

Palestinian Elections: How Real, and with What Results

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Brief Analysis

Members of the political class and the general public are increasingly anticipating and expecting that Palestinian elections will take place due to an unusual convergence of interests between PA president Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Hamas.

Today, the Palestinians find themselves at the closest point to holding an election since 2006, arriving here after a decade and half of repeated failures in efforts at internal reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. In an unprecedented move, election dates were set last month: in May for the Palestine Legislative Council, and later this year for the Palestinian Authority (PA) president and the PLO National Council. Voter registration on the electoral rolls has also been conducted, with a declared **93 percent effective yield** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/palestinian-politics-election-int/palestinians-report-93-voter-registration-for-upcoming-elections-idUSKBN2AH1Q7>). As a result, members of the political class and the general public are increasingly anticipating and expecting that these elections will actually take place.

An unusual convergence of interests between PA president Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Hamas enabled these steps toward elections. On one hand, Abu Mazen is interested in improving his standing with the new administration in Washington and strengthening his legitimacy at home. On the other, Hamas sees an opportunity to improve civilian conditions in Gaza while reinforcing its position in Palestinian politics before a day when Abu Mazen potentially leaves office.

Despite his indications otherwise, Abu Mazen is apparently not genuinely interested in actually bringing about election day. Instead, he still believes he can stop the process at any given moment. Nonetheless, the story of the election is gaining momentum in a way that increases its odds of realization, and as time passes, the step-by-step increase in both internal and international pressures to move forward are making it harder to arrest the process.

Furthermore, some problems that doomed previous attempts at an election have been cleared away, and Hamas is showing new willingness to comply with Abu Mazen's conditions to conduct the election in a purely proportional,

phased system. Still, obstacles remain that are liable to derail this process, and the elections are not a foregone conclusion. Three central problems are particularly threatening for the prospect of elections:

1. The claim by both Hamas and the PA that their mutual commitment to free political prisoners in the West Bank is not being fulfilled.
2. The tension that has emerged in recent days from PA criticism of Hamas for its attempt to get involved in the PA-Egyptian deal to develop a natural gas field off the Gaza coast ("Gaza Marine").
3. The question of holding a Palestinian election in Jerusalem, which, once they understood that Israel would not authorize such an election in its own capital city, has until now been the main excuse for either side to pull back from holding Palestinian elections.

Despite all of these issues, electoral preparations by both Hamas and Fatah are gathering steam. In this context, signs point to a repeat of trends that characterized the 2006 election. Most of all, a sharpening of internal tensions and factionalism has appeared within Fatah, damaging its electoral potential and its public image, which was far from bright anyway. These divisions were the central source of Fatah's failure in the 2006 electoral contest.

Today, several such bones of [internal contention \(https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/ahead-of-palestinian-elections-abbas-stays-wary-of-rivals-dahlan-hamas-656298\)](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/ahead-of-palestinian-elections-abbas-stays-wary-of-rivals-dahlan-hamas-656298) stand out. First, there is the attempt by Marwan Barghouti, Fatah's prominent leader jailed for terrorism by Israel, to run for PA president, which the PA top echelon is trying to prevent. Second, there is the insistence by the camp of Mohamed Dahlan, Abu Mazen's arch-rival who currently resides in the United Arab Emirates, to contest the election as an independent slate. Third, there are the strenuous efforts of Jibril Rajoub to carry out the election only as a means of paving his way to succeed Abu Mazen, a campaign that aggravates tensions with other senior Fatah leaders who incline away from him and from the whole electoral process. Fourth, Nasser al-Kidwa, Fatah Central Committee Member and Arafat's nephew, intends to set up his own separate parliamentary candidates list; al-Kidwa coordinates his moves with Barghouti.

In sharp contrast, Hamas has demonstrated a unified and confident front as it approaches the potential elections. For the time being, the movement allows a somewhat relaxed attitude towards its electoral participation, clarifying that it might be represented by "independent" personages identified with Hamas, much as the Muslim Brotherhood once did in Tunisia and Jordan. At the same time, Hamas makes it clear that this election has no direct link to the Oslo peace process. Hamas has asserted that an election does not commit it to recognize any existing political agreements with Israel or to make any concessions in the military domain.

Hamas keeps a constant wary eye on Israel, fearing that Israel will attempt to limit its activism in the West Bank by, for example, [arresting dozens of its leaders \(https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/israel-arrests-2-hamas-leaders-in-west-bank-raids/2146381\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/israel-arrests-2-hamas-leaders-in-west-bank-raids/2146381) there, as occurred recently. To this point, Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader in Gaza, [warned lately \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-gaza-chief-if-israel-messes-with-our-elections-well-mess-with-theirs/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-gaza-chief-if-israel-messes-with-our-elections-well-mess-with-theirs/) that if Israel tries to spoil an election in the Palestinian territories, then Hamas will act to spoil the upcoming Israeli election.

At this stage, then, there are several main scenarios that might play out:

1. **Internal Political "Explosion"**—This scenario would mean failure of the election effort in the wake of tensions between the PA and Hamas, likely manifested as mutual accusations of failure to fulfill their commitments. If this scenario plays out sooner, while expectations for the election are still somewhat moderate, its effects will be more limited. In addition, such a development could actually make it easier for Abu Mazen to engage in a possible effort to resume a peace process with Israel. At the same time, however, it would also crash Hamas's

expectations, which could find expression in a tougher approach towards Fatah inside Gaza, along with deeper apprehension about the persistence of civilian tribulations there.

2. **Failure Induced by Israel**—This development could result from an intensive Israeli push against Hamas in the West Bank, accompanied by a direct refusal to allow either a vote in East Jerusalem, or Palestinian election officials' transit to Gaza. In their heart of hearts, many elements in Ramallah would probably prefer this outcome because it would exonerate Abu Mazen from responsibility for the election's collapse. However, this development could also cause armed confrontation between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Furthermore, this development could create political tensions between Israel and the PA, potentially provoking popular protests in the West Bank that could turn against Israel, the PA, or both.
3. **Fatah Electoral Victory**—At least in the current moment, this development appears unlikely, although Israel, most of the Arab world, and the U.S.-led international community would welcome it. Even with international support, there is a low probability that Hamas would ever agree to hand its rule in Gaza over to Abu Mazen, which would mean losing what it perceives as among its most important strategic assets.
4. **Hamas Electoral Victory**—Currently, it is quite difficult to assess the probability of this scenario due largely to the lack of information on Hamas's popularity in the West Bank. Some public opinion polls show a slight advantage there for Fatah, but their level of accuracy is unclear, and, in any case, this variable is susceptible to rapid change. This situation could lead to an "Algerian scenario" in which Abu Mazen would refuse to accept the election's results, much as Algeria's regime behaved when Islamists won the election there in 1991. That could create enough internal tension to spark violent clashes between Hamas and the PA in the West Bank, alongside popular protests which could threaten the stability of the Ramallah regime. In the event that Abu Mazen does accept this electoral outcome, Hamas would probably enjoy a strengthened foothold in the West Bank and may take control over the PA.
5. **Unity Government**—This scenario could emerge either from an electoral tie between Fatah and Hamas, or from a Hamas agreement to enter the government as partner rather than leader. That would mainly reflect Hamas's reluctance to assume full responsibility for governance and its understanding that doing so would also place it under growing internal and external pressure to recognize the political agreements with Israel, thus restricting its armed force and paramilitary operations. Still, in this case, Hamas would be more able to entrench its hold on the West Bank without making any meaningful concessions in Gaza, all while under the protective cover of the PA. The latter is already trying to "clarify"—as it did during the failed unity government of 2006-2007, right after the previous election—that this would become a matter of restraining, integrating, and gradually transforming Hamas. But that claim has already been strongly refuted in the past, and at least for now there is no reason to expect otherwise in the future.

In reality, the very notion that this election will really take place remains foggy. And even if it does happen, there is the growing sense that it would redound more to the reputation of Hamas than that of Fatah. As such, the prospect of an election will probably face new challenges and even threats from the PA, Israel, and to a great extent the moderate Arab camp and the West as well.

In the short term, failure to move forward with the election would only return the parties to where they were around a month ago without causing major upheavals in the Palestinian arena. However, to the extent that such internal obstacles, including Israeli preemption, get closer to the first scheduled election date of May 22, it will become

harder and harder to abort the election. Moreover, the internal and external repercussions would be stronger, and more likely accompanied by political and security skirmishes between Israel and the Palestinians, among the Palestinians themselves, and between the international community and both parties to the conflict.

Therefore, looking ahead, it is already vital to establish close consultation and coordination regarding this election issue among all of the following actors: Israel, the PA, the main Arab actors, especially Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the international community, with the United States in the lead. Without this concerted effort, we are all likely to witness a replay of the 2006 election, a process that will dramatically alter the very nature of Palestinian affairs by weakening the nationalist trend and strengthening the Islamist one under the leadership of Hamas.

The best, most urgent way to avoid repeating that tragic mistake today would be to forge a fast, firm international consensus to prevent its recurrence. This consensus would stipulate that Hamas could participate in the election only after it convincingly accepts the conditions previously agreed to by Israel, the PA, the United States and the entire Quartet, including Russia, the EU, and the UN. That means recognizing Israel, renouncing violence, and accepting all previous Palestinian-Israeli political agreements. And if Hamas continues to refuse, then it must bear the onus of aborting the first Palestinian election in fifteen years.

So far, Hamas has shown little sign of swallowing what it sees as a bitter pill, but that is partly because it has been led to believe it never needs to do so. This is all the more reason to conclude that the sooner these constructive Quartet conditions are reaffirmed and enforced by all players, the better it will be for any prospect of genuine Palestinian democracy and agreement with Israel. ❖

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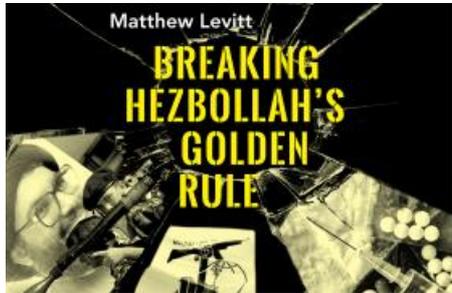
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