

# A Palestinian Vice President? Players, Possibilities, Problems

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Articles & Testimony

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## Until Fatah settles its own internal power struggle, appointing a PA vice president will remain nothing but an idea divorced from political reality.

**T**he final weeks of 2015 were rife with rumors of the impending collapse of the Palestinian Authority (PA): so dire that the Israeli cabinet took the issue up for discussion on January 4. PA President Mahmoud Abbas' political behavior had grown more erratic in the preceding months. Poorly executed gambits led to a series of political setbacks, resulting in him having to walk back attempts to undermine some of his political opponents, and - most notably -- failing to convene the Palestinian National Council (PNC) in summer 2015.

Sensing a weakening of Abbas' hold on power, and a wider risk to Palestinian national institutions, Palestinian leaders from within his own camp who have been until then reluctant to openly challenge him have been increasingly public in their criticism of his domestic and foreign policies. On January 2, Jibril Rajoub, deputy secretary-general of the powerful Fatah Central Committee and a former security chief with a strong base in the West Bank, launched an unprecedented attack on Abbas' policies during a live broadcast on Palestine TV marking the anniversary of the ruling Fatah movement. Meanwhile, the streets continue to seethe in an ongoing wave of attacks by largely unaffiliated young Palestinians against Israelis, which are seen as both a sign of anger and despair against Israel and a challenge to the PA's control over its public.

On January 6, sensing the mounting pressure, Abbas, who was in Bethlehem to mark the Orthodox Christmas, unexpectedly announced that he would give a televised address to his people later in the day. Almost immediately, rumors swirled that Abbas was going to announce a vice president, one that would most likely be his anointed successor. These rumors did not originate in a vacuum. Abbas himself was said to have considered creating the post of Fatah deputy leader in previous Fatah meetings. Senior Fatah leaders, such as Central Committee member Tawfiq Tirawi, have called for Abbas to designate a deputy. Even in Washington think tank circles floated the idea.

While the idea of creating the post of a PA vice president may be appealing as a solution to succession, the devil is in the details, some of which make it impractical if not impossible.

## SHAKY LEGAL GROUND

For starters, the PA's constitutional system as laid out in the Palestinian Basic Law does not provide for such a post. Instead, it mandates a succession process that would see the speaker of the PA's legislature, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), assume interim presidency for 60 days pending presidential elections. The speaker of the PLC is a Hamas member. To create the position of vice president, an amendment to the Basic Law would be needed. This problem presented by this state of affairs is not legal per se. After all, in effect, the PA has been operating in a constitutional vacuum for some years: Abbas has been ruling by decree since his term expired in 2009. The protestations of Hamas PLC members against the legality of Abbas' rule also ring hollow given that the PLC's own term has expired in 2010. Palestinian courts, which have on occasion shown some independence, are not strong enough to invalidate such a move if it has sufficient political power behind it.

Constitutional challenges aside, the problem is political at its core. If Abbas were to take such a step without securing some measure of consensus beforehand, opponents would rally around the constitutional provisions to justify their challenge and thwart his move. Challenges will come from three main quarters. The easiest to dismiss will be the ones from Hamas. Hamas has rejected Abbas' very legitimacy since his term expired, and has routinely rejected many of his decisions. Yet given that Hamas has little influence within the PA machinery, is unable to operate in the West Bank and is not a member of the PLO, it lacks the ability to transform its objection into concrete political opposition. While many Palestinians may sympathize with Hamas' loud objections, Hamas lacks the political means to block the appointment of a vice president though it will certainly not recognize his legitimacy.

In addition to Hamas, a collection of small factions, independents, and civil society actors will likely object to the appointment of a vice president. While the Fatah leadership oftentimes utilizes these actors to present the image of broad support for its rule in the PA and the PLO, and while the antiquated PLO structure gives some of the small factions some procedural power, these actors lack the cohesion and power base to be able to influence the outcome of the momentous decision of appointing a vice president. Some of these groups, however, will inevitably try to extract favors from Fatah in return for their support.

The most consequential challenge to appointing a vice president will come from within Fatah itself. In principle, many Fatah leaders have called on Abbas to appoint a deputy. In practice, however, naming a specific individual to such a post would be very challenging due to internal Fatah politics.

While at certain moments in time, whether in the early years of his presidency or in the years following the 2009 Fatah conference, Abbas might have had the political clout to force his choice upon the Fatah leadership, he is too weak to do so at the moment. This was recently demonstrated when Abbas sought to convene a meeting of the PLO's PNC, inter alia, to confirm his appointment of Fatah Central Committee member Saeb Erakat as PLO Executive Committee secretary-general, the same position Abbas held before assuming the PA's presidency. In an exceedingly rare show of unity, Fatah Central Committee members thwarted this move by reportedly threatening to use their influence in the PLO to vote down the new Executive Committee proposed by Abbas. The PNC meeting was postponed indefinitely.

## THE FRAGMENTED NATURE OF FATAH POLITICS

While Fatah leaders are capable of uniting against the elevation of one of their own for the position of vice-president, they are unlikely to be able to coalesce around a candidate for the post. Currently, Fatah's second in charge is the movement's Secretary-General Mohammad Ghneim, known as Abu Maher. Ghneim is seen as placeholder, whose status as a founder of the movement along with his lack of political ambition made him an ideal consensus candidate among the competing Fatah power centers for the number two position in the 2009 Fatah conference. Yet he would be an unlikely candidate for a vice president for a number of reasons, not least of which are

his political inactivity and his ongoing opposition to the Oslo accords.

Mapping alliances and relationships within Fatah's leadership is difficult, as these alliances shift constantly, abruptly and unpredictably. At the moment, many power centers can be identified. Central Committee members Jibril Rajoub and Tawfiq Tirawi, both former security chiefs with considerable constituencies among West Bank Fatah members, have recently been vocal in their criticism of Abbas' domestic and Fatah policies. While formally expelled from Fatah, former Gaza security chief Mohammad Dahlan continues to enjoy strong support among Gazan members of Fatah and has made significant inroads in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The so-called old guard, Fatah leaders who controlled the movement in exile before the establishment of the PA, exercises a strong hold on Fatah's official institutions. Marwan Barghouti, the charismatic Fatah leader is highly popular in Palestinian society, but is serving five life sentences in an Israeli prison, impairing his ability to be an effective political player. Nasser al-Qudwa, the former Palestinian ambassador to the UN and a nephew of the late president Yasser Arafat who has remained aloof from Fatah infighting, is seen as having the credentials for serving as vice president but lacks a sufficient powerbase. Majed Faraj, the effective, professional intelligence chief, while not a Central Committee member, has Abbas' ear and controls a significant segment of the PA's security sector.

This list is neither exhaustive nor static, but it indicates the fragmented nature of Fatah politics. The dynamics between these various actors are influenced by generational and locational (Gazans, West Bankers, or refugees) factors, interests as well as relations with regional actors. Most of those individuals have been part of the fractious Fatah system for years, leading to checkered interpersonal relations between them and between each of them and Abbas. Until the list is narrowed, the choice of any of them for vice president is likely to mobilize the majority of the others to block the appointment.

The problem facing Fatah politics at the moment is that there is no clear path through which the field can be narrowed. While Arafat had a pool of founding Fatah members to choose potential successors from, and the political credit to do so, Abbas' political line of credit and choices are more limited. Additionally, and apart from the power struggle at the top, Fatah is facing a crisis vis-a-vis its own constituency, especially the younger generation who feel alienated from the movement's traditional leadership. In such circumstances, choosing a deputy by fiat may trigger unforeseen reactions from the movement's base.

If pressed to appoint a vice president, Abbas might try again to appoint a loyalist, most likely triggering a similar impasse that surrounded the PNC meeting last summer. Alternatively, he might try to find a consensus candidate, either a non-threatening nominee such as Marwan Barghouti or a member of the old guard such as former prime minister Ahmad Qurei (Abu Ala), but such a path is far from guaranteed to satisfy Fatah's leaders or its base, leaving a fractured movement that will make it extremely difficult for a vice president to exercise any power.

## **THE FATAH ELECTIONS HURDLE**

In order to identify suitable candidates for succession, Palestinian political dynamics need to be allowed to take their course. In normal circumstances, these dynamics would be channeled through elections as mandated in the Basic Law. Such national elections, however, are extremely unlikely for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the Fatah-Hamas split whereby each of the two factions is unlikely to allow elections that might result in losing their control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, respectively. Even if the two sides were to agree to elections, the perennial issue of securing Israeli consent for holding the elections in Jerusalem will prove difficult to overcome.

The same impediments, however, do not apply to Fatah elections, as neither Hamas nor Israel has a veto over internal Fatah elections. These elections take place in Fatah General Conferences, the sixth and last of which was held in 2009. The Fatah seventh conference has been repeatedly postponed since its scheduled date in 2014 primarily due to Abbas' unwillingness to hold it. Having spent the years since the last Fatah vote in 2009

consolidating his control over the movement, Abbas has been reluctant to allow for the emergence of a new Fatah architecture that might not be under his direct control, let alone one loyal to some of his rivals. His attempts to engineer a favorable outcome, whether by increasing the number of delegates to the conference or bypassing the primaries in Gaza and certain areas in the West Bank, have failed. If his objection can be removed, then the Fatah elections, while sure to be hotly contested, can proceed to either elect a deputy leader for the movement or at least identify the relative standing of its various leaders.

Once Fatah can identify Abbas' successor, the post of PA vice president can be created and filled. This is sure to be challenged by Hamas, smaller factions and even disgruntled elements within Fatah, but the momentum of deputy leader of Fatah who enjoys the support of the bulk of the movement by virtue of internal party election will likely be able to steamroll over these objections.

Last month, six days into the new year, after hours of intense rumors and speculation about the appointment of a PA vice president, President Abbas delivered a speech with the bottom line, in the words of veteran journalist Avi Issacharoff: "Mahmoud Abbas is here to stay". But even if he wanted to say something else, without first settling the power struggle at the top of Fatah, appointing a PA vice president will remain nothing but an idea divorced from political reality.

*Ghaith al-Omari, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, previously served in various positions with the Palestinian Authority, including as an advisor to President Abbas.* ❖

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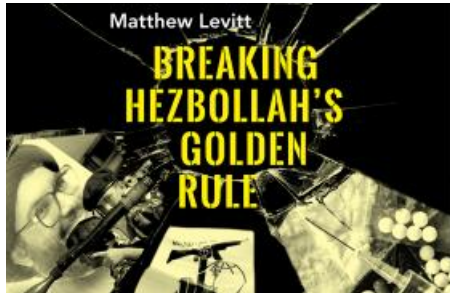
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