

The Consequences of Fatah's Chaotic Primaries

by [Mohammad Yaghi \(/experts/mohammad-yaghi\)](#), [Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Mohammad Yaghi \(/experts/mohammad-yaghi\)](#)

Mohammad Yaghi is a research fellow and program manager at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, specializing in social and Islamic movements and the Gulf states.



[Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](#)

Ben Fishman is a Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics.



Brief Analysis

Fatah's chaotic primary process has left Mahmoud Abbas's party vulnerable to Hamas in constituent districts that may determine control of the Palestinian legislature after January 2006 elections.

After a relatively calm first round of Fatah primaries in five of the West Bank's eleven electoral districts, a second round of primaries in five additional districts -- four in the West Bank and one in Gaza -- held between November 28 and December 3 have caused increased tensions within the movement. Where the victories by the younger generation of Fatah leaders in the primaries could have represented a watershed moment in Fatah's evolution, they have been marred by a haphazard system of voting and numerous accusations of fraud. Moreover, repeated incidents of violence at polling stations demonstrate Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas's difficulty in enforcing his principle of One Authority, One Gun even within his own movement. Rather than unifying Fatah, the primaries have highlighted the party's disorganization and divisions. The old guard represented by Fatah's Central Committee, which dominates a committee of the wise tasked to determine Fatah's final electoral lists, will now have greater leverage in that process to place its own members high on Fatah's national list of candidates in Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections scheduled for January 2006.

An Improvised Process

The poor planning and organization of the primaries by the Fatah Election Supervision Committee led to chaos in the recent voting. The committee, many of whose members ran in the primaries, spent nearly six months debating the system under which primaries would take place but ignored the technical and logistical requirements for a smooth and successful voting process.

Each district had major problems in determining its list of eligible voters, and in some cases, even candidates were left off the voting rosters. The number of names on the list of eligible voters fluctuated wildly until the actual day of voting. In Hebron, for example, the list of voters included 55,000 people at the end of September, dwindled to 16,000 in the following months, but somehow rose again to 40,000 names just two days before the December 2 primary. As a result of this uncertainty, polling places were furnished with questionable lists and often an incorrect number of ballots. Chaos ensued at these ill-prepared polling places, with voters questioning the absence of their names on the roster. In Rafah, the only district in Gaza to conduct primaries, the candidates agreed to minimize such tensions by limiting the number of voters to 8,000. In the January presidential election, Mahmoud Abbas received 21,500 votes in Rafah, indicating a much larger Fatah presence in that district.

The Election Supervision Committee did not establish an internal system for supervising the elections, nor did it invite nongovernmental organizations to observe the electoral process. In some districts, police were specifically kept away from the polling places. The lack of security enabled those opposed to the primaries to use violence to sabotage hopes of holding a primary in four of Gaza's five districts. Primaries in Hebron and Tulkarem ended early; a policeman shot and killed one candidate's supporter in Tulkarem, and in Hebron dozens of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades members affiliated with two losing candidates stormed the local election committee headquarters. This pervasive chaos has undermined the results of the polls, and reflects poorly on Fatah's ability to reform itself, much less the Palestinian Authority.

Results of the Second Round

In the five districts of Hebron, Jerusalem, Tulkarem, Salfit, and Rafah, 239 candidates competed for nominations to forty-four PLC seats. While it is difficult to generalize about the primary winners, most are new faces and many are allied at least loosely with Marwan Barghouti. The younger generation of Fatah leaders generally did well in the first round of the primaries. Jibril Rajoub, the former preventive security chief, led the voting in Hebron, the largest of the Palestinian districts, and is thus ensured the second or third overall spot on the final Fatah list. Rajoub's victory signaled the political mobilization of the security forces, which voted with more discipline than other Fatah constituencies. Members of the al-Aqsa Brigades won a seat in Hebron and in Rafah. Only two members of the Fatah Central Committee won in Hebron and Tulkarem, both finishing third in their local balloting. On the other hand, eight of ten sitting PLC members won in their districts, a much higher percentage of winning incumbents than in the first round. Allies of the old guard did better in Jerusalem than elsewhere, though even there the top spot went to Hatem Abdel-Kader, a sitting PLC member closely identified with the younger generation.

Fatah's Divisions

In nearly every district, losers from the primaries are challenging the validity of the results. The key battle within Fatah in coming days will be between those members of the younger generation who support the primary process and seek empowerment, and the old guard who will likely manipulate the current uncertainty to impose their own candidates on the final Fatah list. Already, the Fatah Central Committee has declared that even though it supports the ambitions of the young generation to control Fatah, it will only use the primaries as an opinion poll to guide the formation of the final Fatah list. Old guard representatives like Ahmed Qurei, the prime minister, Nabil Shaath, the deputy prime minister, and Rawhi Fatouh, the speaker of the PLC -- none of whom competed in primaries -- will likely be named to coveted places on the list.

The young generation itself is divided at this stage, with many of its members pursuing individual gain rather than the advancement of their mutual interests. Victories by individual younger generation leaders like Abdel-Kader, who finished first in Jerusalem, and Jamal Shobaki, who ranked sixth in Hebron, did not carry over into success for other candidates of a similar bent, such as Ahmed Ghuneim, who came in eighth in Jerusalem, or Mohammad Hourani, who finished seventeenth in Hebron. The lack of collaboration could signal to the old guard that the younger

generation is divided and unlikely at this stage to revolt by forming a separate list unless the old guard blatantly ignores their primary victories. It is also important to note the substantive differences between the candidates of the younger generation, who range from current members of the al-Aqsa Brigades to signers of the Geneva Peace Initiative.

Already, Fatah is suffering some defections. Some Fatah members and their allies have decided not to wait for the decision about who will be where on its list, with two current PLC members who have historically voted with Fatah joining the Hamas lists in Jenin and Nablus. At a time when Fatah should be coalescing in preparation for a heated campaign against Hamas, it is splintering. Fatah faces a great challenge forming a strong list by December 14, the deadline for candidate registration in the January elections; Abbas, who heads the list-making committee of the wise, will need to take a more active role in this process, from which he has distanced himself in recent weeks.

A Third Option

Fatah's struggle over determining its list has been so intense that it will not allow room for prominent and respected independents to join its ranks to increase its credibility. As a result, Salam Fayad, the recently resigned finance minister, Hanan Ashrawi, and Yasser Abd Rabbo, have formed a united independent front. Mustafa Barghouti, the former presidential candidate and the head of the Palestinian Initiative, has also formed another independent list. Polls indicate that support for these independent lists remains below 10 percent, though Mustafa Barghouti received nearly 20 percent of the vote in his presidential bid. While the independents struggle with their own divisions, they have recruited members of some of the most prominent Palestinian families as well as respected professionals into their ranks. These parties will attempt to position themselves to attract disillusioned Fatah voters who oppose the Islamist program of Hamas. Their success will depend partly on displaying the kind of unity Fatah lacks, which will be a challenge given the competing personalities and the last-minute formation of these coalitions. The creation of these parties may also spur Fatah to increase its own electoral prospects by naming the most popular candidates to its list.

Mohammad Yaghi, a Ramallah-based Palestinian political analyst, is executive director of the Palestinian Center for Mass Communication, a columnist for al-Ayyam, and a project manager for the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Ben Fishman is a researcher and special assistant at The Washington Institute.



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