

Is a Palestinian Uprising Next?

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



Brief Analysis

In view of the major, unexpected mass protests in Arab societies -- from Tunisia and Egypt to Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and now even Syria -- it must be asked whether similar protests could break out in the West Bank, Gaza, or both. On March 15, approximately 10,000 Palestinians demonstrated in Gaza and 8,000 in Ramallah, calling for unity between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA). And two dates on which anti-Israel demonstrations have often been held in past years are fast approaching: March 30, the Palestinian "Land Day," with expected protests against Israel's separation barrier, and May 15, the Palestinian "Nakba [Catastrophe] Day" marking the anniversary of Israel's independence.

To explore the prospects for an uprising, The Washington Institute hosted a private roundtable on "Palestinian Politics and Arab Upheaval" on March 18. Participants included a small group of diverse U.S. experts and officials. The following is the organizer's analysis of the major themes emerging from that discussion.

Low Expectations of a New Intifada

Several factors weigh against a mass Palestinian uprising in the near future, whether against the PA, Hamas, or Israeli occupation. Since the March 15 Gaza demonstration, Hamas has shown its willingness and ability to suppress such activity with brutal force. Meanwhile, the PA peacefully -- but no less successfully -- co-opted most of the West Bank demonstrators.

More generally, "unity" is a loose and relatively innocuous slogan that lacks a clear target or tactical plan of attack. Ironically, pro-unity protesters run the risk of being labeled and marginalized -- in the West Bank, Fatah casts them as agents of Hamas, while in Gaza, Hamas calls them agents of Fatah. This leaves the opposition divided against itself.

In addition, recent PA economic and security improvements in the West Bank -- achieved, in significant part, with Israel's cooperation and support -- have apparently taken the edge off some of the same type of grievances that have fueled protests in other Arab societies. High-level corruption and inequalities persist, but the daily abuses and petty corruption that so enraged the public in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere are less problematic in the West Bank. Moreover, Palestinians are probably reluctant to turn against their own government instead of Israel.

There are few signs of a potential new uprising against Israel either. Palestinian society is likely still tired of intifadas and war. Gaza is isolated. And in the West Bank, PA president Mahmoud Abbas has explicitly ruled out official support for a third intifada against Israel or any sort of violence against Israeli targets.

Yet Uncertainties Still Abound

Nevertheless, the recent upheavals in other countries suggest that the triggers for such transformations can be sudden and unpredictable, outside anyone's control, and possibly contagious. In the Palestinian case, an extra uncertainty is that the U.S. government lacks detailed firsthand information about the situation on the ground in Gaza, rendering analysis and prediction of events especially difficult. Strikingly, Hamas plainclothes police raided several news outlets on March 19, including Reuters and CNN, to seize images of Palestinian demonstrations supporting Egyptian reformers -- which could indicate that the group is afraid of images showing protests in Gaza. From the outside, the bigger potential challenge to stability there appears to come from Hamas's even more radical and violent opponents than from peaceful popular protest. Yet that impression could conceivably turn out to be as misleading as the past surface calm in other Arab societies.

Possible Indicators of Instability

Given these uncertainties, observers should be alert for any indicators presaging greater unrest. Palestinians have a history of protesting -- in addition to Land Day and Nakba Day, they could hold demonstrations sometime in June or July, in the likely event that the local elections originally scheduled for last summer are once again postponed. Greater involvement in protests by East Jerusalem Palestinians or Israeli Arabs could also be a harbinger of wider popular mobilization. Observers could also monitor Palestinian social media for signs of brewing unrest, though many participants in that virtual conversation live far from the territories.

In contrast, other developments could indicate continued quiet, at least in the West Bank. These include the formation of a new PA Cabinet, announcements regarding new elections, or a concerted push for either negotiations with Israel or unilateral Palestinian diplomatic gains.

PA and Hamas Scrambling for New Legitimacy

Even without sparking internal Palestinian upheaval, the spillover effect of other Arab uprisings has pushed Palestinian leaders into defensive political positions. PA prime minister Salam Fayad and chief negotiator Saeb Erekat offered their resignations, although both continue to serve in caretaker positions and anticipate reappointment. In addition, the PA announced another plan for new parliamentary elections, but then quickly retracted it on the pretext of Hamas objections.

The fall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was an especially bitter pill for Abbas, robbing him of a key mentor and ally against his Hamas rivals. He has now declared more categorically than ever that he will not run for reelection if and when such a vote ever occurs. As a consequence, the internal political battle for succession is intensifying, putting Fayad even more at odds with Fatah's old guard and fragmenting the whole movement around many dueling personalities.

Conversely, Hamas was buoyed by Mubarak's ouster, though it still faces the reality of continued unpopularity in Gaza. Accordingly, the group refuses to tolerate any large demonstrations in favor of Egypt's revolution lest they morph into fervor against Hamas itself. The unprecedented new unrest in Syria, where Hamas has its headquarters, probably makes the movement nervous as well.

New Fights over Unity

Faced with this new challenge of popular sentiment, Fatah and Hamas have fallen back on the venerable slogan of Palestinian unity. Both have announced initiatives, including a proposed Abbas visit to Gaza, aimed at some

variant of this "sacred" objective -- while continuing to argue over who gets the credit and who goes first. Most observers predict that this latest push for unity will once again fall victim to each party's determination to protect its own turf and, if possible, gain the upper hand. For example, Abbas contends that the purpose of his Gaza visit, if it happens, would not be to negotiate terms for unity, but just to agree on a neutral government and new national elections; Hamas demurs on all counts. The question of violence against Israelis is another obstacle to reconciliation: Abbas continues to renounce it firmly, while Hamas continues to both practice and preach it, even excusing the March 12 murder of a Jewish mother, father, and three little children in the West Bank settlement of Itamar.

Diplomatic Repercussions

The combination of popular protests against neighboring moderate governments and internal Palestinian struggles over succession [stet] puts a premium on tougher positions toward Israel. Compounding this tendency are perceived U.S. diplomatic ineffectiveness and detachment as well as the sense among Palestinians that the current Israeli government refuses to contemplate even the concessions proposed by its predecessor. Nevertheless, the PA's supposed September 2011 deadline for seeking UN action on statehood if no agreement is reached with Israel has not yet hardened into a fixed plan of action by the PA. In fact, many Palestinians are beginning to see the UN option as a trap as much as an opportunity, since it will not improve the situation on the ground.

Policy Implications

Given the dim prospects for Palestinian rapprochement and Hamas's continuing preference for violence over peace, any U.S. overture toward the group or signal of support for a Hamas-PA unity government would be either futile or counterproductive. But U.S. signals regarding internal PA politics are now increasingly important. Washington should emphasize that it continues to view Abbas and Fayad as essential partners for peace, while cautioning both leaders against feeding ill-conceived ideas of unilateralism or dismissing the benefits of direct negotiation. Conversely, Washington should keep its distance from lower-level PA officials who voice sympathy for "armed struggle" or disdain for U.S. diplomatic efforts and assistance.

David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Middle East countries. ❖

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