

The New Palestinian Fork in the Road: Will They Take It?

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Articles & Testimony

New proposals by Palestinian commentators can give Abbas and other senior officials a viable framework for rescheduling premature elections and jumpstarting engagement with Israel, Egypt, and Jordan.

The Palestinian issue is still an important one, though it is no longer the cause celebre of international, regional, or even Israeli politics. It has been eclipsed by other, larger crises elsewhere, by growing Arab-Israeli “normalization,” and by the sense that the supposedly “unsustainable” impasse in Palestinian-Israeli relations can in fact be indefinitely protracted. Lately, however, two contrasting trends emerging just under the surface of Palestinian politics are contending to upset this fabled, fragile status quo—either for better or for worse.

Gaza Election

The first such disruptive new force is the prospect of a West Bank/Gaza election. There has not been one for fifteen years; but recently one was suddenly scheduled by the rival Palestinian governments, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, for May 22. Democracy is a good thing. In this case, however, it must be weighed against the likely disastrous outcome of such an election. Hamas gains would almost certainly lead to great violence, first between Palestinians and Israelis and quite possibly among Palestinians themselves. And this would probably spell the last gasp of hope for a two-state, one-state, or any other peaceful solution for the Palestinian problem.

Partly for this reason, and more so due to internal Palestinian factionalism, it remains far from certain even now that this election will actually occur. Yet time and imagination are quickly running out on an acceptable way to defer it. That is where the other, quieter new factor in Palestinian politics could come into play.

A Consensual, Workable Solution

This second path forward from the approaching fork in the road points in a very different direction. It abruptly

surfaced, albeit unofficially, in a significant article in *Foreign Affairs*, coauthored by two Palestinian experts with solid nationalist credentials (Hussein Aghah and Ahmad Samih Khalidi, “[A Palestinian Reckoning: Time for a New Beginning \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-02-16/palestinian-reckoning\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-02-16/palestinian-reckoning)”). Their detailed diagnosis of the problem is compelling and acute: until today, they write, Palestinian strategies, whether of armed struggle or of inflexible diplomacy, have manifestly failed.

Less detailed, yet still intriguing, is their prescription for remedying this problem. They call for a Palestinian state with “limited” sovereignty—most creatively qualified by stronger security and other coordination, not just with Israel, but also with Egypt and Jordan. In principle this is not a radically original idea, but an elaboration of an earlier one.

Nevertheless, their explicit emphasis on it, in such a prestigious American publication, represents a potential departure from the persistent stalemate of the past two decades. Yes, the devil would be in the details of this innovative proposal; and there remain many such details that would no doubt occasion heated objections and debate from all the interested parties. Nevertheless, this article represents a welcome openness to more pragmatic paths toward some kind of consensual, workable solution for the perennial Palestinian problem.

In its own modest way, therefore, this essay is reminiscent of two others, from earlier decades. One also appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, way back in 1978, and eventually helped shape a different diplomatic discourse: Walid Khalidi’s “Thinking the Unthinkable: A Sovereign Palestinian State.” That, too, was an academic, unofficial, yet influential statement.

The Official Palestinian Willingness?

But what was missing then was a clear, official Palestinian willingness, even just in words, to make permanent peace with Israel. A decade later, that seemingly insurmountable obstacle began to lift with the breakthrough opened in a major American newspaper by PLO spokesman Bassam Abu Sharif, which for the first time offered Palestinian recognition of Israel. That article signaled the start of the tortuous process leading, over the next five years, first to U.S. official contacts with the PLO, and ultimately to the Oslo Accords that brought Arafat, the PLO, and many thousands of Palestinians physically and formally back to Palestine.

To be sure, the new path these two Palestinian advocates now outline toward “limited sovereignty” is littered with obstacles, both internal and external. No other Palestinian leader has stepped forward to support it openly. Israel is still reeling from its own inconclusive election, the fourth in two years, and is unlikely to be receptive to this initiative any time soon. And both Egypt and Jordan, who are called upon to assume greater roles in this scenario, have long been very reluctant to do exactly that.

Even so, this proposal offers the Palestinians some new, more realistic political and diplomatic margin for maneuver. It would also find some resonance among the Palestinian public, which recent polls show to be more open to medium-term pragmatic compromises than its leaders, both in the West Bank and Gaza. And it could even provide a means to avoid the growing risks of an unreformed Hamas victory in a dead-end Palestinian election.

Abbas and Hamas

So here is a way to take both ends of the fork. Abbas could announce that he is ready to resume peace talks, with this updated framework as a possible option for discussion. At the same time, he could say that Hamas would have to accept this decision in order to qualify for a Palestinian national election. The expected Hamas refusal would allow peace talks to take priority over an election that risks not only his own political future, but that of the entire Palestinian population.

Abbas can do better than court disaster, simply by offering a “peace of the brave” on this revised basis. Then, unlike

Arafat, he could follow up by negotiating about it in good faith, promising a better future for his people. Even if its full realization is a bridge too far today, just re-launching an incremental peace process could bring substantial practical and political benefits to the Palestinians.

Unfortunately, given his track record, Abbas is unlikely to take this bold step. He may yet surprise us. But if he cannot bring himself to do that, then perhaps one of his successors, who are already jockeying to replace him through the vehicle of an election, will achieve the legacy that has eluded him so far.

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