

# To Vote or Not to Vote: Implications of Postponing Palestinian Elections

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**As the risks of holding Palestinian elections come into focus, a Palestinian Authority decision to postpone the elections will increase tensions on the ground while highlighting structural flaws within Fatah and the PA.**

**M**edia reports and other sources indicate that when Palestinian Authority (PA) president and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas meets with top officials from various factions on April 29, he will call for the postponement of the parliamentary elections set for May 22. This would effectively cancel the elections. Whether he actually formally postpones the elections during the meeting is uncertain. On the one hand, opposition to this move has emerged from significant quarters and may cause him to delay the announcement. On the other hand, the [ill-advised election gambit \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/if-palestinian-elections-proceed-hamas-may-have-upper-hand\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/if-palestinian-elections-proceed-hamas-may-have-upper-hand) has exposed deep dysfunctions within the Palestinian political system, turning what Abbas may have considered to be a risk-free way for him to renew his legitimacy into something that may threaten the eighty-five-year-old leader's grip on power.

Thus, whether it happens this week or not, a postponement seems extremely likely.

A decision to postpone elections has implications. In the short term, priority must be given to preventing any deterioration in security that may be triggered by postponement. In the longer term, however, failure to hold elections highlights structural challenges facing the PA and Fatah, as well as the chimerical nature of trying to achieve Palestinian unity under the current circumstances.

## Background

A postponement of the PA elections **was predictable (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/will-palestinian-election-decree-produce-actual-elections>)**. Longstanding schisms within Fatah all but ensured that figures identified with the movement were going to run multiple electoral lists. Controversial former Fatah leader Mohammad Dahlan is running his own list. More pointedly, the decision of jailed popular Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti to join forces with respected Fatah establishmentarian Nasser al-Qudwa represented a worst-case scenario for Abbas, who is now facing the real prospect of Fatah votes being split, as was the case in the 2006 elections.

For its part, Hamas diverged from initial understandings between its deputy leader, Saleh al-Arouri, and Fatah's secretary-general, Jibril Rajoub, concerning the composition of Hamas's list and the nature of its candidates. Whether this was by design or merely indicative of internal Hamas politics and the limitations of Arouri's influence within the movement—along with that of his tactical partner, Hamas Gaza chief Yahya al-Sinwar—is unclear but ultimately irrelevant, at least with regard to the election dynamics. The bottom line is that Abbas's hopes of predetermined election results that will renew his legitimacy without upsetting the status quo with Hamas proved illusory.

Internationally, Abbas seems to have underestimated the depth of the legal and political obstacles to U.S. engagement with the PA if Hamas is brought back into its structures. The decision by Hamas to nominate candidates who were directly involved in deadly **acts of terror (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-fields-militant-electoral-list-implications-us-palestinian-ties>)** made it difficult for countries to support the elections, even for those that might have been willing to loosely interpret the conditions for election support as established by the Quartet (the UN secretary-general, the European Union, the United States, and Russia). And Jordan and Egypt, while refraining from directly opposing the elections, made their concerns privately known.

For its part, Israel took a passive stance in public (though it privately conveyed its concern to Abbas), choosing not to express opposition to the elections but also refusing to respond to the PA on the pivotal issue of holding the elections in East Jerusalem. Indeed, such a refusal to respond effectively amounts to a rejection. The issue of East Jerusalem provided the justification for the PA's decision to postpone the elections, even though the Palestinian Central Elections Committee indicated that there are technical workarounds if Israel bars elections in Jerusalem. Yet strong opposition to postponement is emerging not only from Hamas but also from Qudwa, Dahlan, and a slew of other candidates and political parties. These objections may cause Abbas to delay his announcement but are unlikely to change his decision to postpone the elections.

## What Postponing Elections Could Mean

The most immediate concern is that the cancellation may trigger instability. The situation on the ground, while largely quiet, has been growing increasingly volatile in recent years. This week's Jerusalem clashes and rocket fire from Gaza are a reminder that the possibility of violent confrontations is never far away. But this does not mean that mass unrest is inevitable or even necessarily likely: violence is a complex phenomenon, and there are stabilizing factors to consider.

In Gaza, Hamas leadership remains committed to the arrangement that has existed for some months now: namely, quiet in exchange for the easing of certain Israeli restrictions. Hamas might decide to fire some rockets into Israel, but if this occurs it will likely be in a manner calibrated so as to not trigger a significant escalation. Other Gaza factions might also initiate attacks, but Hamas has shown itself largely capable of exerting effective security control in the Strip. That said, calculated escalation could easily spin out of control.

The situation in the West Bank is more complicated. Hamas, whose terror infrastructure is severely degraded, will nevertheless likely seek to escalate. Fatah factions that will once again feel marginalized by Abbas may also resort to

protests. Whether developments in the West Bank will mobilize the public and turn into mass confrontations is unknowable. If that happens, it is also impossible to predict whether such protests will start against Israel or the PA (though if protests do occur, they will likely end up targeting both). The ingredients for an explosive mix are there, but recent years have shown limited public appetite for a return to widespread unrest. Moreover, PA security forces—separately and in cooperation with Israeli security forces—have proven effective. But the bottom line is this: the days following the cancellation announcement will be extremely tense.

Politically, Hamas will emerge as the winner in the short term. Having vocally rejected cancellation of the elections, the group is well-positioned to claim that it represents the will of both the 76 percent of Palestinians who demand elections and the 61 percent who expect them to be held. Yet after an initial spike in popularity, Hamas will find itself where it started: regionally isolated, partially blamed for the Palestinian split, and at the strategic dead end of controlling Gaza without a clear path to significantly improving the conditions there. Internally, cancellation of the elections will likely diminish Arouri's (and, to some extent, Sinwar's) standing in the movement that is in favor of other elements, particularly vis-à-vis its resurgent diaspora leadership.

Fatah, however, will be in deep political crisis. Abbas will inevitably be blamed for the cancellation, further eroding his already abysmal standing (68 percent of the public wants Abbas to resign). He will also face unprecedented challenges within Fatah. The call for elections exposed and operationalized long-simmering fissures within the movement, and those will not return to dormancy once the elections are canceled. The heavy reliance by Abbas on the exclusion and marginalization of Fatah leaders who he deems insufficiently pliant may have pushed them outside the formal structures of the movement. But as evident from Barghouti, Qudwa, and Dahlan's ability to form competitive lists, these leaders and their constituencies have not disappeared. It is unknown whether Abbas will (1) conclude that he needs to reverse course and meet the demands of these factions, bringing some back into the fold, or (2) double down on his approach; his track record, however, does not bode well for the prospects of a conciliatory approach. In the context of Abbas's succession, Rajoub stands to be the biggest loser as he is the figure most closely identified with the elections. These complications add to preexisting challenges relating to lack of public faith in the PA's chosen path of diplomacy and deep frustration with its corruption and poor governance.

At the national level, a failure to hold elections highlights the difficulty—even impossibility—of achieving intra-Palestinian reconciliation. Various approaches—including attempts to reach comprehensive reconciliation, attempts at limited reconciliation via the formation of a unity government, and now elections—have failed. Although the failure of each approach can be explained by its specific circumstances, it is hard to escape the conclusion that national unity is not a likely option in the foreseeable future. Practical considerations—ranging from Hamas's security control over Gaza to vested political and bureaucratic interests that took hold over a decade and a half of separation—as well as irreconcilable ideologies may well be insurmountable for now.

## **U.S. Policy Implications**

**W**hile the prospects of widespread unrest are unpredictable, the United States—through the Office of the U.S. Security Coordinator (USSC)—is well-positioned to help Israel and the PA navigate this volatile period. Indeed, such times are another reminder of both the important but often invisible work done by the USSC and the value of a sustained, long-term U.S. presence on the ground.

The postponement of the elections will enable the Biden administration to proceed with its plans to engage the PA more thoroughly—both diplomatically and in terms of aid—and to focus on resolving some of the other obstacles facing reengagement. The administration should also explore areas in which Palestinian-Israeli cooperation can proceed quickly. Quick progress on both the bilateral and trilateral fronts, especially if it is focused on concrete deliverables, may help the cause of stability in the medium term if and when the initial period of volatility passes.

But in the longer term, the severe legitimacy crisis facing the Palestinian political system, particularly the PA and Fatah, will continue to challenge any prospects for more ambitious U.S. and international initiatives to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. (Israeli politics presents its own unique set of challenges.) The United States is not well-positioned to impact Palestinian politics directly, nor would it be advisable for it to do so. Instead, the United States can work with Arab partners—particularly Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia—to encourage Abbas to engage in Fatah revitalization and to clarify the succession process. Further, as the United States continues to reengage the PA, the issue of reform needs to once again be added to the agenda, to stave off the constant leakage of the PA’s domestic legitimacy.

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