

# Fatah Meets in Ramallah

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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## The first gathering in a decade by the Palestinian Authority's dominant party will cast light on a post-Abbas future and governance in Gaza, among other issues.

**O**n May 14, Fatah launched its eighth General Conference, which will culminate in the election of officials to lead its various governing bodies. Because the party dominates both the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the outcome will have implications beyond internal party dynamics. Three major challenges will shadow the proceedings: the competition to succeed President Mahmoud Abbas, the Fatah (and PA) role in the future of Gaza, and the steady decline of the party's popularity.

## What's at Stake?

**S**ince its formal inception in 1965, Fatah has held seven conferences, with the most recent in 2016. At such meetings, delegates elect members to the Central Committee and Revolutionary Council as well as other bodies. The Central Committee is particularly important because its members oversee key party institutions, significant budgets within the party, and have a say in PA appointments. Traditionally, the Fatah leader also serves as PLO chairman and PA president.

The party is not the standard-bearer it once was. A [poll \(https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/1000\)](https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/1000) conducted in late 2025 showed Fatah's support at barely a quarter among Palestinian respondents, reflecting a steep fall from its former standing. This negative trend is due to multiple factors, including the failure of the Oslo peace process, with which Fatah is identified. The decline is also rooted, however, in the broader loss of vibrancy within the movement. While never democratic, Fatah's internal dynamics previously allowed for a degree of competitiveness between various constituencies. But since the creation of the PA in 1994, and particularly under President Abbas since 2005, Fatah has come to embody a one-party system, whether in terms of emphasis on loyalty over representation or of full identification with the government. The outcome of the conference will either help rebrand Fatah or will ossify

this image even further.

The second issue at stake is the future of Fatah—and the PA—in Gaza. While the Trump administration's 20-point plan does not foresee an immediate PA role in the territory, it nevertheless envisions a possible resumption of Authority control there at some point. The conference could affect related dynamics in two ways. First, the U.S. plan requires that the PA enact reforms—and such a process will inevitably be interlinked with Fatah dynamics. While the two entities are formally separate, Fatah members dominate all levels of the PA's bureaucracy, and its leaders have a significant say in PA policy and senior appointments, including key cabinet ministers and heads of security agencies. Second, to gain traction in Gaza, Fatah will need to rebuild its support base in the territory. Since Hamas's takeover of the territory in 2007, Fatah's organizational presence there has been severely diminished. This is in part due to Hamas measures, but it is also a product of Fatah's own policy, in particular the purge of those seen as affiliated with former Central Committee member Mohammad Dahlan—who was expelled from the movement in 2011 and exiled to the UAE amid a bitter rivalry with Abbas but nevertheless continues to have a significant following in Gaza.

Finally, and most concretely, is the issue of succession. This will be the third General Conference held under the leadership of President Abbas, who is ninety, and it will likely be his last chance to line up the Fatah hierarchy behind a chosen heir. In 2025, Abbas appointed Hussein al-Sheikh as his deputy. While this move brought a measure of clarity to the process, Sheikh is still opposed by some senior Fatah figures, a subset of whom harbor their own presidential aspirations, including Central Committee members Mahmoud al-Aloul and Jibril Rajoub. Additionally, Sheikh still lacks a strong constituency within the movement, which casts doubt on Abbas's real support for his designated deputy. A strong showing by Sheikh, reflected in his share of votes as well as those of his supporters in the Revolutionary Council, will strengthen his position as both the choice of Abbas and the Fatah party—in effect smoothing the way for his succession. The reverse will make him vulnerable to constant challenges that could sink his candidacy and lead to a contested and destabilizing succession process.

## What to Watch

**W**hile this conference holds the potential to inject sorely needed new energy into Fatah, early indications are not encouraging, given the many incumbents running for reelection, the lack of primaries to choose delegates, and the overrepresentation of delegates from the security forces. That said, last-minute deals and external pressures have affected the final outcome of previous conferences. One positive exception today relates to Gaza. Egypt, while not supporting any specific candidates, has successfully pressed Fatah for guarantees that significant quotas will be established for Gaza-based delegates to the conference and members of elected bodies.

The most closely watched contest will be for the Central Committee, with two potential candidates viewed as pivotal. The first is Yasser Abbas, the son of the current president, who has become more visibly involved in public life as his father's emissary to Lebanon and the Gulf states and has reportedly been playing a significant informal role within Fatah and the PA. His visibility has only increased since Sheikh's elevation. In the lead-up to the conference, the younger Abbas conducted highly publicized visits to PA civilian and security agencies. A successful run by Yasser Abbas would be unequivocally negative for Fatah, causing further erosion of its image and evoking attempts by former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi to bequeath the presidency to their sons. While Yasser Abbas has denied presidential aspirations, his election would undermine Sheikh's efforts to consolidate his power and overall muddy the succession process.

Maj. Gen. Majid Faraj is the second potential candidate of interest. The longtime PA security chief is well regarded by foreign security agencies, including but not limited to those of Israel and the United States. Faraj has a contentious relationship with Sheikh, not least because Faraj has limited the influence of Sheikh and others within the security establishment. While a position in the Central Committee would be a political promotion for Faraj, it would remove

him from leadership within the PA security forces. This could potentially weaken not only the PASF's credibility with multiple external counterparts but also the independence and professionalism it has enjoyed under Faraj.

In the Revolutionary Council elections, three dynamics bear watching. First, Marwan Barghouti, who is serving numerous life sentences in Israeli prison for terrorism, consistently polls as Fatah's **most popular leader** (<https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/1000>). Yet his supporters were marginalized in the seventh conference, and a similar campaign this time would reinforce perceptions of an ossified Fatah. Second, Mohammad Dahlan continues to enjoy significant support among traditional Fatah backers, especially in Gaza and to some extent in Lebanon. While his feud with Abbas is probably unbridgeable, a failure to reintegrate Fatah members from Gaza, many of whom have links to Dahlan, will both send a message of exclusion and complicate PA efforts to reassert control over the territory. Third, a number of independent Fatah actors, many of whom organized around the ultimately aborted elections of 2021, have emerged as a meaningful grassroots movement throughout the West Bank. Including some of these activists in the Revolutionary Council will help rehabilitate Fatah's image, particularly among younger Palestinians.

## Implications for U.S. Policy

**W**ashington has a generally limited ability to shape internal Palestinian political dynamics. But this reality is even starker under the current administration amid curtailed U.S. engagement with the PA and the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development and thus aid to the Palestinians. Washington should therefore focus on minimizing any negative impact of Fatah dynamics on U.S. interests. Since America lacks the tools or visibility to directly affect these issues, it should work closely with key Arab partners—particularly Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—focusing on three areas:

- **Succession.** The United States has an interest in ensuring that PA succession proceeds as smoothly as possible. Given the general instability in the West Bank, a highly contested succession process could trigger further unrest, which will have implications not only for the Palestinians but also for U.S. interlocutors in Israel and Jordan. The United States should not advocate for any particular candidate but instead articulate the policy positions it expects from any future leader, and work with regional partners to ensure the smoothest possible transition.
- **PA reform.** The U.S. focus here should be on insulating the PA from Fatah turbulence. Key partners to coordinate with are Saudi Arabia, which has emerged as the regional leader on this issue, and the European Commission.
- **Security sector efficacy.** Security is the one area in which Washington continues to engage robustly with the PA, working through the Office of the U.S. Security Coordinator. Over the years, the security coordinator has made significant progress in professionalizing and—to the extent possible—depoliticizing the PA security forces. Depending on the outcome of the conference, the coordinator will need to focus on preserving these achievements in case of a PASF leadership transition.

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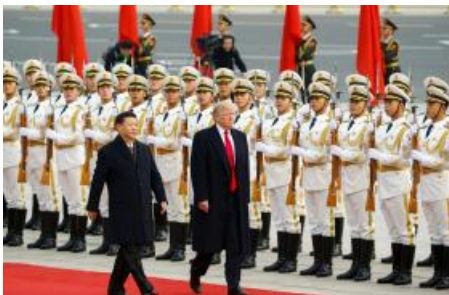
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