, which accounted for the smooth transition following his death. Abbas has adopted a markedly different political management style. He has systematically undermined other strong figures in Fatah, including those with whom he is in conflict, such as Mohammad Dahlan, who was expelled from the movement in 2011 and effectively exiled to the United Arab Emirates. The tension between Abbas and Dahlan goes back to the 1990s, but it intensified once Dahlan was seen as building an independent power base and publicly critiquing Abbas and his family. It also included leaders who were unwilling to fall in line, such as Marwan Barghouti—a Fatah figure seen as popular among the movement's younger generation in the West Bank, whose supporters were marginalized at Fatah's most recent assembly, the Seventh General Congress, in 2016. This strain even extended to some supporters, such as Jibril Rajoub, a former West Bank security chief who had aligned himself with Abbas since the latter's election as president. Rajoub won the highest number of votes at the Seventh Congress, positioning him as an apparent threat to Abbas, who used his Central Committee portfolio-allocation authority to deprive Rajoub of the movement's number-two position. Abbas's approach has not only blocked the emergence of strong leaders within the movement but has also alienated significant components of its base. This includes both those aligned with various Abbas rivals and a significant proportion of the younger generation who feel mar-

ginalized in Fatah politics, particularly after Seventh Congress failed to empower a new cadre of leaders.

This is not to say that Fatah lacks a party machine. Whether through al-Shabiba (the Fatah youth movement), the Tanzim (a structure created by Arafat in the 1990s to empower West Bank-based Fatah activists), or the various regional and local offices, the movement can claim a significant membership that has on occasion been mobilized. Although a Fatah Central Committee member is designated to run this machine, in reality Abbas maintains direct control over it. In the meantime, various presidential aspirants have been building their own support within the membership in anticipation of the day after. As such, the Fatah party machine cannot be relied on as a stabilizing factor in succession, nor is it disciplined enough to throw its whole weight behind a specific candidate.

Although Fatah continues to dominate the PLO and the PA, it is no longer the uncontested leader of Palestinian political life. In 2006, it lost the parliamentary elections due to its failure to deliver on Palestinian national aspirations through talks with Israel, coupled with the rampant poor governance that has characterized and still characterizes the PA. Later, Fatah went on to lose Gaza to Hamas. Today, polls show that while Fatah continues to enjoy more support than Hamas, the latter is not far behind. Although the numbers fluctuate, the most recent polls show that if parliamentary elections were to be held, Fatah would get 38% of the vote compared to 32 percent for Hamas.⁴ Under such circumstances, a seal of approval by Fatah would not carry sufficient legitimacy within the broader Palestinian community. As a result, Fatah does not have the same standing it did in 2005, nor is it cohesive enough to produce a consensus candidate in a timely manner.

The PLO: A Legitimizing with a Legitimacy Deficit

The PLO played a central role in bringing about Abbas's nomination in 2005. Most notably, the PLO's executive committee helped secure support for

Abbas's candidacy from a number of reluctant Fatah Central Committee members by threatening to put Abbas forward as its own candidate if Fatah failed to immediately nominate him. Once Abbas was selected, the PLO served as a political legitimizer for his candidacy, turning him from a factional candidate into a national one.

Even then, the PLO's power was already receding. The beginning of the decline dates back to the establishment of the PA in 1994 following the Oslo Accords, when the center of gravity in Palestinian politics shifted from the diaspora to the occupied territories. Still, under Arafat's presidency the PLO maintained the perception of relevance. At that time, the politically active generation of Palestinians largely issued from the PLO, and Arafat himself gave the PLO high visibility and afforded its leaders significant power and resources, along with some margin of independence. Under Abbas, the PLO's marginalization proceeded at a faster pace. Abbas himself was uncomfortable with the PLO leadership maintaining a measure of independence and sought to bring it under his control. This culminated in 2018, when the Palestinian National Council convened to elect a new PLO leadership under controversial circumstances, including boycotts from Hamas (which is not a PLO member but whose PLC members sit on the PNC ex officio) and some PLO factions, criticism that the meeting was being held in Ramallah—giving Israel the power to prevent some members from participating—and allegations of irregularities. Abbas loyalists were elected to leadership positions and his opponents sidelined. Although this facilitated Abbas's control over the PLO machinery, the resulting cost to the organization's national standing was considerable. In the meantime, the new generation that is gradually populating Palestinian politics, born of a PA-centric era, has little direct affinity for the PLO—which today has lost much of its luster.

SCENARIOS FOR SUCCESSION

Given Palestinian institutional weakness, the lack of a clear succession process, and the dearth of obvious

successors, the succession process could proceed along a number of different trajectories.

History Does Not Repeat Itself

Upon Abbas's departure, the Palestinian leadership will likely attempt to replicate the succession process that followed the death of Arafat: a Fatah candidate who enjoys the PLO's seal of approval will be anointed Palestinian president. Yet this process will face two complicating factors: Fatah's own lack of cohesion and an absence of legitimizing institutions.

The Fatah nominee will be chosen by the Fatah Central Committee, the highest decisionmaking body in the movement. While the current committee, formed in 2017, is overwhelmingly composed of Abbas loyalists, it has been beset by factionalism. The factions shift constantly, but two main groupings can be discerned today. The first consists of members seen as close to Abbas—such as Hussein al-Sheikh and General Intelligence head Maj. Gen. Majid Faraj (himself not a committee member, but very influential in the security sector)—and is rallying around Fatah vice chair Mahmoud al-Aloul. But Aloul is not a particularly dynamic figure, which is one reason Abbas chose him as his deputy. After three years as Fatah's number-two figure, Aloul has failed to garner a visible national or international profile, although he has a decent following within the movement.

The second group consists of security figures such as Jibril Rajoub, former head of the Preventive Security Organization in the West Bank, and Tawfiq al-Tirawi, former head of General Intelligence, with occasional rumors of support from the previous PSO leader in Gaza Mohammad Dahlan. This group does not have its own clear candidate, although it is seen as close to Nasser al-Qudwa. A former foreign minister and the nephew of Arafat, Qudwa has extensive international and Arab contacts, but he has been aloof from domestic Palestinian politics.

These two groupings, meanwhile, have their own significant internal tensions. Furthermore, neither

has the clear advantage, whether as a group or as an agent capable of producing a compelling presidential candidate. Indeed, public opinion polls show that the only Fatah leader who enjoys wide public support is Marwan Barghouti, who rose to prominence in the first intifada (1987–93) and headed the Tanzim after the PA's establishment. He has consistently and widely outpolled any other Fatah candidate in public opinion surveys, with the latest showing close to 36 percent saying they would vote for him, and only 5.5 percent backing his closest Fatah rival.⁵ But there is a complication. Barghouti is serving five consecutive life sentences in an Israeli jail for murder convictions in the second intifada, putting his potential candidacy in obvious doubt. Moreover, despite his extreme popularity—or maybe because of it—his supporters have been sidelined within Fatah and pushed away from leadership positions. His popularity will be a source of concern for any aspiring successor, and although both factions within Fatah are courting Barghouti's support in the lead-up, neither is likely to coalesce around him as a candidate.

Lowest Common Denominator

Given the lack of a clear advantage for either faction, the Central Committee is likely to seek a consensus candidate from within its ranks—most likely an internationally presentable yet politically unthreatening figure. A number of Fatah leaders are positioning to fit this bill, including current PA prime minister Mohammad Shtayyeh and Nasser al-Qudwa.

While this consensus-seeking approach may emerge as the most appealing in theory, it could prove complicated in practice. The recent process of selecting a PA prime minister, while not completely analogous, presents an instructive case. In January 2019, after Fatah leaders made sustained demands to replace the technocratic prime minister Rami Hamdallah with a Fatah member, Abbas tasked the Central Committee with choosing one of its people for the post. The process proved lengthy and contentious, regarding both the choice of the individual and his control over the security and

finance portfolios. The ultimate pick was Mohammad Shtayyeh, a technically qualified but politically weak figure. Given the higher stakes for a presidential succession, an equally lengthy and fractious selection process is probable. And unlike the prime ministerial selection process, which largely took place behind the scenes, a presidential contest will generate interest and will likely spill into the open.

To complicate matters, no institutions are capable of pressuring Fatah into expediting and containing its internal selection process. The current PLO executive committee is too weak to play the role it did in 2005, and the PA does not have any strong independent institutions—be they legislative or judicial—either. The time pressure built into the constitutionally mandated timeline for succession will be irrelevant since a national-level presidential election is unlikely to take place. Given the split between Fatah and Hamas, the latter is unlikely to allow a presidential election in Gaza. And West Bank-only elections would sharpen the lack of perceived national legitimacy rather than confer such legitimacy. But even if the new leader wants elections only in the West Bank, it would be politically impossible to hold these without the participation of East Jerusalem, a course that requires Israeli permission—which is unlikely to be forthcoming. More probably, the succession process will fall within the remit of the Constitutional Court, which does not operate within a prescribed timeline, and also lacks the political gravitas needed to pressure Fatah into a speedy decision.

The Three-Leader Solution?

In the face of this uncertainty, the idea of splitting the leadership and choosing different leaders for the PLO, Fatah, and the PA has been gaining currency. Proponents of this view argue that while Arafat and Abbas combined all three positions by virtue of being members of the founding generation, the next president will not have such credentials. Moreover, these advocates contend that such a division of posts would help ease the deadlock within Fatah by giving each of the competing factions a stake in the post-Abbas era.

Some potential presidential contenders now claim this to be their preferred approach, but the question remains of whether this is a genuine preference or simply a placeholder. The skepticism derives from the practical complexities of implementing this option. Each of the three posts—particularly the leadership of Fatah and the presidency of the PA—holds enough power to undermine the two others. The PA president will have access to budgets and security services, while the Fatah leader will control a vast party machinery that dominates the PA. Of the three, the PLO leadership is the most symbolic and least desirable. The main formal power of the PLO leader consists of the ability to represent Palestinians in international relations, but in practice even this power has been ceded to the PA. The three-leader solution may well end up being the only available compromise, but it is unlikely to be the opening bid for any of the contenders and would be reached only once all other options are exhausted.

THE RISKS OF A PROLONGED SUCCESSION

A protracted succession would be destabilizing under any circumstances, but the current circumstances are particularly volatile. Although the security situation in the West Bank has been reasonably stable thanks, among other factors, to Palestinian-Israeli security cooperation, this stability may be fragile. Palestinians have lost hope in a political solution to the conflict. The release in January 2020 of President Trump’s “deal of the century” has only sharpened this.⁶ The economy is in dismal shape. According to projections by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, GDP per capita in 2019 was forecast to be around \$3,000, unemployment around 31 percent, and GDP growth a mere 0.5 percent.⁷ And this of course does not account for future economic deterioration caused by the coronavirus pandemic. While opinion polls show little appetite for violence, this could change quickly.⁸

A protracted transition, however, will create a governance vacuum given the amount of power

amassed in the hands of the president. Of particular concern here is the issue of the PA security forces. While significantly professionalized with tremendous help from the United States, some PASF leaders remain involved in politics and under the president’s control. The vacuum created by a prolonged succession may invite some of these services to get involved in choosing the next president. This would highly increase the risk of succession devolving into violence.

Even if no violence occurs, a protracted process raises the risk that political divisions will spill over to the public, with each side mobilizing its supporters. Putting aside widespread but unsubstantiated rumors that some contenders are amassing weapons, even unarmed clashes between supporters of various camps could trigger instability. Although such instability would be inward-looking, it could very quickly transform into clashes with Israeli security forces, particularly if the PASF is leaderless or divided and cannot play the buffer role that has in recent years minimized friction between Palestinians and Israeli forces.

Moreover, terrorist organizations, particularly Hamas, have been constantly trying to conduct attacks from the West Bank. So far, these attempts have largely failed thanks in no small measure to Palestinian-Israeli security cooperation. If succession creates instability or a security vacuum, terrorist groups will inevitably redouble their efforts to exploit such a reality.

In an extreme case, given the PA’s weakness and the lack of public trust in governance and political institutions, instability triggered by succession could threaten the very survival of the authority. Although this is an unlikely scenario that is in no one’s interest, it cannot be completely discounted.

CHALLENGES FACING A NEW PA PRESIDENT

According to the current trajectory, Abbas’s successor(s) will start with a number of disadvantages. Under the consensus scenario, different Fatah leaders

will likely try to deprive the new president of unfettered control of key assets, akin to what happened with Prime Minister Shtayyeh during the 2019 cabinet formation process. Under the three-leader scenario, the limitations are built in.

On the political level, institutional weakness will deprive the next president of legitimizing instruments, opening him (and it will definitively be a “him,” since no women contenders have emerged) to direct and indirect challenges. In the case of Abbas, the PLO endorsement and his victory in the PA presidential elections forced even his fiercest critics to accept his leadership. This was particularly important in the early months of his presidency, when he had not yet consolidated power. Even under the best scenarios, Abbas’s successor will require considerable time and skill to consolidate his control—an outcome that is not assured given political weakness and internal divisions.

Such a situation will leave the new president weak vis-à-vis his putative allies, and vulnerable vis-à-vis his opponents. Most significant among the latter is Hamas. It is difficult to predict Hamas’s exact posture, particularly whether or not it will make a bid for the PA presidency or even the PLO leadership. Both moves are unlikely for a number of reasons, not least of which involve tensions within the group, but Hamas has been known to make surprising political decisions, including its decision to compete in the 2006 PLC election. More likely, however, Hamas will dispute the legitimacy of the new president and will continue to present itself as an equally if not more legitimate authority. Specifically, Hamas has never accepted the Constitutional Court’s 2018 dissolution of the PLC and will argue that the council’s speaker is the rightful interim president. In recent times, some international actors, particularly Turkey and Qatar but also on occasion Malaysia, have sought to portray Hamas as the legitimate authority and may do the same in this scenario.

But even if Hamas does not vie for the presidency, it will likely try to benefit from the vulnerabilities plaguing the new president. Hamas will probably use this president’s weakness to make a new bid for

a national unity arrangements on its own terms, and the next PA leader may be unable to resist. Moreover, Hamas may push for a new parliamentary election to exploit the post-succession disarray within Fatah. Although Hamas’s terrorism infrastructure in the West Bank has been largely decimated, the group maintains political networks that could help it benefit from such elections.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

A prolonged, destabilizing, or inconclusive succession process is not in the U.S. interest. In the short term, the United States has an interest in maintaining security and stability on the ground. In the longer term, the interest becomes encouraging the emergence of a strong Palestinian leader capable of meaningfully engaging in peace diplomacy when the time is right.

Yet Washington lacks the means to directly affect this process. The U.S. impact on Palestinian politics has always been limited, and it is almost nonexistent today given the lack of engagement between the PA and the Trump administration. It is safe to assume, however, that as in the past, the Palestinian leadership will probably be mindful to choose a president who might be capable of engaging the United States at some point in the future.

The one area where the United States may have some—although limited—impact is in the security sector. A PASF role in the succession process comes with risks not only to Palestinians but also to international stakeholders. Large segments of the PASF have been trained by the United States, and an active PASF role in succession may open Washington to accusations of political meddling, and would risk the longstanding, painstaking American effort to professionalize the Palestinian security sector. Whether through the Office of the U.S. Security Coordinator or intelligence channels, the United States should try to dissuade security chiefs who have a long-term interest in maintaining positive relations with the United

States from getting involved in the succession process.

Still, Washington should indirectly engage some of its Arab allies—which hold considerably more sway with the Palestinians—to urge Abbas to start clarifying the succession process. Such engagement should start early, since no external actor will have an impact once the contest starts in earnest. But the United States will need to overcome considerable hurdles to get Arab states to engage with the Palestinians on this issue. Arab states are reluctant to get too involved in Palestinian politics for fear of becoming inextricably enmeshed therein. Moreover, no single Arab state is likely to get involved without significant support from key Arab peers, specifically Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Although these countries are part of the same loose camp, there is still a degree of mistrust among them, and it would require significant U.S. effort to convince them to cooperate on such a sensitive and potentially explosive issue. The publication of *Peace to Prosperity*, as the U.S. administration's plan is formally known, further complicates this issue since it creates uncertainty among Arab states and a hostile regional environment.⁹ In particular, Jordan, which has a key role to play in engaging the PA, feels that some of its own national security interests are at risk, and is likely to be even more reluctant than usual to get involved in internal Palestinian politics.

CONCLUSION

In the current trajectory, the contest to succeed Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas holds many

uncertainties and potential pitfalls. While Fatah, the PA leadership, and the PLO may have an interest in a swift, orderly succession akin to Abbas's own ascendance following Arafat's death, this is far from certain. In his efforts to eliminate dissent, Abbas has prevented the emergence of strong political figures who could become obvious successors. In addition, the Palestinian split has suspended the constitutional succession process, and the weakness of Palestinian political institutions has eliminated checks and balances within the system. As a result, the succession could well be protracted and potentially destabilizing, and is likely to produce a leader who is, at least initially, weak. The United States has an interest in an orderly transfer of power but holds few tools to effect this outcome. Still, the United States can try to influence the PASF to remain out of politics and to ensure some stability during the transition. It can also work with Arab allies such as Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf states to identify ways these countries might help facilitate a smooth transition.

Ultimately, however, the conduct and outcome of the succession contest will depend on internal Palestinian decisions. Unless the Palestinian leadership begins clarifying the process of succession, allows potential successors to emerge and develop their own bases of support, and starts addressing the waning role of institutions in Palestinian politics, the succession will be held hostage to the vagaries of Palestinian politics. These might ultimately be somehow ironed out, but the Palestinians, Israel, and everyone else invested in Palestinian stability would be better served by more active steps to ensure a stable, sustainable transition.

NOTES

1. The Palestinian Basic Law is available at <https://www.palestinianbasiclaw.org/basic-law/2003-amended-basic-law>.
2. Data is from Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Public Opinion Poll 75, March 1, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2V5p0bQ>.
3. Neri Zilber and Ghaith al-Omari, *State with No Army, Army with No State: Evolution of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces, 1994–2018*, Policy Focus 154 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-with-no-army-army-with-no-state>.
4. PCPSR Poll 75, <https://bit.ly/2V5p0bQ>.
5. Ibid.
6. White House, *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, January 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf>.
7. See Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/E-themostforecast-2019.html.
8. David Pollock, "Palestinian Majority Rejects Two-State Solution, but Backs Tactical Compromises," *Fikra Forum*, February 25, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/palestinian-majority-rejects-two-state-solution-but-backs-tactical-compromi>.
9. See *Peace to Prosperity*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf>.

Palestinian Political Alliances, Rhetoric, and a Rising Contender

By Ehud Yaari

The contest to succeed Mahmoud Abbas as president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) is already well underway. Some half a dozen or more political figures are engaged in complex maneuvers aimed at improving their position for the morning after. Away from the public eye, heated debates are taking place almost daily among top Fatah movement officials. These often degenerate into shouting matches, threats, and accusations, and on at least one recent occasion ended in a brief exchange of blows. In only a handful of cases have these controversies spilled into Palestinian social media, while traditional media outlets—including those owned by Hamas or in private hands—strictly avoid addressing the issue.

In an incident that became fairly widely known, one of the contestants, Jibril Rajoub, posted a claim on social media that Hussein al-Sheikh, one of his main adversaries, was sexually harassing female employees at the General Authority for Civil Affairs, the ministry al-Sheikh heads. Both the original post and numerous comments were hastily removed on Abbas's orders. Also quickly excised was a brief Facebook "mini-war" between Rajoub and the General Intelligence Directorate, headed by Maj. Gen. Majid Faraj, on

the always hypersensitive issue of "collaboration" with Israel.¹

Thus, the presidential race is growing more intense. This reality is also reflected in the strenuous efforts by some contenders to obtain the allegiance of armed groups from the myriad squads of the Tanzim—the organization of Fatah cadres—in West Bank refugee camps, the countryside, and poorer suburbs. Numerous cases of violent friction between Tanzim groups allied with rival politicians have been contained at an early stage. Around Nablus, however, fatalities have occurred in clashes between PA security forces (PASF) and local gangs. It is worth noting that the PA has never embarked on a systematic campaign to disarm these groups, which sprang up as a result of Yasser Arafat's secret move to distribute weapons to Tanzim activists in 1997. The Tanzim groups possess an abundance of guns, and the PASF is usually reluctant to confront those possessing them.

It is important to stress that the competition reflects personal and factional interests more than significant political differences. Rather than offer individual platforms, all these figures concentrate on proposing nuanced changes to current policies, especially

regarding relations with Israel and, to a lesser extent, Hamas. Most contenders emerged from Arafat's old security apparatus and later had close contacts with their Israeli counterparts. The rivals adopt at times conflicting public postures regarding relations with Israel, Hamas, and the meaning of "resistance," but until now this has not translated into a serious divide. The main features of the rivalry are mutual accusations of "collaboration" and "corruption" rather than a debate over alternative courses of policy.

As a rule, most contenders seek to advertise criticism of Israel, skepticism concerning the advantages of respecting the Oslo Accords, and reservations regarding security coordination. But none of them advocates igniting another intifada or resorting to "armed struggle." Thus, the controversy has narrowed to a focus on tactics, with no discernible internal Fatah debate over strategy. Occasionally, someone calls for "dissolving" the PA and dropping the two-state solution, but so far such statements have not been transformed into an agenda for any candidate.

Rawhi Fattouh (b. 1949), who in 2004 served as interim PA president in the gap between Arafat's death and Abbas's election, attempted to ease the mounting tensions. In late 2019, he proposed nominating a five-member committee that would be entrusted with selecting Abbas's successor when the time comes. Fattouh's aim was to set up a speedy procedure that would avert dangerous confrontations during the transitional period. Unsurprisingly, he had his own agenda that involved becoming a compromise candidate acceptable to all factions. Abbas, however, wasted no time in dismissing his proposal, and so far he has clearly been uninterested in creating a special mechanism to make decisions after he departs.

By late 2018, Abbas, through the constitutional court he established in 2016, had also dissolved the Palestinian Legislative Council, for which the most recent election took place in 2006. The body has not been functioning since June 2007, when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip. In practice, this move suspended the law stipulating that the speaker serve as interim president—the very law that enabled Fattouh to serve. The last speaker, Aziz Duwaik (b. 1948), was

from Hamas, and Abbas wanted to ensure that no Hamas member would ever replace him. Abbas talks regularly about holding new elections but absent an understanding with Hamas (over voting in the Gaza Strip) and Israel (over voting in East Jerusalem), no ballot boxes are expected to be set up in the foreseeable future.

Abbas, who turns eighty-five this coming November, often privately reminds his quarreling Fatah lieutenants and subordinates that he was blessed with "excellent genes." His father died at 113. But the chain-smoking Abbas, who has gained quite a bit of weight, is undergoing routine cardiology checkups—in Baltimore, Berlin, and more often Amman. Still, at present he has no acute health problems.² His official spokesmen routinely deny the occasional rumors that his physical condition is worsening. Sometimes, his doctors in Ramallah discreetly consult with their Israeli colleagues. But so far, Abbas has refused to be treated in Israel, although in 2014 he allowed his wife, Amina, to undergo leg surgery in Tel Aviv. The Palestinian president does not spend long hours in his office and has been well enough in recent years to travel for weeks at a time around the globe. People close to him testify that these days he tends to be more short-tempered and moody than in the past and has little patience for those who dare to question his policies. This low tolerance led in recent years to the removal of several of his more capable advisors, notably Yasser Abed Rabbo, Nabil Amr, and al-Tayyeb Abdul Rahim.

ABBAS CONSOLIDATES HIS POWER

So far, no effort has been made to streamline the succession process, and no clear legislation exists on how to elect a new PA president. It is widely understood, however, that Fatah movement institutions—the Central Committee, then the wider Revolutionary Council, and finally the Fatah General Congress—will ultimately be the forums where decisions are made and approved. In past years, especially during Fatah's last rounds of internal elections in 2016, Abbas managed to fill these bodies with loyalists while

ousting many of those whom he came to view as too independent-minded.

In late 2019, elections for the Fatah district councils (*aqalim*) in the West Bank confirmed the PA president's ability to control results even at the local level, with help from the PASF. Thus, the new committees running Fatah branches in the different districts, whose members usually hail from the younger generation, have shown themselves happy to support Abbas's policies. They refrain from proposing alternative courses of action and are focused on their own political prospects for the post-Abbas period.

The top prospects for succession belong to the current Fatah Central Committee, with each striving to cultivate his own power base and generally avoiding open controversy. They are in constant competition to win support from Fatah's grassroots groupings, to which they divert budgets by drawing on the PA's complex patronage system. For all aspirants, securing adequate financial resources is clearly essential, and to that end, they often strike ad hoc alliances with one another. Nevertheless, the activists joke that "a deal in Fatah is good for a week."

Abbas is sharply cognizant of this state of affairs and eager to preserve a stable balance of power beneath him. He has thus solidified his grip over Fatah. Notably, in December 2016, he exerted his influence over the movement's Seventh General Congress, held in Bethlehem, to elect a new, extended eighteen-member Central Committee and a new, eighty-member Revolutionary Council. Next, he took an unprecedented step, allocating upgraded positions in several bodies for the leading contenders:

- **Mahmoud al-Aloul** (b. 1950) was appointed vice chair of the Fatah Central Committee, a function that had not previously existed. This nomination led some in Fatah to view Aloul as Abbas's choice for a successor.
- **Jibril Rajoub** (b. 1953) was appointed secretary-general of the Central Committee, in addition to

his roles heading the Palestinian Football Association and Olympic Committee. Despite receiving more votes than any other candidate in the Seventh Congress, Rajoub was not rewarded by Abbas with more executive powers.

- **Maj. Gen. Majid Faraj** (b. 1963) was promoted to de facto special emissary on behalf of Abbas and national security advisor in charge of all security agencies.
- **Saeb Erekat** (b. 1955) was appointed secretary-general of the PLO Executive Committee.
- **Hussein al-Sheikh** (b. 1960), former secretary-general of Fatah in the West Bank and a member of the Central Committee, was granted overall responsibility for coordination with Israel in civilian matters.
- Finally, in 2019, **Mohammad Shtayyeh** (b. 1958) was elevated to the post of prime minister.

The contenders understand that their chances of agreeing on a single successor to assume all Abbas's various titles and powers are very slim. Abbas has secured for himself vast authorities during his fifteen-year tenure, and although he took care to "consult" frequently with the top PLO and Fatah entities, he in fact made all major decisions on his own, winning post-factum approval from his subordinates. Thus, Abbas retains exclusive control over the different security agencies; the government and the important ministries; and the Fatah organization throughout the West Bank, and partly in the Gaza Strip and the diaspora, especially Lebanon. He nominates all district governors—who are not required to take orders from the government—and personally controls PA foreign relations, managing ties with major international powers as well as key Arab and Muslim-led states.

It should be noted that when Abbas succeeded Arafat in 2005 as the consensual heir, he was required to relinquish the chairmanship of the Fatah movement to his adversary Faruq Qaddumi, a longtime opponent of the Oslo Accords who has refused to move from his

home in Tunisia to the West Bank. It took some time before Abbas successfully claimed this position as well.

ENTER SHTAYYEH

The Fatah Central Committee is, in all likelihood, the forum in which the succession vote will occur. Its leading members realize that they may be compelled to divvy up Abbas's current responsibilities. This would establish a sort of collective leadership in which the figure eventually selected to be PA president will probably be the weakest of the group. There is talk of distributing the offices of PA president; PLO Executive Committee chair; Fatah Central Committee chair; prime minister; PLO secretary-general; and Fatah secretary-general. Additional offices can be easily introduced to accommodate a greater number of players. This prospective arrangement is generally perceived as a temporary solution to avoid a crisis in the immediate wake of Abbas's departure.

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, however, has shifted the balance of power at the top echelons of Fatah, with Abbas isolated in his Ramallah residence, barring his assistants from showing up to work, strictly maintaining a distance from all his lieutenants, and communicating with them only by phone. Among other things, this has presented an enormous opportunity for Mohammad Shtayyeh, the ambitious newly appointed prime minister and the first Fatah member to assume this office since Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) resigned in 2006.³ The first PA prime minister was appointed in 2003, when the United States, European Union, and some Arab states forced Arafat to nominate Abbas himself to this post.

Shtayyeh replaced Rami Hamdallah (b. 1958), an uninspiring linguistics university professor from Nablus who was appointed in 2013. Hamdallah had gradually started to display some political appetite of his own rather than restricting himself to directing a purely technocratic team. He was seen as constantly seeking to expand his authorities, thus raising the ire of Fatah's veterans bent on protecting their own fiefdoms.

Hamdallah had himself been tapped by Abbas to replace another non-Fatah independent, the reformist Salam Fayyad (b. 1951), who served with distinction as finance minister and then prime minister from 2007 to 2013. Fayyad, for the first time, put forth a comprehensive vision on how to proceed gradually toward establishing a Palestinian state. Fayyad's dynamic policy, coupled with moderate views on the conflict with Israel and backing from the West, inevitably made Abbas perceive him as a potential threat. Finally, Abbas bowed to persistent pressure from Fatah's elders to fire him. Fayyad, once considered the most suitable successor by many, is no longer on the short list and tends to spend only limited time in the West Bank, residing mostly in the United States.

Shtayyeh was for many years relatively close to Arafat but belonged only to the second-tier leadership. He served as one of the negotiators with Israel and was also head of the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR), minister of public works, and chair of the elections commission. Shtayyeh is a member of the Fatah Central Committee and, although careful not to advertise his ambitions in public, has never hidden his aspirations to one day reach the top.

As prime minister, Shtayyeh has exploited the coronavirus pandemic to demonstrate his administrative qualities, political skills, and rhetorical style, while Abbas has mostly been absent from daily management of the crisis. Maj. Gen. Faraj, who runs the PASF, has been happy to assist Shtayyeh, whose handling of the PA effort to combat the virus's spread has earned him high marks, often much higher than Abbas's. Public opinion surveys by the West Bank pollster Arab World for Research and Development found in late March that "82% of respondents evaluate the overall performance of the government of Dr. Shtayyeh positively, an unprecedented [*sic*] high evaluation."⁴

Shtayyeh has worked concertedly to assume control of the security agencies, which have been essential in enforcing a lockdown in PA-controlled areas. In Areas B and C, where the PASF is prohibited from operating without explicit prior Israeli consent, and in East Jerusalem, Shtayyeh has helped create no fewer than

four hundred Tanzim “emergency committees” to ensure the population abides by the PA’s instructions. These committees sometimes supply food and medical care and erect roadblocks to separate Palestinian villages and refugee camps from neighboring Jewish settlements. Shtayyeh has demonstrated a remarkable ability to orchestrate the activity of PA and Fatah forces and, at the time of this writing, was contemplating creating a permanent Tanzim militia to complement the existing structure of the PASF.

By late April 2020 in the West Bank, records indicated some 330 cases of Covid-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus, with no deaths.⁵ The general sentiment among Palestinians was that the PA was doing well in its efforts to contain the contagion. If the disease does not spin out of control in PA-run areas, Shtayyeh will take most of the credit. As a result, he is already seen—for the first time in his career—as a possible successor to Abbas. Palestinians are generally appreciative of his effective and thoughtful approach to the crisis. Yet Shtayyeh can only become president if Abbas lets him keep his job, rather than removing him, as he has done in the past whenever he sensed a threat.

Another advantage for Shtayyeh is his relative youth among members of the Fatah Central Committee. Quite a few of the older members have acute health problems, including those thought to be comparatively well positioned: Faraj underwent coronary bypass surgery in 2018, slowing him down ever since. Rajoub has struggled in the past few years with a type of cancer and travels to South Korea for treatment, after having been hospitalized in London. Aloul has diabetes. Erekat received a lung transplant in the United States. And Nasser al-Qudwa has heart-related issues. These are just a few examples.

Still, quite a few of these figures can be expected to work together to prevent a smooth takeover by Shtayyeh. The big question is whether the commanders of the different security agencies will join Faraj in backing Shtayyeh on his way up, as they helped him in battling the pandemic.

For this to happen, Faraj, still the dominant figure in the 30,000-strong PASF, would have to renounce

his own aspirations. If he did so, the question would be whether the other security agency commanders follow suit. Gen. Hazem Atallah (b. 1965), the chief of the PA police, is well respected in the West Bank and viewed as a potentially independent player. His father, Arafat’s longtime chief of military intelligence Atallah Atallah (Abu al-Zaim), ultimately broke ranks with his boss and became one of his most vehement critics while residing in Cairo and then Amman. He moved to the West Bank only after Arafat’s death to see his son, who in 2008 became the youngest-ever head of the Palestinian police. Also uncertain is whether Maj. Gen. Ziad Hab al-Rih, who heads PA Preventive Security and is still close to his old boss Rajoub, and Maj. Gen. Nidal Abu Dukhan, commander of the National Security Forces, would follow Faraj’s example.

AN UNEASY BALANCE

The current Palestinian political map can be summarized as follows:

The most effective axis in Fatah is that centered on Majid Faraj and Hussein al-Sheikh, the primary contacts with Israeli authorities.⁶ Jointly, they form a powerful political alliance that has so far supported Shtayyeh’s performance as prime minister. Roughly half of the members of the Central Committee back them. The Faraj–al-Sheikh axis also holds the loyalty of most PASF personnel; a significant section of the Tanzim, mainly in the Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Jenin districts; and a substantial part of the public sector. A large portion of the general population depends on their goodwill, and their access to the PA’s financial resources is unrivaled.

Pitched against them is a looser coalition comprising Jibril Rajoub, the first Preventive Security commander in the West Bank; Tawfiq al-Tirawi (b. 1948), former director of General Intelligence; and Nasser al-Qudwa (b. 1953), a former foreign minister and high-ranking United Nations official. Sabri Saidam (b. 1972)—the son of Fatah’s late military chief, a former minister, and the current deputy secretary-general of Fatah’s

Central Committee—is also a prominent member of this faction. Ahmed Hilles (b. 1952) furnishes it with support from what remains of the Fatah structure in Gaza.

There are indications that Mohammad Dahlan (b. 1961), the Fatah leader expelled by Abbas from the organization in 2011 and living in exile, is somehow linked to this alliance. Dahlan and Rajoub have a thirty-year history of enmity, but more recently Dahlan has maintained a certain amount of cooperation with Tirawi in cultivating armed Tanzim groups in several refugee camps. Rumors that he has reconciled with Rajoub in recent months cannot be confirmed, but Dahlan's associates outside the PA have certainly been in touch with Rajoub.

Dahlan once saw himself as a serious contender to replace Abbas, who accuses him, *inter alia*, of sharing the blame for Arafat's "assassination." Dahlan, a former chief of Gaza Preventive Security who lost the region to Hamas in 2007, enjoys the sponsorship of Abu Dhabi's *de facto* ruler, Muhammad bin Zayed. Dahlan spends long periods in Serbia and Montenegro and has been granted citizenship by both. He is favored by Egyptian intelligence. While he has succeeded in retaining some support among Fatah loyalists in the Gaza Strip by offering occasional subsidies, his efforts to obtain a substantial following in the West Bank have met with only modest success.

This coalition can count on support from Rajoub's strong following in the Mount Hebron area and from some of his former subordinates in Preventive Security. It can also rely on Tirawi's Tanzim factions in some of the northern West Bank refugee camps and a few of his former officers in General Intelligence, as well as Fatah cadres attracted by Dahlan's funding. Qudwa, their likely choice to head the PA, is keeping a low profile for now and has no organized power base of his own, except as head of the Yasser Arafat Foundation.⁷ Being Arafat's nephew also brings him some popularity, especially in Gaza, and a diverse array of high-level contacts in the Arab world.

Mahmoud al-Aloul is playing his cards differently, preferring to remain a lone wolf rather than seek

partnerships. He calculates that the two rival alliances will request his support when the moment comes. Aloul, a former commander of the Western Sector, Fatah's terrorist outfit in the pre-Oslo decades, was imprisoned in Israel and lost a son during the second intifada. He also enjoys wide respect among Fatah youth. Since his lengthy term as governor of Nablus (1995–2009), he has cultivated a solid political base within the Nablus region. He has always maintained a close friendship with Abbas. In serving currently as head of Fatah's Office of Mobilization and Organization, he managed to expand his networks among the Tanzim in other districts as well. Quite a few members of Fatah's Central Committee would feel more comfortable with him than with any other successor.

Public opinion polls have found that the most popular candidate to succeed Abbas is Marwan Barghouti (b. 1959), who since 2002 has been serving five life sentences in Israel's Hadarim prison for murder during the second intifada. Yet his close partners, such as Qadura Fares, face increasing difficulties maintaining his old base of support in the Ramallah countryside and elsewhere. Abbas has made sure over the years that the Barghouti camp does not perform well in Fatah elections. The latest rounds of internal Fatah voting have proven that although Barghouti's lengthy imprisonment still elicits public sympathy, it does not translate into tangible political prospects. The other rivals—notably Rajoub—may be interested in gaining his blessing and would probably be willing to offer him a symbolic title, but in any case, Barghouti is now more of a spectator than a participant in the race.⁸

Clashes between these rival camps often revolve around the loaded issue of relations with Israel, with intra-Palestinian reconciliation—mainly with Hamas—the second priority. The Faraj-al-Sheikh faction claims that Rajoub, as head of Preventive Security, enabled the Israel Defense Forces to capture or kill certain militants, notably the Hamas-aligned Awadallah brothers. Tirawi and Rajoub respond by depicting their competitors as "Israeli puppets" and "traitors." In a Facebook post, al-Sheikh once called on them "to drink from the water of the Dead Sea."⁹

Tirawi is the only one who has publicly criticized the Palestinian president's management of relations with Israel, urging withdrawal from the Oslo Accords, suspension of all forms of security coordination, and rescinding of Arafat's 1993 recognition of Israel's right to exist. He seems to be in tune with another veteran of the Central Committee, Abbas Zaki, a former PLO ambassador to Lebanon, who advocates close Palestinian relations with Iran and Hezbollah. Rajoub avoids upsetting Abbas but at the same time registers his support for ending security coordination with Israel.

Both Rajoub and Tirawi are barred from entering Israel, which has revoked their VIP certificates—a perk available to most mainstream Palestinian leaders—while Faraj and al-Sheikh are in daily contact with their Israeli colleagues. Aloul, too, is keen to present his objections to security coordination and steers away from contacts with Israelis. Shtayyeh, who had close contacts with Israel in his previous jobs, is making a great effort as prime minister to distance himself from Israel, building up credentials as a strong critic of cooperation. Although he has called for a boycott of Israeli products, he is nevertheless quite happy to have al-Sheikh carry messages to his Israeli counterparts, including pleas for generous financial aid.

As for relations with Hamas, Rajoub portrays himself as a potential architect of Gaza–West Bank reunification through reintegrating Hamas into the PA. Other candidates are also careful to appear as advocates of reconciliation with Hamas, based on compromise. Hamas's Political Bureau has so far ignored these campaign statements, refusing to offer any indication of its preference for one candidate or another. Hamas leaders realize that they are unlikely to take part in the succession process. They may still enjoy support from up to a third of West Bank residents, but their organization there has been decimated over the past decade, with their network of underground cells mostly uncovered. Only a period of confusion

and infighting at Fatah's highest echelons might allow them a chance to enter the fray.

CONCLUSION

To a large extent, how succession plays out will depend on the manner in which Abbas departs from office. He may still decide to retire of his own accord so that he can supervise his replacement's election. He has already announced several times that he has no intention of running again for president if elections are held, but these statements are generally viewed as a ploy to invite "pressure" on him "to change his mind."

Whether he chooses to retire or stay until he is incapacitated, Abbas can be expected to take steps to guarantee that the al-Sheikh–Faraj alliance, complemented by Shtayyeh and Aloul, will run the show. He has no intention of paving the way to power for his sworn enemies Dahlan and Tirawi or for critics like Rajoub, Barghouti, and Qudwa. In the next phase, therefore, observers should look out for maneuvers intended to strengthen the PA president's favorites, along with corresponding attempts by their adversaries to hold their ground. Increasing tensions will raise the specter of deterioration into scattered violent skirmishes between PASF and Tanzim groups.

Israel is bound to adopt a wait-and-see policy, avoiding blatant intervention in this struggle. It has nothing to gain from appearing to act as kingmaker for the Palestinians. Israel, however, has ample tools to affect the process through its security cooperation with the PASF, its financial dealings with the PA, and its military control over most parts of the West Bank. In the larger picture, Israel is determined to prevent the emergence of a new Palestinian leadership committed to "all forms of popular resistance" or seeking accommodation with Hamas.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given how the contest for Palestinian succession is shaping up, Israel, its Arab neighbors led by Jordan and Egypt, and PA donor states including the European Union, Japan, and also the United States should adhere to policies that do the following:

- Encourage the rival factions in Fatah to restrain their armed supporters and strive to reach a quiet agreement on post-Abbas arrangements. None of the contenders is in a position to ignore this advice: each will be eager to secure Israeli acceptance, aid from the donor states, and diplomatic assistance from neighboring and Gulf Arab states.
- Prevent a major crisis resulting from attempted Israeli annexation of portions of the West Bank allocated to it in U.S. president Donald Trump's peace plan.¹⁰ Moves toward annexation may trigger large-scale Palestinian protests, including armed attacks, which will force the PA to restrict security cooperation with Israel, at least formally. They may also result in punitive measures against Israel by Jordan and other Arab states. Annexation would certainly compromise the standing of the Faraj-al-Sheikh axis.
- Stress that the Trump plan can be discussed as a blueprint for a whole range of interim arrangements rather than merely as an outline for final resolution of the conflict. This may allow for new ideas for the resumption of PA-Israel negotiations and the PA-U.S. dialogue.
- Make clear that they expect a moderate Palestinian leadership that rejects—as Abbas does—"armed struggle" and is committed to a two-state solution to the conflict with Israel. U.S., Canadian, and EU involvement with the PASF should likewise be maintained.

NOTES

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2. On Abbas's health and potential successors, see David Hacham, "Mahmoud Abbas Is Ailing; Who Leads Palestinians Next?" *New York Daily News*, April 5, 2020, <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-abbas-palestinians-who-comes-next-20200405-vz5lh4m5ojhhdikhisuc6vcfy-story.html>.
3. Khaled Abu Toameh, "Coronavirus Pandemic Boosts Shtayyeh's Chances of Becoming Next PA President," *Jerusalem Post*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/coronavirus-crisis-boosts-shtayyehs-chances-of-becoming-next-pa-president-623351>; also see Palestine Information Center, "Did Coronavirus Renew Political Conflicts in the Palestinian Authority?" (in Arabic), April 16, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Sf00TB>.
4. Arab World for Research and Development, "Opinion Poll on the Palestinian Government's Performance Against the Coronavirus," poll taken March 28–31, 2020; n = 800 economically and socially active Palestinian men and women, <https://bit.ly/35ajmtx>.
5. Updated statistics on coronavirus in the Palestinian territories, including the West Bank specifically, are available at the Palestine News and Information Agency (WAFA) website, <http://english.wafa.ps/>.
6. On Faraj's alliance with al-Sheikh, see Hacham, "Who Leads the Palestinians Next?" <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-abbas-palestinians-who-comes-next-20200405-vz5lh4m5ojhhdikhisuc6vcfy-story.html>; on Faraj's strength as a leader, see "The Pasha: The First Intelligence Man in Palestine Who May Pass 'The Deal of the Century'" (in Arabic), *Sasa Post*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.sasapost.com/majid-faraj/>; and (in Arabic) <https://bit.ly/3bJh6vz>.
7. See Yasser Arafat Foundation, "Board of Directors," http://www.yaf.ps/?url=blogs/listing/543/Board_of_Directors.
8. For a recent news reference to Barghouti, see Hacham, "Who Leads the Palestinians Next?" <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-abbas-palestinians-who-comes-next-20200405-vz5lh4m5ojhhdikhisuc6vcfy-story.html>.
9. See Khaled Abu Toameh, "Fatah Officials Jockeying for Power as Abbas's Tenure Enters 15th Year," *Jerusalem Post*, January 11, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/fatah-officials-jockeying-for-power-as-abbass-tenure-enters-15th-year-613851>.
10. White House, *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, January 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf>.

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