

If Palestinian Elections Proceed, Hamas May Have the Upper Hand

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Brief Analysis

Abbas may decide to postpone the vote given Fatah's internal fissures, his rivals' relative unity, and the damage that certain outcomes could do to Palestinian relations with the West.

Although significant obstacles may still derail the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) election scheduled for May 22, the formal process of registering candidates is proceeding for now, and the candidate lists will be published in April. The contours of the electoral map are taking shape as well, with Hamas seeming cohesive while Fatah is showing fissures. Some key factors have changed since elections were last held in 2006, but the overall picture is worryingly similar.

Hamas Unified

Despite internal tensions, Hamas is showing a unified front as it enters the current election cycle, which may also include a presidential vote and other contests later this year. The two main figures pushing the group to participate in the process are Saleh al-Aruri, deputy head of its Political Bureau, and Yahya al-Sinwar, its leading official in Gaza. While both aspire to ultimately lead Hamas and are therefore bound to clash at some point, they have established effective working relations for now on a number of issues, including elections.

When Hamas held internal elections last month, Sinwar faced a serious challenge from Nizar Awadallah, an old-guard figure who is uncomfortable with Sinwar's openness to establishing functional understandings with Israel and Egypt, among other issues. As these tensions began emerging in public, Hamas quickly announced that Sinwar had won the Gaza vote. Although his margin of victory was small and may indicate future difficulties with controlling Hamas in Gaza, his local power is uncontested for now. With Sinwar secure and his partnership with Aruri intact, Hamas is poised to enter the election unified and disciplined.

Fatah Fracturing

Fatah's current disunity is conjuring bad memories of its defeat in the 2006 PLC elections. After that setback, Palestinian Authority president and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas sought to consolidate his grip by cracking down on and excluding any dissenting views within the movement's ranks. Although he succeeded in establishing full control over the party's formal structures, significant constituencies have been alienated by his coercive approach.

With the new election looming, Abbas has been using similar tactics to impose discipline on Fatah, barring members of its leadership bodies from vying for PLC seats and threatening candidates who run outside the official list with expulsion—even with violence, according to some media reports. Yet this approach is not swaying certain constituencies capable of influencing the election, including prominent former Gaza security chief Mohammad Dahlan and popular politician Marwan Barghouti.

Dahlan has already been expelled from Fatah and has been living in exile in the United Arab Emirates, so he sees the election process and surrounding developments as a first step in his return to official Palestinian politics—a path that may include an eventual bid for the presidency. Dahlan cannot run for a PLC seat himself because he was convicted of corruption charges in absentia in 2014, yet he continues to enjoy significant support in Gaza and parts of the West Bank. In the Strip, Hamas has given Dahlan and his supporters wider space for operating than it gave official Fatah members. In recent weeks, for example, Dahlan delivered shipments of COVID-19 vaccines to Gaza, and some of his top lieutenants—most notably former security chief Rashid Abu Shabak—were permitted to return there for the first time since 2007. Whether Dahlan will run his own list in the PLC election or support another is not clear yet.

As for Barghouti—who is serving five life sentences in Israeli jail but whom opinion polls still identify as the most popular Palestinian politician by far—he is unlikely to field a list for the May vote because he is eyeing a possible presidential run and does not want to be blamed for splitting Fatah in the interim. Even so, he and his supporters have been increasingly critical of Abbas's approach and are unlikely to throw strong support behind the official Fatah list, especially if it excludes them as expected (they have felt increasingly marginalized since the last Fatah general conference in 2016).

Abbas likely predicted such complications with Dahlan and Barghouti, but a surprising challenge has emerged from Nasser al-Qudwa, who announced his intention to form a list and run in the PLC election. His Fatah credentials are difficult to discredit: the nephew of Yasser Arafat, he became a prominent member of the movement in the 1970s, headed the General Union of Palestinian Students in 1974, served as the Palestine Liberation Organization's representative to the UN, and later became PA foreign minister. More recently, he served as a member of the Fatah Central Committee and head of the Yasser Arafat Foundation. Some see him as an elitist who lacks a populist touch, but his record is free from accusations of corruption or human rights violations.

Abbas reacted to Qudwa's candidacy announcement in his usual fashion, expelling him from Fatah and the Arafat Foundation and harassing some of his aides. Yet these reactions seem to be reinforcing Qudwa's narrative—namely, that he is a magnet for various discontented constituencies in Fatah and beyond. He recently reached out to Barghouti's camp, even promising to cede leadership of his list if Barghouti runs. And although he distanced himself from Dahlan and his top aides due to their vulnerabilities, Qudwa has repeatedly reached out to their rank-and-file supporters. He is also targeting certain independents and civil society activists. If any of these potential alliances materialize, Qudwa's list could pose a significant challenge to Fatah's.

Even the movement's official list formation process will likely be fraught given its implications for the perennial question of [who will succeed Abbas \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/palestinian-politics-](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/palestinian-politics-)

after-abbas-sudden-succession-essay-series). Secretary-General Jibril Rajoub was the driving force behind Fatah's decision to call for elections and will likely try to capitalize on this momentum in order to strengthen his support base—a move that will inevitably be opposed by other aspirants. Abbas has long been quick to undermine any Fatah leader who shows signs of becoming too strong, including Rajoub himself in 2015. The final composition of the official Fatah list will indicate whether this pattern is continuing.

Other Factions

Former PA prime minister Salam Fayyad, who was effectively forced into exile after his premiership, has announced his intention to run at the head of an independent list. Lacking the machinery of an established political organization, he is unlikely to garner many seats, but even a modest showing would allow him to return to formal political life.

Additionally, various leftist organizations have indicated a desire to unite in an electoral list. So far, though, efforts toward that end have not shown much progress.

2021 Is Not 2006

Despite the similarities between the current dynamics and 2006, there are important differences that make the outcome unpredictable. If voting actually happens this year, it will be governed by a different elections law that makes it difficult for one party to gain an absolute majority. And although Hamas remains disciplined internally, more than a few Palestinians blame it for perpetuating the split with Fatah, ruling Gaza in a corrupt manner, and failing to improve the territory's dismal socioeconomic performance. With this track record, the group may have trouble presenting itself as the party of good, clean governance, as it did in 2006. Another wrinkle is the possible emergence of a joint Fatah-Hamas list—an idea that is still alive despite internal opposition from both groups.

Perhaps most significantly, it remains unclear whether the PLC election will even be held on time. The splits within Fatah may exceed what Abbas anticipated. Likewise, the potential negative foreign policy implications are coming into sharper focus, especially regarding PA relations with the United States. These factors may prompt Abbas to postpone the vote. As things stand, Hamas seems better positioned to contest the election, and if members of this U.S.-designated terrorist group win entry to a resurrected PLC, the results will have substantial implications for U.S. policy toward the PA and the Middle East peace process. To avoid any Palestinian miscalculations, the Biden administration should keep a close eye on these developments and **make the bilateral consequences clear** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/press-room/press-release/institute-experts-urge-biden-administration-clarify-palestinian>).

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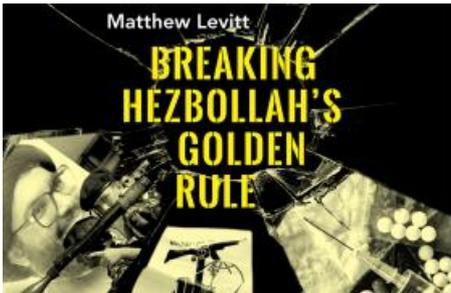
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