ROUNDTABLE | POLITICS

Palestine After Abbas: Potential Scenarios and Coping Strategies

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Overview

In the months leading up to the American elections, the jockeying among Palestinian factions had been heating up in anticipation of a post-Abbas period. It was hoped that the long-delayed Fatah seventh conference, scheduled for November 29, 2016, would provide some insights into what a transition of power might look like, answering the question of how and when might Mahmoud Abbas step down from one or all of the three positions he holds: Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), head of the Palestinian Authority (PA), and head of Fatah, the largest Palestinian political faction.[1]

With the election of Donald Trump Israel believes it now has a free hand to do what it likes in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and beyond, making a Palestinian leadership transition all the more difficult. In this roundtable, Al-Shabaka policy analysts examine the different scenarios for a post-Abbas Palestine. While some such as **Hani Masri** believe that Palestinians have much to fear from a power vacuum in terms of further fragmentation and outside interference, others such as **Noura Erakat** argue that Palestinians have more to gain given the opportunities for change. **Jamil Hilal** warns of the dangers of a violent power struggle and urges a shift to a struggle for the collective rights of the Palestinian people as a whole, rather than the fate of an individual or his elite

cohort. **Sam Bahour** examines the different precedents and actors, and notes that the other PLO factions have lost any leverage they might once have had because their political existence is underwritten by the authority they might seek to challenge.

Jaber Suleiman, writing from his Lebanon base, warns that a PA collapse could cause a wave of migration or displacement toward the East Bank and a revival of Israeli projects envisaging rule of the West Bank and Gaza Strip with Jordan or Egypt, with implications for Palestinian communities in Lebanon and elsewhere. **Diana Buttu** hopes that new leaders would undo the disastrous effects of the Oslo Accords, hold Israel accountable, and build grassroots strategies for steadfastness rather than simply "ruling" the PA. In reviewing the various possible outcomes **Wajjeh Abu Zarifa** urges Palestinians to consolidate the UN-recognized State of Palestine by creating a Constituent Assembly. Al-Shabaka Program Director **Alaa Tartir** served as the roundtable's facilitator.

Hani Al-Masri

It is not a foregone conclusion that Abbas will soon leave office. Evidence suggests that he will likely seek to extend his term by pushing to convene Fatah's seventh general conference. This would also thwart Mohammed Dahlan's return to Fatah's Central Committee as Abbas's successor or as a player who would decide on and control the successor. The fact that no national alternative exists, because most of those named as possible successors are of the same school of thought, supports this scenario.

Post-Abbas scenarios depend on his exit's timing, namely whether it follows Fatah's general conference, the meeting of the Palestinian National Council, the end of the Fatah-Hamas division, or the return of Dahlan to Fatah. If Abbas were to depart before the conference is held and unity is reclaimed, the struggle to succeed him will be fierce and likely lead to chaos and infighting. This could cause

the PA to collapse, splinter into several authorities, or become a servant of Israel along the lines of the South Lebanon Army. If Abbas leaves office after agreeing on a Fatah vice president, a PLO vice chairman, and a PA vice president – instead of assigning the three positions to one person as has been the case since the PA was established – then this is likely to minimize chaos.

Post-Abbas scenarios also depend on the nature of his departure, be it by resignation, illness, or assassination. An assassination would trigger the worst scenario, in light of Dahlan's threat that he will not allow Abbas to hijack Fatah by commandeering its seventh conference. Another scenario entails a Dahlan alliance with Hamas, though this may not materialize, as Hamas could realize that its enmity against Dahlan and the Arab alliance that supports him (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain) is greater than its enmity against Abbas.

Palestinians have much to fear from a power vacuum, which could provide Israel, the Arab Quartet, takfiri and extremist groups, or Hamas and other Palestinian leftist or Islamist factions with the opportunity to seize power.[2] The two most likely of these scenarios would be Israeli control or the return of Arab trusteeship over the Palestinians. Both are undesirable, especially since the Arab countries that would attempt to impose a trusteeship, such as Saudi Arabia, maintain close relations with Israel and have increased cooperation with it to fight terrorism, takfiri movements, Iran, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

To prevent these unfavorable scenarios, leftist and other Palestinian political forces, as well as civil society and national private sector groups, must restore the liberation and rights discourse, redefine the national project, and rebuild the national movement so that it is based on true democratic political participation, with the goal of holding elections at all levels. Such elections should not be considered a means of winning the internal conflict, but rather a competition within the framework of unity.

The debate around these issues should transcend that of elite circles so that it becomes more accessible to the general public. This can be done through traditional as well as social media, popular and national conferences on the regional and national levels, and possibly petitions, sit-ins, and demonstrations.

Noura Erakat

Mahmoud Abbas oversees an institution – the PA – that reproduces itself in each of its many parts irrespective of the head of state. Its function is contingent on external financiers and gatekeepers, including the United States and Israel, which have an interest in keeping it intact, mainly due to its administrative function that mitigates the daily burdens of occupation while helping to contain the conflict. In addition, 40 percent of the Palestinian population works in the public sector and therefore also has an interest in continuing a status quo that, though harmful to its core interests, is simultaneously necessary for its livelihood and survival.

The most likely post-Abbas scenario will see an interim leader appointed until elections can be planned. Most projections for a successive head of state include well-known players, such as Mohammed Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub. Based on external and internal support as well as the scope of the threat he has posed to Abbas and Fatah's old guard, Dahlan's candidacy is as realistic as it is horrifying. Past attempts to exclude the Gaza Strip from polls and to marginalize Hamas's electoral prospects indicate that such elections would prove extremely contentious.

Worst-case scenarios involve a collapse of the PA and a takeover by Israel or by rival Hamas forces. However, Hamas is unlikely to risk directly confronting Israel in the West Bank unless it is also prepared for another escalation in the Gaza Strip and a simultaneous Israeli offensive in the West Bank. This is improbable unless the outcome would recalibrate the status quo in its favor, which is unlikely given Hamas's diminishing grassroots support in the West Bank and the costs of staging

two fronts. Hamas leaders will likely stage protests during elections and use them to further legitimize their rule in the Gaza Strip, rather than use force.

The Palestinian people have more to gain than lose from a leadership vacuum, as it creates an opportunity for change – and structural change is necessary to achieve Palestinian liberation. New leadership would have to disavow the PA's harmful structures, declare the Oslo framework null and void, cease economic and security cooperation with Israel, and insist on continuing a liberation struggle.

Such radical restructuring is contingent on popular mobilization by a critical mass. Israel's meticulous legal, political, and social fragmentation of the Palestinian population has thwarted the formation of such a mass. An unknown and unforeseen confluence of factors is necessary to overcome this fragmentation; Abbas's departure may be one factor in this constellation, but is not a sufficient one.

Change will most likely ultimately come from a grassroots youth cadre that is not beholden to the current institutional frameworks and is more imaginative and less fearful about future prospects. Such a cadre does not exist at present, though several seeds for it exist across the Palestinian landscape in Iqrit, Haifa, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Gaza City, and Nablus.

Jamil Hilal

Inclusive, legitimate national institutions will not bring about the election of a leader after Abbas because these institutions are not functioning. The Palestinian National Council (PNC) has not been active since the Oslo Accords, and the PA's legislative, judicial, and executive institutions have been split politically, territorially, and institutionally since June 2007, when Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip. Fatah as a ruling political party is experiencing its own internal schisms, with a Mohammed Dahlan faction opposed to the Abbas leadership.

As a result, a small political elite within the Fatah leadership, rather than the Palestinian people as a whole, will decide who will lead after Abbas. With no national institutions present to represent the various Palestinian communities inside historic Palestine and in the diaspora, the question of leadership cannot be satisfactorily resolved. It will continue to be contentious until national representational institutions are established, but given the split between Fatah and Hamas, the likelihood of such establishment is remote.

Any violent power struggle for leadership within Fatah would mean more political and geographical fragmentation and more Israeli, regional, and international interference in Palestinian political, economic, and social affairs.

The guessing game as to who is likely to succeed Abbas is not motivated by a concern for Palestinian national interests, but by Israeli interests as well as those of regional and international powers that are concerned about their standing.

Palestinians' attention should focus on rebuilding their national representation on a democratic and inclusive basis, to include all Palestinian communities inside and outside of historic Palestine. Their concern should be the struggle for the collective rights of the Palestinian people as a whole, rather than the fate of an individual or his elite cohort. Palestinians need to reconstruct Palestinian influence and standing in the form of institutions, associations, visions, and strategies that not only elect political leaders but also community leaders. These leaders should seek to unify all Palestinians in the struggle for freedom, dignity, the right of return, and self-determination. Any other endeavor is simply a distraction or a mirage.

Sam Bahour

When Yasser Arafat died in 2004, Palestine's Amended Basic Law – the equivalent to a constitution – was respected: The Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and its speaker took over for 60 days until elections took place. Today, given the fact that

there is no operational PLC and the supposed speaker is from Hamas, it is likely that this law will not be respected. Rather, "extraordinary measures" will be invoked to maintain control. This could mean that the Fatah Central Committee will deliberate and come to the Fatah-dominated PLO Executive Committee to implement the decision. The other PLO factions, having lost any secondary leverage they once had, may challenge this decision, but this would create a clash with officialdom, which today underwrites their political existence. Given that Fatah is seriously fragmented, it is not clear if it would be able to agree on a single person or a mechanism to undertake the leadership role. A division of labor between the heads of the Palestinian Authority and the PLO may occur to satisfy competing personal agendas.

The fears going forward are many. At the forefront is the fear of regional or international interference in national decisions. Palestinians have already experienced this over the last several years, and such interference could have devastating effects if allowed to fester or increase. Another fear is that the PA leadership may attempt a power grab, given its resources, international recognition, and security forces. Still another concern is that one of the security force heads could attempt to take political control; this, however, is not likely since none of the security forces is self-sufficient. Lastly is the threat that Israel will implant one of its operatives in the leadership role. Yet a more likely Israeli action would be to proclaim statehood in Gaza for Palestinians and further entrench Israel's presence in the West Bank, perhaps through full annexation. If Israel took this approach and Hamas in Gaza was open to such a move, the current disunity could be irreparable.

To safeguard the little representative integrity that remains in the Palestinian political system and counter the threats noted above, Palestinians must demand two immediate actions: 1) that Abbas call for elections to reinstate the PLC, with the understanding that though it would only represent Palestinians in the West

Bank, it could rapidly be acted upon and have some popular legitimacy;[3] and 2) that the temporary PLO Leadership Committee, which encompasses all PLO as well as national factions, be convened with a mandate to allow the formation and recognition of new political parties. This would set a course for resetting the Palestinian political system through proportional representation via the PLO's highest body, the Palestinian National Council (PNC).

Jaber Suleiman

We will likely face one of two major scenarios post-Abbas. The first is chaos. The departure of a president who has monopolized decision-making, as well as the inability of the Palestinian political system to renew its expired legitimacy, threaten to make this struggle for power not one of political disagreement, but of infighting and further division. Such a situation will likely result in the complete separation of the two authorities in Gaza and Ramallah, and even more division within the West Bank, with Hamas controlling its southern parts. Arab and regional interference, particularly from the Arab Quartet, would add to the chaos. Israel, which has an interest in confirming its claim that the Palestinians are unable to manage themselves and unworthy of an autonomous authority, let alone a state, could also play a role.

This scenario would culminate in the PA's collapse, and would cause a wave of migration or displacement toward the East Bank. Such movement would in all likelihood revive projects like Shimon Peres's scheme of sharing rule of the West Bank and Gaza Strip with Jordan or Egypt, but in a new form in which the PA/PLO would replace Jordan or Egypt. Such a scenario would have a disastrous impact on the unity of the Palestinian community in Lebanon, particularly given that Palestinians in Lebanon have hardly been able to avoid the implications of the Palestinian divide and advocate for a unified national agenda that addresses Palestinian inalienable rights, in addition to their struggle for basic human rights in

Lebanon.

The second scenario would be a peaceful transition of power through an interim national leadership, agreed upon via a reconciliation agreement such as the Cairo Agreement. This leadership would need to rectify the relationship between the PLO and the PA, given that the PA is a PLO tool and not vice versa. And it would need to execute genuine democratic reform of PLO structures, especially the Palestinian National Council, as well as in regard to the PA's relationship with the state and the PA's decision-making mechanism.

Israel and some Arab parties would challenge this scenario because they would rather control the Palestinian "card." It therefore not only requires political will on the part of all national factions, especially Fatah and Hamas, but also the mobilization of the Palestinian "silent majority," that is, all national popular frameworks in Palestine and the diaspora. The goal would be to amass a bloc of this majority capable of exerting pressure on the factions so that they choose peaceful transition and rebuild the political system and its national institutions on democratic foundations.

Diana Buttu

After Abbas, several scenarios are possible: A peaceful transition to power by the speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC); a power struggle between individuals within Fatah or the PLO, culminating in multiple "leaders;" or a power vacuum until elections are organized and held. Given the chaos that Abbas has created, and the concomitant disarray in Palestinian political parties, it is unlikely that elections will be organized soon.

Palestinian leaders should move to reconcile with Hamas and make arrangements for a post-Abbas PA/PLO that would put forward a strategy for liberating Palestine and for beginning to represent Palestinians living in Israel. This strategy

would see new leaders undoing the disastrous effects of the Oslo Accords, holding Israel accountable, and building grassroots strategies for steadfastness, rather than simply "ruling" the PA.

The Palestinian political spectrum and civil society could also use the leadership change to rebuild the PLO so that it is both representative of Palestinian society as well as the age shift in Palestinian society. Such a strategy would also mean capitalizing on the strength of the Palestinian people as a whole and their movements, and doing away with futile bilateral negotiations. As a first step, Palestine needs to break the yoke of financial blackmail that currently binds the PA/PLO to these bilateral negotiations. In addition, by bringing in Palestinians in Israel, the PLO can finally begin to become representative of all Palestinians, rather than paying lip service to such inclusiveness while marginalizing Palestinians not living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

A leadership vacuum would be a major distraction from focusing on this strategy, and is indeed Israel's dream, allowing it to divide and conquer and use the time of chaos to build more settlements.

Wajjeh Abu Zarifa

If Abbas stays in power in the short term, the first possible scenario is to hold presidential and legislative elections in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem as stipulated in the Cairo Agreement. However, this option is unlikely in light of the deep division and mistrust between Fatah and Hamas. The second scenario is to hold presidential and legislative elections wherever possible, such that if Gaza were to boycott, the elections would be organized in the West Bank. Yet this is also an unlikely option, as it would entrench the division and increase the likelihood of secession. Moreover, Israel may not agree to hold the elections in Jerusalem, which would further the separation of Jerusalem.

When Abbas leaves office, there are a number of possible scenarios, including the chief justice of the Constitutional Court becoming the PA president until elections are held, or the PA presidency being assigned to the PLO's Executive Committee, with the PLO secretary becoming a temporary president. Yet there is one scenario that is more practical and logical, even though it is not constitutional or legal: The prime minister, in his capacity as chief of the executive authority, takes on the powers of the PA president. Presidential and legislative elections are held within 60 days and require national consensus. However, such an option, though the most logical one, is close to impossible given current divisions.

Thus, all political forces must be invited to a serious dialogue to develop the mechanisms needed to overcome current divisions, implement the Cairo Agreement, and hold presidential and legislative elections before Abbas leaves office. Palestinians also need to convene the PLO's provisional leadership framework and the committee entrusted with reforming the PLO to restore the Palestinian National Council and hold a session bringing together all parties, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The PLO's Central Council and the Executive Committee must be formed, and a new chairman must be named. In the longer term, Palestinians need to consolidate the UN-recognized State of Palestine by creating a Constituent Assembly comprised of members of the Central Council, the Legislative Council, the government, and the Executive Committee to draft a Palestinian constitution and elect a president.

1. Al-Shabaka publishes all its content in both English and Arabic (see Arabic text here.) To read this piece in French, please click here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces into French, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.
2. *Takfir is to accuse a person of being an unbeliever and has become a central ideology of militant groups (see, e.g., Oxford Islamic Studies and Le Monde Diplomatique).*
3. *Haytham Al-Zubi made the case for this arrangement in a 2013 op-ed. See "Calm Constitutional Advice to the Palestinian President," Al-Quds, July 20, 2013.*

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