

Palestinian Elections: Renewal or More of the Same?

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Brief Analysis



Former officials and advisors discuss the newly announced Palestinian legislative elections in light of Hamas’s leadership change, Israel’s political imperatives, growing violence in the West Bank, and the prospects for jump-starting the Trump administration’s stalled transition plan in Gaza.

On July 23, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Neomi Neumann, Ibrahim Dalalsha, and Ghaith al-Omari. Neumann is an adjunct fellow with the Institute and former head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency. Dalalsha is the founding director of the Ramallah-based Horizon Center for Political Studies and Media Outreach; previously, he served as the senior political advisor at the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem. Al-Omari is the Institute's Gilbert Foundation Senior Fellow and a former advisor to the Palestinian Authority. The following is a rapporteurs' summary of their remarks.

Neomi Neumann

The Palestinian system is at a historic low point. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank are deeply divided, and the absence of fresh ideas or new leaders in the Palestinian Authority and Hamas has led to political paralysis. Meanwhile, the Palestinian issue has tumbled down the international agenda since last year's ceasefire in Gaza, with regional actors and U.S. officials now less willing to invest the efforts needed to move into phase 2 of President Trump's transition plan. Yet the real tragedy is that Israel has been the main instigator and changemaker in the Palestinian arena since the October 7 attacks, if not longer. And in the West Bank, the current Israeli government has a clear ideological policy to weaken the PA and promote de facto annexation on the ground.

Following the implementation of phase 1 of Trump's Gaza plan, three major obstacles have prevented the parties from moving to phase 2. The main impediment is Hamas. The group refuses to disarm, and without demilitarization, Israel will not withdraw from Gaza, international bodies cannot enter the Strip, and donor countries will not fund reconstruction. The latter factor is an obstacle in and of itself—current international funding is insufficient, but donor states require security guarantees and a stable government mechanism before they will invest more. Lastly, Israel refuses to allow the PA to return to Gaza, even though the United States and its partners ultimately need the PA to assume responsibility for managing the territory. Hamas leaders know that Washington is not willing to let the process fail; they believe time is on their side, and they are waiting to see what happens with the U.S.-Iran confrontation, the Lebanon framework agreement, and Israel's upcoming election in October.

On July 20, Khalil al-Hayya defeated Khaled Mashal to become the new head of the Hamas Political Bureau, winning by a narrow 35-34 margin. Hayya is associated with the hardline Hamas camp closest to the late commander Yahya al-Sinwar, and he supports ties with the Iranian axis. Mashal is aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood and has much closer connections with Arab states; he is also willing to integrate politically into the Palestinian system to gain power. Hayya's razor-thin victory reflects the strategic dilemma that Hamas has faced since Sinwar's death—namely, whether to continue with the pro-Iran line or pivot back to the Sunni Arab world as Mashal advocates. It is too early to predict where the movement is headed, but Hayya is unlikely to make any dramatic changes until the Iran war has ended, Israel's election has passed, and Arab states have reacted to those events.

Once the next Israeli government is in place, the first thing it should do is decrease West Bank tensions through important steps such as easing movement for Palestinian residents, reducing settler violence, helping the PA reverse harmful economic measures, and protecting the status quo on the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif. These steps could also help rehabilitate Israel's global image and reverse its declining support in America.

Indeed, the election has created a window for Israel to undergo a strategic reset. Washington needs to recognize this opportunity and remind Jerusalem that such a reset is crucial to Israel remaining a Jewish and democratic state. Neither of those identities can be sustained if Israel continues to govern two million Palestinians with no political horizon. Hopefully, Israelis will not miss this opportunity.

Ibrahim Dalalsha

Any serious plan for Gaza has to create a viable alternative governing system that can actually control the situation on the ground. And anyone who knows Palestinian politics understands that the only viable alternative to Hamas is the PA. The objections raised whenever the PA is mentioned—that it needs reform and lacks legitimacy—are valid, but they do not change this fundamental fact. None of the many plans drawn up for Gaza governance has addressed how to contain the remnants of Hamas's informal system, which survived the destruction of the group's official governing bodies and can sustain control endlessly. Plans for a technocratic government disconnected from the PA will not work. The current Israeli government is facing an election and is in no position to strike a deal in which Hamas emerges as the second party. Hence, officials must work with the PA even as it implements the necessary internal reforms in parallel.

Meanwhile, the West Bank has been undergoing a complex set of emergencies that were not sufficiently reported or addressed during the Gaza war. Simply put, the war was partly fought in the West Bank as well. The total closure of that territory has restricted not only Palestinians' access to Israel, but also their movement from town to town, with international organizations documenting roughly a thousand roadblocks and iron gates erected since 2023. Israeli settler violence has been systematic and organized, damaging property while besieging and intimidating Palestinians inside their own communities with apparent impunity, to the point where senior Israeli security commanders have sounded the alarm.

Moreover, punitive financial measures have brought the PA to the brink of collapse, if not past it—though officially announcing that collapse would carry security implications that the PA is not prepared to accept. Some \$6 billion in tax revenues have been withheld, roughly 200,000 employees have gone nearly three years without their full salaries, and the refusal to clear shekel cash from Palestinian banks has produced a sharp fuel crisis. Efforts to release the funds have repeatedly failed because of the extreme positions held by Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich. The damage now runs well past payroll concerns—for instance, cancer and dialysis patients not being able to obtain the medicines they need, and schools and clinics opening just one day a week due to lack of operating budgets. Set alongside the spectacle of far-right Israelis performing massive religious rituals at al-Aqsa Mosque and government ministers declaring that the status quo at al-Haram al-Sharif has changed, the situation has moved beyond just sounding the alarm—immediate solutions are needed.

Going forward, officials should not let Hamas’s legal designation as a terrorist organization prevent them from accurately reading how the organization works. As noted previously, despite losing its government and most of its military capabilities, it has retained the informal organizational system that gave it weight before it first came to power in 2006. It has also proven able to keep its internal differences contained enough so that its institutions can eventually govern, unlike Fatah. Selecting Hayya—who oversaw Gaza and led negotiations after Sinwar’s death—as the new political chief should be no surprise because it signals continuity.

The chronic Palestinian problem is the failure—unaddressed by every reform effort since 1996—to separate the national liberation movement and its factions from the governance born of the Oslo Accords. For instance, decisions on when elections are held are not made by the PA government, whose ministers hear about them in the news like everyone else. To be sure, the legislative election announced for November is necessary and will serve as another “baby step” toward rebuilding an institution that has been absent for nearly two decades. Yet it will not be a game changer.

The only true game changer on the horizon would be an Israeli government that is willing to work with the PA. Washington and Israel should also focus on building institutions rather than picking individual leaders they like; the latter approach will not serve either country’s long-term interests.

Ghaith al-Omari

Amid escalating tensions between the United States and Iran, it would be easy to assume that conditions in the Palestinian arena are comparably stable. Yet both the West Bank and Gaza remain highly volatile.

Today alone, Hamas launched two attacks against Israeli civilians, while local Israeli attacks on West Bank residents have been frequent. The PA also continues to face severe financial strain, with the U.S. State Department recently warning that conditions could deteriorate further after some Israeli financial institutions decided to terminate correspondent services for Palestinian banks. The PA has not made much meaningful progress toward internal reform either, in part because of its institutional constraints and decreasing external assistance.

Meanwhile, the Gaza ceasefire remains fragile. Hamas has refused to disarm and continues to entrench its control, while Israel is still conducting periodic military operations against the group and expanding its territorial presence in the Strip. The Trump administration’s Gaza plan has reached a strategic impasse: the U.S.-led Board of Peace remains disempowered, and the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG) has not been operationalized.

Under Khalil al-Hayya, Hamas will likely face difficulties improving its relations with Arab states. In his first public address as leader—aired on Al Jazeera—he thanked Iran, the Houthis, Hezbollah, and Iraqi militias while omitting longstanding supporters Turkey and Qatar. The speech signaled strong alignment with Tehran’s axis and generated frustration among the Gulf states. Similarly, Zaher Jabarin—who will now lead the Hamas negotiating team while also overseeing Hamas activities in the West Bank—is based in Lebanon, where he frequently coordinates with Hezbollah.

As for Fatah, its May election resulted in Chairman Mahmoud Abbas’s son obtaining a leadership position, fueling allegations of nepotism. Some of Abbas’s rivals also fared well in the voting, further complicating the prospects of a stable succession. When Abbas called for a national election to be held this November, he required participating parties to commit to the Palestine Liberation Organization charter, which prohibits Hamas’s participation. This could represent a modest step forward—though skepticism is warranted given his cancellation of the 2021 election amid concerns that he could lose to rival Fatah factions.

The United States can and should play an important role in the Palestinian arena, which has once again demonstrated its major, direct implications for Israel, regional stability, and U.S. interests. First, Washington should appoint a senior official to lead the Israel-Palestine portfolio. Second, it should avoid further engagement with Hamas, which confers legitimacy on the organization. Third, it should press Arab partners to assume a more active role. The Gulf states, Jordan, and Egypt frequently express concern about the Palestinian issue but have shown limited willingness to act, often arguing that Palestinian leaders are unresponsive. The United States should push harder for sustained, well-coordinated Arab engagement—in particular, it should empower Egypt and the Board of Peace while remaining cautious about relying on Turkey and Qatar as mediators.

This summary was prepared by Wiam Hammouchene, Manuel de la Puerta, and Ari Nagle. ❖

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