

How to Ensure the PLO Meeting Goes Beyond Token Reforms

by [Neomi Neumann \(/experts/neomi-neumann\)](#)

Apr 22, 2025

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Neomi Neumann \(/experts/neomi-neumann\)](#)

Neomi Neumann is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Palestinian affairs. She formerly served as head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency, or Shin Bet, and with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Neumann recently began her doctoral studies at Tel Aviv University.



Brief Analysis

Although President Abbas seems more focused on meeting diplomatic expectations abroad than dealing with burning issues at home, officials should still push him to propose something beyond cosmetic change—both to address the reality in the West Bank and, perhaps, to legitimize the PA’s eventual return to Gaza.

On April 23, the Palestine Liberation Organization’s Central Council is expected to convene in Ramallah for a two-day session with a potentially significant reform at the top of its agenda: appointing a vice president to Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas. It remains unclear whether the council will simply approve the creation of this post or take the next step of defining whether the chosen candidate is selected by presidential decree or council vote. Either way, the announcement of a specific nominee may be pushed to a later date.

This reform is part of a broader package of political and administrative changes that Abbas intends to advance in the coming weeks, some of which are already underway. At the Arab League summit in March, he declared that he would grant amnesty to Fatah members previously expelled from the movement—most notably Mohammed Dahlan, once a close ally and later a rival who was ousted in 2011. The aim of this announcement was to restore Fatah’s internal unity while potentially enhancing Abbas’s standing with key Arab states who have pressured him to move in this direction.

Meanwhile, a wave of PA administrative reforms began early last year with the appointment of Muhammad Mustafa—an economist and Abbas confidant—as prime minister. These measures were initially designed to signal compliance with the Biden administration’s call for a “revitalized” PA that might eventually assume responsibility (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gaza-phase-2-sorting-out-political-and-security->

scenarios) in the Gaza Strip after the Hamas-Israel war comes to an end. Key steps have included replacing most of the PA's security chiefs. Last month, Nidal Abu Dukhan—head of the National Security Force since 2011—was dismissed along with three other agency heads, while dozens of other senior officers have been forced into retirement as part of a broader restructuring effort aimed at renewing leadership and improving efficiency in the security sector. Many of their successors have been chosen from the Presidential Guard, Abbas's most loyal unit. In addition, General Intelligence chief Majid Faraj, the PA's most senior security official, might be removed and shifted to a political position in the PLO or Fatah (see below).

Another significant reform, set for implementation in June, involves revising the mechanism for paying stipends to families of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. A February decree stipulated that payments will now be based on a family's economic need rather than the length of a prisoner's sentence—an attempt to counter longstanding international criticism of the so-called “pay for slay” policy.

Why Is Abbas Advancing These Reforms?

Some might question why the president is pushing measures that seem to weaken his political dominance. One explanation is that he sees them as mostly symbolic or technical, with limited impact on his authority.

For example, the proposed vice presidency lacks defined powers, and the frontrunner for the post—Hussein al-Sheikh—has already been Abbas's de facto deputy since 2022, serving as secretary-general of the PLO Executive Committee and managing ties with the United States, Israel, and Arab states. Notably, appointing him could provoke opposition from other Fatah leaders such as Jibril Rajoub, Mahmoud al-Aloul, and Marwan Barghouti, an imprisoned figure who may be poised for a political return if released in a future deal with Israel. To stave off such objections, Abbas may offer compensatory roles to his rivals,

Such an approach would delay any real transition of power and reinforce Abbas's centrality. In a similar move last November, he declared that in the event of his death, Palestinian National Council speaker Rawhi Fattouh would serve as interim PA president for ninety days until elections—an announcement widely viewed as a minor procedural action rather than a substantive step toward defining the PA succession process.

Abbas's motivation for reform also appears rooted in the need to meet the expectations of Arab and European donors without compromising his authority. On April 14, EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas approved a three-year aid package worth 1.6 billion euros, including 620 million euros in direct budget support tied to reforms. Meanwhile, French president Emmanuel Macron held a call with Abbas last week and noted afterward that reforms are essential for the PA to be seen as a viable governing authority for Gaza—a telling remark given reports that Paris may soon recognize (https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2025/04/14/macron-calls-for-reform-of-palestinian-authority-to-govern-post-war-gaza_6740210_7.html) the state of Palestine.

In some cases, reforms appear targeted at specific regional partners. The idea of appointing a vice president originated with Saudi Arabia, which has pressed Abbas to accept the proposal and could even suspend its \$10 million monthly aid to the PA if he refuses. Similarly, the outreach to Dahlan—now closely aligned with the United Arab Emirates and Egypt—seems aimed at mending ties with key Arab players whom Israel and the United States see as essential to any future arrangement in Gaza.

As noted above, Abbas might also be preparing to reposition General Intelligence chief Faraj as a consensus candidate to govern postwar Gaza. Faraj has longstanding security ties with Israel, Washington, and Arab states, so transferring him could be framed as a gesture of coordination rather than dismissal.

Still, Abbas presumably harbors no illusions about the potential impact of these reforms. He may not expect them to alter Israel's deep skepticism toward the PA or elicit dramatic new support from the Trump administration. One possible exception could be the restoration of U.S. assistance (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy->

analysis/resetting-us-relations-palestinian-authority) to the PA security forces, which was suspended in February and may be contingent on reforming prisoner payments. As mentioned previously, Abbas has sought to address this sensitive issue in recent weeks while avoiding public confrontations with Washington.

In the near term, Abbas's main goal appears to be preserving Arab and European support ahead of a major international conference in New York this June. Organized under UN auspices and led by Saudi Arabia and France, this event will reportedly aim to relaunch diplomacy toward a two-state Israeli-Palestinian solution.

The PA is also desperate to stabilize its finances. Since the Gaza war began, it has only been able to pay 30-40 percent of public sector salaries, and GDP in the West Bank has dropped by nearly 30 percent—factors that could accelerate the **generally worsening situation (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/settler-violence-turning-west-bank-tinderbox>)** in that territory.

In addition, Abbas may believe that if Hamas and Israel reach another ceasefire, discussions about Gaza's postwar governance will gain momentum. By accelerating reforms now, he may be hoping to position the PA as a credible candidate for a role there, both to preserve Palestinian unity and to improve his political legacy.

Even if Israel and the United States do not intend to restore the PA's authority in Gaza in the near future, they have a shared interest in supporting real reforms, especially the following:

- Promoting a more orderly and stable succession process to reduce the risk of institutional breakdown or intra-Fatah violence.
- Improving the efficiency and professionalism of the PA's civilian institutions and security forces.
- Enhancing Fatah's legitimacy and public support as a means of counterbalancing Hamas.
- Advancing transparency and accountability in PA financial practices, which entails curbing corruption and limiting the diversion of funds to extremist elements.
- Clarifying the relationship between PLO and PA institutions, which would enable the PA to focus on governance and service delivery rather than ideological disputes.

Neomi Neumann is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute and former head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The Brotherhood May Have Pushed Jordan Too Far This Time

Apr 22, 2025

◆
Ghaith al-Omari



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Sudani's Invitation to Ahmed al-Sharaa Triggers Muqawama Backlash

Apr 21, 2025

Ameer al-Kaabi,
Hamdi Malik

(/policy-analysis/sudanis-invitation-ahmed-al-sharaa-triggers-muqawama-backlash)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Is the Houthi Threat a Checkmate for U.S. Military Logistics?

Apr 21, 2025

James E. Shepard

(/policy-analysis/houthi-threat-checkmate-us-military-logistics)

TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)