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The New Palestinian Prime Minister Will Face Steep Internal Challenges

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Brief Analysis

Fatah succession maneuvers, escalating tensions with Hamas, a financial crisis, and an uncertain security hierarchy will make it difficult for the incoming premier to improve the current situation.

On March 10, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas designated Fatah Central Committee (FCC) member Mohammad Shtayyeh as prime minister. The new premier will now have three weeks to form a government, extendable by two weeks if necessary. Although the appointment will have minimal impact on Palestinian foreign policy, which is handled directly by the president, it does provide a glimpse into the dynamics surrounding PA succession. It will also have some impact on Fatah-Hamas relations and governance issues in the West Bank, for better or worse.

FATAH DYNAMICS

On January 29, outgoing prime minister Rami Hamdallah tendered his resignation to Abbas following the FCC's recommendation to form a political cabinet under Fatah leadership. Hamdallah had presided over a technocratic government formed under a Hamas-Fatah consensus agreement.

Once Abbas tasked the FCC with choosing the next prime minister, tensions within the committee soon became apparent. The FCC has always been factionalized, but the divisions have become more pronounced in recent years as senior members position themselves in the contest to succeed the aging Abbas. Worried that choosing one of

their own as prime minister would improve said individual's chances to replace Abbas, members were deadlocked on the decision for over a month, eventually choosing Shtayyeh as a compromise candidate.

Shtayyeh has been an FCC member since 2009, but he did not rise through the ranks following the usual political or security tracks. A former academic, he came to prominence after assuming a number of ministerial-level technical positions in the PA. He also participated in negotiations with Israel from the Madrid process in 1991 until 2013. Such posts gave him some exposure in governance and diplomatic circles, but he never developed a strong base, so other FCC members tend to view him as one of their least threatening competitors.

Even so, some FCC factions objected to appointing him as prime minister, fearing that the position could transform him into a viable succession candidate. These objections were eventually overcome after other alternatives were exhausted, but the end result is that Shtayyeh will not be able to rely on solid support from Fatah. More likely, succession dynamics will continue to dominate Palestinian politics, and his former colleagues will try to limit his power.

RELATIONS WITH HAMAS

Shtayyeh's appointment is another escalation in the ongoing struggle between Hamas and the PA. Fatah insisted on elevating one of its own committee members to the post, spurring Hamas to reject the move and declare that it "will not recognize this separatist government."

At the same time, however, Hamas has made no indication as to whether and how it might oppose the decision in practice. Its ability to form its own government or take other concrete measures is constrained, and such steps could trigger punitive action from the PA—for example, cutting all payments to Gaza, something the PA has already been threatening to do in response due to other disputes. In addition to the catastrophic implications that scenario would have for Gaza's economy, it would also upset Egypt's efforts to bring security and financial stability to the Strip. Cairo is deeply frustrated with Abbas and has been de facto dealing with Hamas on various Gaza matters, but it still regards the PA as the legitimate address for Palestinian relations. Egyptian authorities are therefore unlikely to continue their stabilization efforts if Hamas creates its own governing structures.

The chances of Hamas acting out may also be influenced by whether Shtayyeh's cabinet includes other Palestine Liberation Organization factions besides Fatah. The less inclusive the cabinet is, the more emboldened Hamas will be. So far, the two biggest PLO factions—the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine—have refused Fatah's invitation to join the government. Shtayyeh will try to woo them again, along with smaller PLO factions. If he fails to recruit any of them, however, the resultant Fatah-only government would strengthen Hamas in its bid to contest the party's primacy in the Palestinian national movement.

SIGNIFICANT PORTFOLIOS

In addition to political strife, Shtayyeh and his ministers will face major governance challenges. The PA is in the midst of a financial crisis and has already announced various austerity measures. Moreover, despite ongoing coordination with Israel, the security situation in the West Bank and Jerusalem has been steadily deteriorating.

To navigate the first challenge, the PA would be best served by retaining Finance Minister Shukri Bishara, who has developed a positive professional reputation and strong relations with his Israeli and international counterparts. Alternatively, if he leaves and is not replaced by a well-known figure, it would further complicate efforts to stabilize the economy.

Regarding the second challenge, the interior minister has nominal control over a significant part of the PA security forces, but the question of actual control is more complicated. Outgoing prime minister Hamdallah kept that portfolio for himself while in power, though in practice Abbas held true authority over the PASF. Senior FCC

members were comfortable with Hamdallah playing that dual role, but they are less likely to tolerate one of their own overseeing such an important ministry while also serving as premier.

Accordingly, jockeying for that portfolio began well before the prime minister was picked. A major PASF shakeup has been expected in recent weeks, and some security leaders—most notably police chief Hazem Atallah—have indicated their desire to become interior minister. Appointing a PASF chief could strengthen the ministry, improve the performance of security personnel, and potentially help bring the PASF under ministry control instead of presidential control as envisaged in the Palestinian Basic Law. Yet elevating a former security chief would also shift the balance of power within the PASF, inevitably raising resistance from other security chiefs and the FCC members who have cultivated close relations with them.

CONCLUSION

Fatah has long sought to get one of its own senior members appointed as prime minister, but reaching that goal comes at a cost. When Shtayyeh assumes his new role, he will be constrained by paralyzing succession dynamics, a worsening split with Hamas, and deteriorating economic and security conditions in the West Bank. As for relations with Washington, U.S. peace envoy Jason Greenblatt publicly welcomed the latest appointment, but political realities will likely prevent Shtayyeh from restoring contacts with the administration anytime soon.

Ghaith al-Omari is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and coauthor of its 2018 study [State with No Army, Army with No State: Evolution of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces, 1994–2018](#). ❖



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