



# Managing Palestine's Looming Leadership Transition

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## Principal Findings

**What's new?** President Mahmoud Abbas is approaching the conclusion of his tenure as leader of the Palestinian national movement. It is unclear who will succeed him, and by what process, which raises no small number of questions about the Palestinians' political future.

**Why does it matter?** Under Abbas's presidency, the Palestinian Authority has become autocratic and ceased to function as the putative foundation for a Palestinian state. Yet it remains critical as the provider of essential services to over three million West Bank Palestinians. A failed transition could trigger violence or even the PA's collapse.

**What should be done?** The best – if improbable – course would be to return to established succession procedures. Should the post-Abbas interim leadership take the more likely route, and appoint a successor, it should give in to popular pressure for a presidential election that would ratify the appointment or allow an alternative candidate to emerge.

## *Executive Summary*

More than a year after cancelled elections and a violent upheaval, Palestinians face the prospect of a destabilising leadership transition. President Mahmoud Abbas, 87, continues to exert a strong hold on power, but his reign is unavoidably nearing its end. A smooth succession will be challenging, as Abbas holds three leadership posts – he is president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and head of both the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Fatah, its largest faction. He has hollowed out or disabled the institutions and procedures that would otherwise decide who will take his place. Complicating matters, while Abbas is leader of Palestinians worldwide, the national movement's centre of gravity has shifted to the territories Israel occupies; for all practical purposes, only the Palestinians living there will have a voice in choosing a successor. To avert the risk of chaos, any interim Palestinian leadership should ensure a stable transition, one that Palestinians recognise as legitimate, by allowing for a presidential election that would ratify an appointed successor or, better, allow Palestinians to freely choose among candidates.

As successor to PLO co-founder Yasser Arafat, Abbas assumed great responsibility when he became PLO leader upon the latter's death in 2004 and president of the PA a year later. He was nominally the top political representative of Palestinians worldwide: in the occupied territories, in the diaspora and (in his capacity as head of the PLO) even inside Israel. No single mechanism exists for this broad but fragmented community to elect its leaders, and the PLO has thus developed different procedures for succession in its various institutions and organs. Since the 1993 Oslo accords, which led to the PA's creation in the occupied territories, the 5.35 million Palestinians in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza have carried the political weight of what remains of the Palestinian national movement. Yet their leaders, with the help of Israel, have repeatedly thwarted them in their aspiration to vote in presidential and legislative elections as a way to bestow upon them popular legitimacy.

It is thus a conundrum when the person who combines all three main leadership posts, and who has ruled with an increasingly authoritarian hand, pushing aside procedures, weakening institutions and silencing critics, reaches the end of his tenure. The challenge is compounded by the fact that Abbas has given no clear indication of who he would like to succeed him, thereby sowing confusion and encouraging extra-institutional rivalry among would-be successors.

Three scenarios present themselves. The first would see Abbas or his interim successors ordering a return to the rulebook, reviving judicial oversight institutions he pushed to the side and reintroducing a degree of popular will into succession procedures. For now, nothing suggests Palestinian leaders will choose this path, though it would be the safest one. In the second scenario, either Abbas would anoint a successor before he passes from the scene or, if he fails to do so, then Fatah would select one afterward. Such a step could bring initial stability in a transition but is unlikely to be sustainable. Pressure is likely to build quickly among Palestinians for a popular vote. Moreover, a successor will not enjoy Abbas's authority as a PLO co-founder or the grip on Palestinian institutions that has allowed him to put off elections. The third scenario, which is certainly plausible, would see the transition collapse into disarray

and, potentially, violence between armed factions aligned with particular politicians and controlling different parts of the West Bank. This last eventuality could throw the PA's survival into question.

What non-Palestinian actors want is far from immaterial. Israel sees the situation in the territories it occupies primarily as a security concern – the main reason for having turned the PA from the steward of a future Palestinian state into, in effect, an auxiliary in Israel's exercise of control. To perpetuate the occupation and everything that comes with it, Israel prefers that existing leadership circles remain in charge post-Abbas. But it is wary of openly endorsing any single candidate, lest its endorsement be politically fatal for that person with the Palestinian public. More worryingly, Israel's new far-right government is almost certain to introduce new destabilising elements into the military occupation – accelerated settlement expansion, moves toward full annexation, provocative actions at Jerusalem's Muslim holy sites – that would undermine the Israeli security establishment's apparent preference for maintaining the status quo.

Likewise, neighbouring states like Jordan and Egypt, though officials keep mum, would prefer a transition that changes nothing in the equation, if only because anything different might force them to act. As for external powers, such as the U.S. and Europe, they continue to utter words endorsing democracy even as they signal that they would be content with whatever Israel and its neighbours can accept or bring about.

There is no easy way to renew the Palestinian national movement's leadership. The Oslo accords allowed the PLO's upper echelons to return to the West Bank, and for all practical purposes it is now the Palestinians there who may or may not have the chance to weigh in on who comes next, at least as PA president. While Palestinians should keep seeking to refresh politics overall, the imminent transition in the occupied territories suggests that preparations for a succession should begin there at once if it is not to make an already tense situation even more so.

There are constitutional procedures to determine the succession, which the Palestinian leadership should take steps to reaffirm and reestablish after years of neglect. It is unlikely to do so, however. Nor does it appear international actors nominally invested in a just and durable solution to the conflict will do much to nudge Abbas in that direction. But even without restoring Palestinian institutions before Abbas leaves the scene, it is hard to envisage a scenario in which pressure does not mount for a vote soon afterward, even if the actual handover of power is seamless. It will be vital, then, that foreign actors do what they can to support – and certainly do not stand in the way of – a post-Abbas process that would see any successor's legitimacy confirmed in an election, at a minimum a presidential vote, held throughout the occupied territories. That would fall far short of reinforcing faltering efforts to bring about a viable Palestinian state, but it would reduce the chances that a botched succession triggers further chaos or even the PA's collapse.

**Ramallah/Brussels, 1 February 2023**

# Managing Palestine's Looming Leadership Transition

## I. Introduction

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The Palestinian national movement will soon face a power vacuum. The same man, Mahmoud Abbas (commonly known as Abu Mazen), leads three of its most important institutions: the Palestinian Authority (PA) that administers the West Bank, the Fatah party that dominates the PA and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), in which Fatah is the largest faction and which Israel recognised as the Palestinian people's sole legitimate representative in the 1993 Oslo accords. Abbas, who is 87, has headed all three bodies since Yasser Arafat died in 2004. When he passes from the scene, he is likely to leave behind a void at the top, since he has made no provision for handing over the reins. In January 2021, he called presidential and legislative elections for the PA and elections for the PLO's main decision-making organ. Just three months later, however, he cancelled them.

Of the three institutions that Abbas leads, the PA is the most recent creation, established in the occupied territories soon after the Oslo accords, and the most relevant to Palestinians living there. The body has never lived up to expectations that it would become the foundation of an independent Palestinian state; instead, it has become, as its harshest critics contend, a mere subcontractor to Israel in maintaining the military occupation. Since Abbas called off elections, the PA has been rocked by scandals over corruption, nepotism, incompetence and the use of lethal force by its security forces, which have chipped away at its already brittle legitimacy. It has been enervated by Abbas's increasingly authoritarian tendencies during his seventeen years in power. It also faces a severe fiscal crisis.

Yet the PA remains critically important. It is a service provider to some 3.2 million Palestinians in the West Bank, where it is also a major employer.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, perhaps incongruously, even as a weak institution it has gained in influence vis-à-vis the PLO, which has become increasingly enfeebled as a national liberation movement since its leaders began relocating to the occupied territories after Oslo, a trend accelerated under Abbas. The PLO's slow eclipse by the PA presents Palestinians worldwide with a dilemma: the PA gives a measure of political representation to those residing in the occupied territories, but mainly by Israeli and international design, it is helping perpetuate a process of colonisation, dispossession and annexation rather than mounting a challenge to Israel's occupation and systematic denial of Palestinian rights. Meanwhile, it has come to stand in for the PLO in many ways. Abbas's failure to prepare for a smooth, democratic succession has thus come to pose an existential threat not just to the PA but to the Palestinian national movement as a whole.

The question is therefore what to do once a post-Abbas transition gets under way. The vast majority of Palestinians would like a legitimate leadership un beholden to the occupying power that can negotiate at least an end to the occupation and, prefer-

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<sup>1</sup> The West Bank population figure is from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

ably, a just, durable resolution of the conflict, including for Palestinian refugees – the purpose the PLO was intended to serve. Yet with that prospect close to nil at present, and with the PA administering the largest congregation of Palestinians under a single Palestinian governing body, the transition will unavoidably be centred on the West Bank and the three leadership structures headquartered there: the PA presidency, the PLO and Fatah.

Critics may rightly point out that a limited Palestinian self-governing authority under permanent occupation cannot work, at least not to the benefit of Palestinians. They may say the only way forward is through the overall renewal of the Palestinian national movement under PLO leadership, a process that would serve all Palestinians, wherever they may be – under occupation, in Israel or in the diaspora. But that project will take years. Meanwhile, the emergence of a leadership vacuum in Palestine is imminent. It could have a devastating humanitarian impact if governing institutions sputter or – in the worst-case scenario – cease to function altogether.

This report focuses on the looming leadership transition as it affects the PA, the PLO and Fatah in the occupied territories, with heavy emphasis on the first institution, which has become the epicentre of Palestinian politics and decision-making over the last three decades. It draws on more than 80 interviews conducted in the occupied Palestinian territories, Türkiye, Egypt, Jordan and Israel with representatives of the Palestinian political factions, PA security forces, the Palestinian justice sector, Palestinian civil society organisations (including election monitoring bodies) and international donors, as well as Israeli security analysts. Their accounts are supplemented with information gleaned from policy reports, media coverage and opinion surveys.

## II. Fault Lines and Fractures

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The leadership transition, when it occurs, will take place against the backdrop of deep fractures in the Palestinian national movement. One of these separates Fatah from its major rival, Hamas, the Islamist movement that administers the Gaza Strip and is not part of the PLO. But other divides – inside the organisations Abbas leads, within the broader political elite, and between the PA and the Palestinian public – are also salient. These fault lines date back in their current form to the last Palestinian elections, in 2006, and have only widened since then. A major question is what mechanism – general elections, a power-sharing agreement between Fatah and Hamas, a managed succession at the top or some combination of these – could help heal the rifts and restore the PA’s legitimacy in the population’s eyes.

### A. *The 2006 Elections’ Heavy Legacy*

The major divides in Palestinian politics came to the surface after the elections of January 2006. It was not Palestinian politicians but international actors – notably, the U.S. and its then-secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice – who pushed for these elections, as a means of resolving the legitimacy crisis from which the PA suffered, with no end to Israeli occupation in sight, much less a Palestinian state, more than a decade after the Oslo accords. They had to overcome resistance from Abbas and senior Fatah leaders, who feared that Hamas would win. The U.S. was unpleasantly surprised when Hamas did indeed emerge victorious.<sup>2</sup> Together with Fatah and Israel, Washington rejected the result, deepening the fractures in Palestinian society and derailing any effort at a democratic power transfer.

The growing polarisation has been hugely damaging to Palestinian institutions and governance. The elections created opposing power centres that split the Palestinian political arena in two – the Fatah-led PA in the West Bank and the Hamas-led de facto government in Gaza. The latter has been subject to an international boycott (broken only by Qatar) and Israeli blockade since its creation in 2007.<sup>3</sup> These institutional divisions have solidified into two separate authoritarian regimes, each with its own supporting cast of local, regional and, in the case of the PA, international stakeholders.

Political fragmentation in subsequent years further undermined the machinery of governance. The PA became increasingly inept and corrupt, losing support not only at a popular level but also within the ranks of Fatah. In response, its critics allege, the PA resorted to coercion to enforce compliance.<sup>4</sup> For its part, Hamas became increas-

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<sup>2</sup> David Rose, “The Gaza bombshell”, *Vanity Fair*, April 2008. See also “The Palestine papers: Quadrilateral meeting of the Gaza Security Committee”, Al Jazeera, 11 March 2007.

<sup>3</sup> In 2007, Hamas assumed the role of de facto administrative authority in Gaza after Fatah rejected the previous year’s election results. In a Western-backed coup attempt, Fatah tried but failed to dislodge Hamas, after which the Islamist movement took total control of the strip. See Rose, “The Gaza bombshell”, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Abdaljawad Omar, “How the Palestinian Authority manages dissent”, *Electronic Intifada*, 14 July 2021; Omar Rahman, “U.S. support is keeping the undemocratic Palestinian Authority alive”, *Foreign Policy*, 2 July 2021; and Marwa Fatafta, “Neopatrimonialism, Corruption and the Palestinian Authority: Pathways to Real Reform”, Al-Shabaka, 20 December 2018.

ingly entrenched in Gaza, tolerating little dissent. Israel's siege of the territory, ostensibly aimed at containing Hamas and rendering it unpopular, has caused severe economic hardship but done little to dislodge Hamas. It has even backfired, particularly during the several rounds of violent confrontation between Hamas and Israel: each such altercation has brought the movement renewed support, even if only temporarily. But whatever respect Hamas has gained for being willing to stand up to Israel it has soon lost in Gazans' eyes, due to weak service delivery, while it has found itself continually ostracised by most of the world.<sup>5</sup>

The split in the Palestinian body politic undermined the Palestinian leadership's credibility in peace negotiations in the eyes of Israel and outside actors, and it provided a convenient way for Israel, which in practice had already abandoned the two-state paradigm, to claim that it had no peace partner that could deliver on any signed deal.<sup>6</sup> An official at the U.S. Security Coordinator, a U.S.-led body that coordinates security issues between Israel and the PA, said "the hard-line view among diplomats [is that] Israelis are where they are and the Palestinians are where they aren't", referring not just to the lack of overlap in the two sides' positions, but also to the disarray in Palestinian ranks, which has prevented the development of a consistent strategy, one that is not simply reactive, as well as a unified objective in dealings with Israel.<sup>7</sup>

The main obstacle to Palestinian reconciliation is that Fatah and Hamas cannot agree on a way forward, a predicament that Israel and external actors have readily accepted if not abetted. It is not for lack of trying. The two parties have made several efforts to establish power-sharing mechanisms over the past fifteen years in response to public pressure. These have ranged from comprehensive reconciliation accords to attempted unity governments and the promise of national elections. A range of outside powers, including Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Morocco, Egypt, Qatar, Türkiye, Algeria and Russia, helped broker the efforts, all in vain. The failures invariably came down to a combination of three issues: Fatah's demand that Hamas in Gaza disarm; Hamas's demand that the PLO allow Hamas to join its ranks; and the question of when and under what conditions to hold national elections. The first two demands have repeatedly proven to be the main stumbling blocks.<sup>8</sup>

Both Fatah and Hamas have an interest in some form of reconciliation – the former because its grip on power is tenuous after losing its legitimacy and the latter because it is internationally isolated as well as excluded from Palestinian national movement discussions about the future. Reconciliation could lead to elections organised in a way that both forces could accept, paving the way for a post-election power-sharing arrangement. Yet progress toward a workable compromise has been elusive. A former senior PA and Fatah official said:

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<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau officials, Cairo and Gaza, February-May 2021. See also Tareq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* (Stanford, 2018); Belal Shobaki, "Hamas: Dismantling the Dilemmas of Governance and Resistance", Al-Shabaka, 30 September 2021; and Nathan J. Brown, "Gaza Five Years On: Hamas Settles In", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 June 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. Security Coordinator official, 31 March 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 31 March 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Hamas political bureau officials and Fatah/PA officials, February-March 2021.

There has never been a leadership [on either side] that believes in the necessity of achieving [institutional] unification and works seriously to achieve it. The approach has always been wrong and partial, never comprehensive. In theory, there are ways out of this division. In practice, we are in a very deep hole.<sup>9</sup>

#### **B. Fatah and Hamas Agree to Share Power, Prepare for Elections**

Events in 2020 helped focus the two factions' minds, at least for a time, on compromise. That January, the Trump administration released its so-called Peace to Prosperity plan, which it had crafted ostensibly to resolve the conflict, but entirely on Israeli terms, namely by leapfrogging a negotiated political settlement in the absence of a viable peace process.<sup>10</sup> Palestinians denounced the scheme as undermining their aspiration to statehood, as it said Israel could annex large swathes of the West Bank.<sup>11</sup> Later in 2020, Israel signed a number of "normalisation" deals with Arab states. These agreements were another blow to longstanding efforts to maintain Arab consensus behind tying diplomatic recognition of Israel to resolution of the Palestinian question. The Peace to Prosperity plan fell by the wayside when Joe Biden beat Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential election. But the year's developments had impressed on Fatah and Hamas the need – after years of deadlock – to move forward with reconciliation talks leading to a power-sharing deal that would enable elections.<sup>12</sup>

The result was what seemed to be real progress. Following several months of talks between senior aides from the two sides, Fatah and Hamas concluded verbal agreements on power sharing in October 2020.<sup>13</sup> They cemented the deal in an exchange of messages in early January 2021. On 15 January, Abbas announced that elections would take place for all three critical Palestinian decision-making bodies – the PA's Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) on 22 May; the PA presidency on 31 July; and the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the PLO's legislative body, on 31 August.<sup>14</sup> The breakthrough had come in the Hamas-Fatah exchange, when the former accepted the latter's demand that the three elections be held consecutively, not concurrently. Fatah wanted to test the waters with the PLC contests, so that it would have time to manage any backlash and, if necessary, cancel the others. Hamas agreed to Fatah's condition because it had decided not to field a candidate for president. It had also

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<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 5 November 2021.

<sup>10</sup> The plan accepts the extension of Israeli sovereignty over occupied East Jerusalem and calls for the Palestinian capital to be located on the West Bank side of the separation barrier, physically cut off from the main part of the city. It also approves the annexation of all Jewish settlements in the West Bank, as well as most of the Jordan Valley. For full details, see "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People", White House, January 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Ali Sawafta and Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Slap of the century": Palestinians reject Trump Mideast plan", Reuters, 28 January 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas officials, Gaza and Cairo, February–March 2021.

<sup>13</sup> "Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas to hold talks in Ankara", Al Jazeera, 20 September 2020. See also Daoud Kuttab, "Palestinian leaders grasp for unity in Ramallah-Beirut meeting", *Al-Monitor*, 4 September 2020; and "Palestine's Abbas hails Haniyeh's reconciliation letter", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 3 January 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Isabel Kershner and Adam Rasgon, "Abbas announces Palestinian elections after years of paralysis", *The New York Times*, 15 January 2021.

received verbal assurances from Fatah that prospective Hamas legislators would be given seats on the PNC.<sup>15</sup>

These understandings culminated in fourteen Palestinian political factions convening in Cairo on 8 February 2021, under official Egyptian sponsorship, for the first round of what was called the National Palestinian Dialogue.<sup>16</sup> The parties agreed to a “national partnership”, which involved holding elections for the three Palestinian decision-making bodies.<sup>17</sup> A second round convened on 16–17 March, once again under Egypt’s official auspices. This time, the factions signed a “code of honour”, agreeing to put aside political divisions and reaffirming their support for the electoral process.<sup>18</sup> With the exception of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, all the established Palestinian political parties agreed to present electoral lists.<sup>19</sup> Together, the two sets of Cairo agreements did the important work of detailing election procedures and stressing the need for all parties to accept the outcomes.

For both Hamas and Fatah, elections offered a gateway to renewed relevance and political revival. For Hamas, they presented a path out of sole responsibility for deteriorating conditions in Gaza, for which residents blame not just the Israeli siege but also the movement’s governance. They would also allow Hamas to extend its political reach in the West Bank and in Palestinian decision-making organs, including, for the first time, the PNC, from which it is excluded, and to relinquish its administrative duties in Gaza.<sup>20</sup> Hamas does not aspire to be the ruling party – the Muslim Brotherhood’s 2012–2013 experience in Egypt was a sobering indicator of where that could lead – but to join the PLO and its various institutions in order to be part of decision-making.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas and Fatah officials, Gaza and Cairo, February–March 2021. On 18 January 2021, Palestinian factions agreed to reduce the number of PNC members from 765 to 350. Of the 350, 150 would come from the occupied Palestinian territories and the remainder from the diaspora. The 150 would be composed of the 132 elected PLC members as well as eighteen to be agreed upon among the factions, the Preparatory Committee for National Council Elections and the Elections Committee. The other 200 would be appointed via consensus among the factions, depending on their contributions, status and other criteria. “Palestinian official: Reducing National Council members to 350”, Anadolu Agency, 18 January 2021 (Arabic). On Hamas’s decision not to contest the presidency, see “Hamas rules out the candidacy of its leaders for the presidency”, Al Jazeera, 17 January 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>16</sup> These same fourteen factions had met previously, in September 2020, when Abbas chaired a video conference of the general secretaries, who were speaking variously from Ramallah and Beirut.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad officials, Cairo and Istanbul, February–March 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior member of Palestinian political factions, Cairo, March 2021. See also “Palestinian factions sign a code of honour in Cairo to guarantee success of upcoming elections”, Wafa News Agency, 16 March 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad political bureau member, Cairo, 10 February 2021. Palestinian Islamic Jihad does not recognise the Oslo accords and refuses to participate in any process involving the PLC or any other institution these accords created. Yet other factions deem it an important part of the political fabric and often invite it to national events.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau officials, Gaza, 16 March 2021. It is not clear what exactly the two sides understood by the notion of Hamas relinquishing its administrative responsibilities in Gaza. It was an issue to be negotiated after the elections.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Palestinian observer in Gaza, 1 July 2022.

For Fatah, the decision to head to the polls was motivated by Abbas's determination to consolidate his base, curry favour with the Biden administration by demonstrating democratic practices, and win a broader mandate to restart negotiations between the PLO and Israel.<sup>22</sup> Fatah convinced Hamas to accept a 2007 decree that changed the system for legislative elections from a majoritarian "bloc vote", which had secured the Islamist movement's victory in 2006, to nationwide proportional representation.<sup>23</sup> This change, and the fact that the movement's popularity had dropped since the 2006 election, meant that Hamas would likely win at most 45 of the body's 132 seats.<sup>24</sup>

Abbas made concessions in exchange. He repealed a post-2006 decree requiring candidates to accept the PLO's political obligations, including pursuing a two-state solution, adhering to existing agreements with Israel and endorsing the principle of non-violence. Instead of swearing allegiance to the PLO, Hamas and twelve other factions, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), agreed to abide by the 2006 Prisoners' National Conciliation Document, which called for a Palestinian state within the 1967 boundaries and restoration of refugee rights as per international law.<sup>25</sup> Abbas also agreed to form a non-partisan elections court.<sup>26</sup>

The Cairo agreements, while important in creating consensus on the need for elections, were nonetheless flawed in a crucial respect. They left the most divisive issue – how to form a national unity government – to be discussed after the elections.<sup>27</sup> Although both Fatah and Hamas signalled firm intent to establish such a government, regardless of which party made the best showing in the polls, the absence of agreement on substantive matters dimmed the prospects of forming a viable one.<sup>28</sup> The two factions accused each other of bad faith, with each suspecting the other of

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<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Fatah official, 19 March 2021.

<sup>23</sup> The 2006 elections were based on two different lists, with 66 seats in winner-take-all electoral districts and 66 others allocated proportionally on the basis of the national vote. Hamas won the legislative majority based on its success in the districts, where it easily beat Fatah, plus the narrow victory it eked out in the proportionally elected seats. See "The Second 2006 PLC Elections – The Final Distribution of PLC Seats", Central Elections Commission – Palestine, 2006; and "The Electoral System Set Forth by Elections Law No. (9) of 2005", Central Elections Commission – Palestine, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> "Public Opinion Poll No (79)", Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research, 14-19 March 2021; and "Drawing on past lessons, Hamas submits inclusive electoral list", *Al-Monitor*, 1 April 2021.

<sup>25</sup> "National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners", UNISPAL, 26 May 2021.

<sup>26</sup> "Palestinian factions in Cairo sign a charter of honour to run for elections – Document", *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 16 March 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior Fatah officials, March 2021; and Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau members, Cairo and Gaza, February-April 2021. See also Joseph Massad, "Palestine elections: Why is Hamas seeking national unity with Fatah?", *Middle East Eye*, 25 February 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas officials, Gaza and Cairo, February-March 2021. Despite not participating in the elections, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, like other Palestinian factions, was present at all reconciliation and electoral preparation meetings during this time. All the factions, regardless of whether they would take part in elections, agreed on the need for broad consensus concerning the process, so that none would attempt to foil it.

masking a partisan scheme with paeans to national unity. Elections thus promised to exacerbate divisions as much as bridge them.<sup>29</sup>

A second problem arose from suspicions that, in seeking national unity, the two factions were in fact colluding to keep their present power. Apart from the Cairo agreements, Fatah and Hamas considered a proposal that they appear together on a single national list for the elections. A joint list would have allowed the two factions to bolster their duopoly, whereby Fatah controls the West Bank and Hamas runs Gaza. Discord within both factions nixed the idea, along with widespread popular opposition, but not before Abbas's credibility in particular had suffered (see below).<sup>30</sup>

Yet, overall, the prospect of new leadership capable of delivering essential services, reconciling divisions in Palestinian society and leading dialogue about the national cause, including how to approach any future peace process with Israel, was electrifying for Palestinians in the occupied territories.<sup>31</sup> True, many were sceptical at first.<sup>32</sup> But as election preparations went ahead, doubt turned into popular enthusiasm, sparking a flurry of activity across the political spectrum. Some 93 per cent of eligible Palestinians registered to vote in the PLC elections, and 29 independent and seven political party lists submitted applications by the 31 March deadline. A total of 1,391 candidates stood for election, including 405 women.<sup>33</sup> A representative of the Human Rights and Democracy Media Centre (SHAMS), a Ramallah-based NGO, warned: "These elections have given Palestinians hope and purpose. If they are cancelled, things will get chaotic and heated".<sup>34</sup>

### C. *Fatah Splinters*

Soon, however, something happened that gave Abbas second thoughts about the elections he had announced. As the campaign unfolded, Fatah's longstanding internal divisions surfaced, breaking the movement into three competing electoral lists, each led by prominent party veterans. One list belonged to Abbas's faction. The second was jointly headed by Marwan Barghouthi, a popular figure who is serving five life sentences in Israel for his role as a commander in Fatah's armed wing during the Second Intifada, and Nasser al-Qidwa, Yasser Arafat's nephew, who endorsed Barghouthi for president. The third slate's leader was Mohammed Dahlan, Fatah's former security chief in Gaza.<sup>35</sup> Until the split, Fatah had maintained a lead over Hamas

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<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Fatah officials, March-April 2021; and Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau members, Gaza, March-April 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, SHAMS official, 10 March 2021. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau officials, Gaza, 16 March 2021; former senior Fatah official and head of Fatah splinter list, 25 July 2022; and senior Fatah and PLO Executive Committee official, Ramallah, 13 July 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, representatives of the PA's Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR) and PLC candidates on youth and civil society lists, February-April 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, ICHR and SHAMS representatives, February 2021. See also Kershner and Rasgon, "Abbas announces Palestinian elections after years of paralysis", op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> "CEC Exhibits the Preliminary Register of Nominated Electoral Lists", Central Elections Commission, 6 April 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 10 March 2021.

<sup>35</sup> "Conflicting expectations in Palestine amid registration of dozens of electoral lists", *Middle East Monitor*, 7 April 2021. Qidwa's decision to endorse Barghouthi derived from his scepticism that the

in opinion polls, which seemed to suit both factions.<sup>36</sup> Now, Fatah's chances of winning seemed considerably lower.

A major reason for Fatah's breakup was discontent in the ranks with Abbas and his coterie of advisers, paired with cynicism about the power-sharing agreement in light of the joint list proposal.<sup>37</sup> A former senior Fatah and PA official said:

There was no reconciliation. That was the crux of the matter. Hamas would continue its control over Gaza and enter the PLO and legislative council. In exchange, Abbas would be re-elected in an uncontested presidential election. That is why there was strong opposition to the joint list and the rest of the plan. The plan was never to go for free and fair elections. It was to go for a joint list between Fatah and Hamas, where Hamas agreed to play second fiddle to Fatah. The spoiler to all of this was Marwan Barghouthi's candidacy. This killed their plot.<sup>38</sup>

Fatah's splintering was accompanied by verbal spats and armed clashes between supporters of various sub-factions and figures across the West Bank.<sup>39</sup>

Even Abbas's official Fatah slate sloughed off members. It included five members of the Fatah Central Committee, despite his earlier declaration that no official from the party's upper echelons would participate.<sup>40</sup> Those deemed critical of or disloyal to Abbas and his entourage were disqualified or overlooked. Others were given meaningless places at the end of the list, leading nine to withdraw their candidacies.<sup>41</sup>

Hamas was better organised. Having announced it would not put a name forward for president, it concentrated on the parliamentary elections with its own list, Jerusalem Is Our Goal (al-Quds Maw'adna). In keeping with its lowered ambitions relative to 2006, the movement made statements to the effect that it would not take any of the most important ministerial posts.<sup>42</sup> Its internal decision-making processes kept it united behind this approach.<sup>43</sup> Though some lower-ranking Hamas officials opposed participation in the elections, they were marginal.

For its part, and despite the troubles on Fatah's side, the Israeli political and security apparatus was unsettled by the possibility of a unity government. The head of the Shin Bet, Nadav Argaman, reportedly asked Abbas to cancel the elections.<sup>44</sup> The PA

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elections would take place. Crisis Group telephone interview, Nasser al-Qidwa, 5 November 2021. See also Dalia Hatuqa, "Arafat's nephew is coming for Abbas", *Foreign Policy*, 16 April 2021.

<sup>36</sup> "Public Opinion Poll No (79)", op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Legislative Council candidate, senior Fatah officials and PLO Executive Committee members, West Bank, 13, 15, 27 and 30 July 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 5 November 2021.

<sup>39</sup> "Nine Fatah candidates withdraw from movement's electoral list", *Middle East Monitor*, 2 April 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior Fatah officials, including some who later defected, March-April 2021. See also "Abbas surprises the Fatah movement with the decision to form the final electoral list", *Palestine Today*, 31 March 2021.

<sup>41</sup> "Withdrawals from the Fatah list continue.... What are the reasons?", Safa (Palestinian Press Agency), 1 April 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau officials, Gaza, 20 April 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Hamas officials, Gaza and Cairo, January-March 2021.

<sup>44</sup> See "President Abbas rebuffs Israeli intelligence chief", *Arab News*, 15 March 2021; and "Report: Shin Bet chief demanded President Abbas cancel the Palestinian elections", *Haaretz*, 31 March 2021.

leader reportedly rebuffed the request. Throughout March and April, Israeli security forces in the West Bank disrupted electoral preparations in other ways. They arrested dozens of Hamas leaders and cadres, including members of the (defunct) PLC, trade unionists and student activists, threatening to detain anyone who considered running on the Hamas list.<sup>45</sup>

#### D. *Abbas Calls It Off*

Though he rejected Israel's entreaty, Abbas realised that he had called elections without being fully prepared. His main fear was the impact of Fatah's fragmentation.

A combination of factors helped him decide on his next move. Tensions were rising at the Holy Esplanade (the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount complex) and in the Palestinian neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah, both in East Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Israel was making moves that seemed intended to deny East Jerusalem's 300,000 Palestinian residents participation in the planned vote.<sup>46</sup> It was preventing East Jerusalemites from campaigning and had placed restrictions on where they could cast a ballot.<sup>47</sup> On 29 April, Abbas said Israel had told the PA it would not allow East Jerusalem Palestinians to vote and that the U.S., European Union (EU) and several Arab countries had sent the same information.<sup>48</sup> Both the EU and Israel immediately refuted his claim.<sup>49</sup> Israel asserted it had not provided a definitive answer to Palestinian requests to hold elections in East Jerusalem.<sup>50</sup>

But Abbas had the pretext he needed. Shortly after making the claim about Israeli obstruction, he announced via presidential decree that he would postpone the elec-

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<sup>45</sup> "Security threats and summonses to Hamas supporters in the West Bank", *Felesteen*, 9 February 2021 (Arabic); "Israel warns Hamas leader not to participate and run in Palestinian elections", *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 27 January 2021 (Arabic); "Elections in Jerusalem", Central Elections Commission, 18 April 2021; and "Palestinian militant Omar Barghouti: Occupation warned me not to run in the next legislative elections", *Al-Arabi al-Jadeed*, 25 January 2021 (Arabic). Israel's ambassador to the U.S. and UN, Gilad Erdan, echoed this approach in an address to the UN Security Council, saying Palestinians who support "terrorist activity" or do not recognise Israel, such as members of Hamas or the PFLP, should not be permitted to stand in the elections. "Ambassador Gilan Erdan: Security Council Speech", 22 April 2021.

<sup>46</sup> As mandated in the Declaration of Principles and Article II of the 1993 Oslo I Accord and Article VI of the 1995 Oslo II Accord, 6,300 Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem are eligible to cast their votes in post offices inside city limits under Israeli supervision. The bulk of East Jerusalem's Palestinian residents, who live in PA-controlled areas outside city limits, can vote there.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, ICHR and Central Election Commission officials, 10 March 2021. For an account of these events, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°225, *Beyond Business as Usual in Israel-Palestine*, 10 August 2021. See also, "EU nations at UNSC: Israel must allow East Jerusalem Palestinians vote", *Jerusalem Post*, 23 April 2021; and "Abbas delays Palestinian elections, citing Israel's refusal to allow Jerusalem vote", *Haaretz*, 29 April 2021. For voting arrangements in East Jerusalem in place since at least 2006, see the Central Election Commission website.

<sup>48</sup> "Today, we received a message from Israel, the U.S. and some Arab countries about Israel's opposition to holding the elections in Jerusalem", Abbas said. "The message we received said Israel can't make a decision because there is no government in Israel". Quoted in Khaled Abu Toameh, "Abbas: Palestinian elections postponed after Israel blocks Jerusalem vote", *Jerusalem Post*, 30 April 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Nidal Al-Mughrabi, Ali Sawafta and Rami Ayyub, "Palestinian leader delays parliamentary and presidential elections, blaming Israel", Reuters, 30 April 2021.

<sup>50</sup> "Abbas delays Palestinian elections, citing Israel's refusal to allow Jerusalem vote", op. cit.

tions indefinitely. “Facing this difficult situation, we decided to postpone” the vote, he said. “Our people are excited for elections. There is enthusiasm. ... But what about Jerusalem? Where is Jerusalem?”<sup>51</sup> At the same time, he said he would work to form a national unity government, as per the Cairo agreements – a government that would “abide by international resolutions and reinforce the PLO”.<sup>52</sup>

Abbas’s decision was hardly a surprise. The territories had been rife with rumours that the elections would be postponed, if not cancelled outright.<sup>53</sup> While all the electoral lists agreed that Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem should have the right to vote, opinion polls suggested a significant majority of voters wanted elections to go ahead regardless, particularly if the PA could arrange for all East Jerusalemites to vote outside city limits.<sup>54</sup>

Many Palestinians were furious when Abbas did not reverse course. Protesters in the West Bank and Gaza called for the elections to proceed as scheduled; for many, it would have been their first chance to cast a ballot.<sup>55</sup> The postponement decree exacerbated Fatah’s internal divisions as well. Abbas’s opponents in the central committee claimed that rather than preserving Fatah, the decision was prompting further defections. Hamas, too, was fiercely critical, and its officials boycotted the meeting announcing the indefinite delay.<sup>56</sup> Bickering between Hamas and Fatah intensified over the following months. The PA was further weakened by the events of late April and May 2021, when it looked like a bystander amid clashes at the Holy Esplanade, the war in Gaza and a groundswell of protest among Palestinians inside and outside the occupied territories.

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<sup>51</sup> Mughrabi, Sawafta and Ayyub, “Palestinian leader delays parliamentary and presidential elections, blaming Israel”, op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> “Abbas: Palestinian elections postponed after Israel blocks Jerusalem vote”, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, local and international stakeholders in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, April 2021. See also Barak Ravid, “Abbas weighs delay of Palestinian parliamentary elections”, *Axios*, 21 April 2021; and “Independents’ Homeland’ reveals scenario for holding elections in the event the authority decides to postpone them”, *Sama News*, 27 April 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, ICHR official, Ramallah, 7 July 2021. See also “Public Opinion Poll No (80)”, Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research, 4 July 2021.

<sup>55</sup> “Palestinians protest after Abbas postpones long-overdue elections”, *The New Arab*, 30 April 2021.

<sup>56</sup> “Hamas: The postponement of the elections is a coup against what was agreed upon in Cairo”, *Sama News*, 30 April 2021 (Arabic).

### **III. Abbas and the PA in the Eye of the Storm**

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Popular support for political renewal did not dissipate after Abbas called off the elections. It flared up after the eleven-day war in Gaza in May 2021, and has remained manifest since then, spurred often by events that cause people to vent their anger at the PA, such as the violent death in custody of an Abbas critic, Nizar Banat.<sup>57</sup> Abbas's political opponents and civil society representatives alike contended that all Palestinians should have a say in democratic decision-making about the national movement's future.<sup>58</sup>

#### **A. Booster Shots for the PA**

Reeling from the April-May events, and stung by the subsequent criticism, the PA leadership may have found some relief in Israel's June 2021 elections, which for the first time in years ushered in an Israeli coalition government headed by someone other than Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu was uninterested in serious dealings with the PA, except for security cooperation; his succession of governments had kept it afloat but merely treading water. The new coalition helped, at least, revive a more frequent direct relationship with Israel, thus throwing it a lifeline.

The PA and its security apparatus are important props for the Israeli-led status quo. Israel depends on the PA's security forces to help prevent attacks on Israelis, while international stakeholders need the PA to survive in order to keep talking about the possibility of a two-state solution, but also so as not to upset the status quo. The PA's faint signs of life following the April-May upheaval – it was, at least, still standing in the face of Hamas's surge in popularity and popular anger at the cancellation of the elections – encouraged both Israel and foreign powers to give it a shot in the arm. Without such aid, they feared, the PA might collapse entirely. As a former PA official said:

The PA is losing its hold over large swathes of the population and is crumbling slowly. Any administrative power needs legitimacy, and the PA doesn't have that. It can no longer claim the nationalist mantle. Worse, it's arresting and violently suppressing people. ... But the PA is slowly becoming weaker as a force in Palestin-

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<sup>57</sup> Protests broke out after Palestinian preventive security forces killed Banat following his arrest on 24 June. Banat, a long-time Fatah member, was an anti-corruption activist who had intended to stand in the PLC elections on the independent Freedom and Dignity list. See Mustafa Abu Seneineh, "Who was Nizar Banat, the outspoken critic who died in Palestinian Authority custody?", *Middle East Eye*, 24 June 2021. Before his arrest, Banat uploaded a video on his Facebook page accusing the PA of corruption and calling on foreign powers to stop funding it. (The clip was reposted post-humously on 15 August.) On the war in Gaza, see Crisis Group Report, *Beyond Business as Usual in Israel-Palestine*, op. cit.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, representatives of local monitoring bodies (Al-Haq, the Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights, the Human Rights and Democracy Media Centre and the Palestinian NGOs Network), prominent civil society activists and Palestinian lawyers, January-June 2022.

ian society. And the Israelis know this. That's why they are now offering the concession they are.<sup>59</sup>

The defence minister in Israel's new governing coalition, Benny Gantz, met with Abbas at PA headquarters in Ramallah at the end of August. It was the first visit by a senior Israeli government official in seven years, sending the message that Gantz, at least, would take a different approach from Netanyahu.

In reality, however, little changed. The meeting confirmed the importance of security coordination between Israel and the PA. In addition, Gantz offered a series of "good-will measures" to ease the West Bank's economic woes, including what he called a \$150 million "loan" to the PA, taken from tax revenue the Israeli government collects from Palestinian workers in Israel on the PA's behalf.<sup>60</sup>

However small, the gesture strained the governing coalition. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett declared that Gantz could meet with Abbas – strictly on economic and security, not political, matters – but he himself would not; and he dismissed the PA as worthless:

My perception is different than that of the defence minister, although we work in harmony. I oppose a Palestinian state, and I think it would be a grave mistake to import the failed Gaza model of Hamas, which shoots rockets at us, and turn the entire West Bank into that. ... In my opinion, the Palestinian Authority is a failed entity.<sup>61</sup>

Bennett and many others on the Israeli right see value in a politically weak PA that helps maintain the occupation while preventing a Palestinian state from emerging.<sup>62</sup> In this view, they concur with Gantz and others closer to the centre. A former PA official, referring to the latter perspective, said:

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<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Palestinian academic and former PA official, 13 April 2022. Another critic, a senior member of the Palestinian NGO network, said: "Though formally the PA's structures consist of the key governmental institutions found in presidential democracies everywhere, including a legislature, judiciary and executive, the reality is quite different. The PA lacks any national legitimacy of political substance and is overly dependent on patronage. Its biggest power is the ability to transfer payments to employees in the bureaucracy, to choose who it hires and fires, and the relationships it builds". Crisis Group telephone interview, 13 April 2022.

<sup>60</sup> The PA received the loan in September. It was expected to repay it by June 2022 but had yet to do so as of November. Crisis Group telephone interview, Palestinian Ministry of Finance official, 22 November 2022. See also Jeffrey Heller, "Israel says it will loan Palestinians money after highest-level talks in years", Reuters, 30 August 2021. Gantz and Abbas held a second meeting on 28 December, in which Israel offered the PA an additional \$30 million "loan" drawn from Palestinian tax revenues. Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the PFLP and the Popular Resistance Committees all condemned the meeting as a betrayal. Khaled Abu Toameh, "Palestinian factions decry 'disgraceful' Abbas-Gantz meeting", *Jerusalem Post*, 29 December 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Rina Bassist, "Bennett rules out meeting Abbas, but not economic cooperation", *Al-Monitor*, 15 September 2021.

<sup>62</sup> An Israeli security official suggested that the PA is part of Israel's security architecture and, as such, its security forces warrant continued support: "The more they can do, the less we have to do". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 13 November 2022. A former security official indicated that, regardless of the political dimension of the PA's existence, Israel needs it for operational reasons. Were the PA to crumble, "that is what's most dangerous, and where Hamas can come in". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 30 October 2022.

This is part of the Israeli vision, having a Palestinian administrative authority that can provide security and civil management to the Palestinians living in the West Bank but makes no nationalist claims. They call it “shrinking the conflict”, but it’s more like shrinking the PA.<sup>63</sup>

Another vote of confidence came from the EU, which has been the PA’s primary financial underwriter.<sup>64</sup> The EU publicly supported holding elections, though it, too, was worried that Hamas might win or enter a unity government with Fatah. Several EU member states called on Israel to permit voting in East Jerusalem. The EU also began exploring ways of recognising a Fatah-Hamas coalition government.<sup>65</sup> A range of Palestinians expressed hope that Europe and others would tolerate an arrangement similar to that in Lebanon, where Hezbollah participates in government, in order to demonstrate respect for electoral results.<sup>66</sup>

The EU and its member states kept backing the PA financially and diplomatically, despite the elections’ cancellation, and they took no action against Israel for offering Abbas an excuse – the East Jerusalem issue – to call off the vote. Instead, the EU, reiterating its backing for accountable, functioning Palestinian democratic institutions, merely called on the PA to set new dates and on Israel to facilitate balloting in all the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem.<sup>67</sup> Its statements gave ammunition to Palestinian critics who say the EU supports Palestinian democracy with money but otherwise only with empty rhetoric.<sup>68</sup> In early November, the EU and PA inaugurated the Central Elections Commission’s new headquarters in Ramallah, to which the EU had contributed €6 million. EU Representative Sven Kühn von Burgsdorff said:

This project ... is about maintaining hope for millions of Palestinian youth who never had the chance to vote in national elections. This is about ensuring that every Palestinian can elect his/her leaders in free and fair elections all across the Palestinian territory, including in East Jerusalem. This is about protecting the inalienable human right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former PA official, 13 April 2022.

<sup>64</sup> The main EU financing tool for Palestine, the European Neighbourhood Instrument, includes direct support, aid for Palestinian refugees and development programs, amounting to €1.28 billion in the period 2017-2020. To this amount should be added EU humanitarian assistance (€25 million in 2022 so far, and more than €852 million since 2000). Bilateral cooperation by EU member states amounts to €300-400 million per year. In addition, the U.S. has provided over \$500 million since April 2021. Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Algeria account for 23 per cent of the PA’s total foreign aid.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°237, *Realigning European Policy toward Palestine with Ground Realities*, 23 August 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, PLC candidates, Hamas officials, and SHAMS and ICHR officials, March 2021. In their view, foreign capitals would not need to explicitly recognise, or directly engage with, Hamas. They could rather continue pursuing their no-contact policy toward the movement – and engage only with Fatah and the Palestinian head of state.

<sup>67</sup> “Palestine: Statement by High Representative Josep Borrell on the postponement of the elections”, European Union External Action Service, 30 April 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, SHAMS and ICHR officials, March 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in “Palestine and EU inaugurate the new headquarters of the Palestinian Central Elections Commission”, press release, EU Neighbours – South, 10 November 2021.

Yet helping build new offices for the elections commission, without at the same time applying pressure on the PA to organise elections or on Israel to allow East Jerusalem residents to vote, appears unlikely to result in any concrete policy change.

### B. Local Auguries of Change?

Popular anger proved durable despite the outside shows of support. The PA violently suppressed protests after Nizar Banat's death, prompting more demonstrations that lasted through the end of August.<sup>70</sup> Protesters called expressly for Abbas's resignation and the PA's downfall.<sup>71</sup> A survey conducted in the West Bank and Gaza in September showed that an unprecedented 78 per cent of respondents wanted Abbas to resign.<sup>72</sup> Online campaigners likewise demanded throughout May-September that Abbas step down.<sup>73</sup>

From its side, Hamas also did not remain silent, as it realised it could capitalise on disaffection with Abbas as well as its surge in popularity following the eleven-day battle with Israel. A June 2021 opinion poll in the West Bank and Gaza showed 53 per cent of respondents favoured Hamas, compared to 14 per cent backing Fatah. It also found that, in the event of a presidential election between Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, 56 per cent would support Haniyeh and 34 per cent Abbas (though only 51 per cent of respondents said they would choose at all).<sup>74</sup> Yet Hamas has not backtracked on its previous publicly stated stance not to put forward its own presidential candidate.

In response to such pressures, Abbas repeated his earlier pledge, announcing in a recorded speech before an emergency meeting of the Arab Parliament of the Arab League in Cairo on 19 May: "We are ready to form an internationally accepted national

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<sup>70</sup> Steve Hendrix and Sufian Taha, "Palestinian frustrations with West Bank government boil over with death of activist", *The Washington Post*, 29 June 2021; "Fatah: We will strike with an iron fist whoever tempts himself to insult our security establishment", *Sama News*, 26 June 2021 (Arabic); Joseph Krauss, "Palestinians shaken but steadfast as PA suppresses dissent", Associated Press, 15 July 2021; and Bethan McKernan, "Nizar Banat's death highlights brutality of Palestinian Authority", *The Guardian*, 31 August 2021.

<sup>71</sup> "Palestinians protest against Mahmoud Abbas after activist's death", Al Jazeera, 26 June 2021.

<sup>72</sup> "Public Opinion Poll No (82)", Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research, 8-11 December 2021.

<sup>73</sup> The campaign, whose website is no longer active, also condemned the PA security services' heavy-handedness, called for general elections and demanded justice in the Banat case. See "Academics and intellectuals call on Abbas to resign or be sacked", *Palestine Today*, 30 May 2021 (Arabic). Similar sentiments emerged in "Public Opinion Poll No (81)", Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research, 15-18 September 2021. See also Amira Hass, "With election called off, Palestinians petition calls on Mahmoud Abbas to resign", *Haaretz*, 10 June 2021; and "Palestinians call on Abbas to resign in viral petition", *The New Arab*, 13 June 2021. Activists accused Abbas of disregarding popular demand for his resignation, insisting that Palestinians have the right to determine who governs and represents them. Crisis Group telephone interviews, West Bank activists, June-September 2021.

<sup>74</sup> "Public Opinion Poll No (80)", Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research, 9-12 June 2021. In a second poll in September, Fatah performed slightly better (19 per cent) and Hamas a little worse (45 per cent) than four months earlier. "Public Opinion Poll No (81)", op. cit.

unity government committed to international legitimacy".<sup>75</sup> He added that he was pressing ahead with efforts to hold general elections, which he said would proceed once people in East Jerusalem were assured that they could vote.<sup>76</sup>

But Abbas backtracked on the Cairo compromise, returning to his old position that, in order to participate, Hamas had to acquiesce in all international agreements to which the PA was party, including the so-called Quartet conditions – non-violence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of all existing accords with Israel.<sup>77</sup> Since Hamas had not accepted these conditions in the past, and it was unlikely to do so after the 2021 fighting, Fatah's gambit now appeared to be to block reconciliation. The Islamist movement accordingly rejected the elections proposal, calling for a new political track in which Abbas would not monopolise decision-making.<sup>78</sup>

Still, the PA knew it needed to defuse popular anger. In an apparent attempt to do so, and perhaps also to gauge public support for Fatah should Abbas once again call national elections, the PA council of ministers issued a decision in early September to move ahead with local elections in the West Bank and Gaza, which had last been held in 2017. This time, it split the contests into two phases, the first for municipalities in Area C of the West Bank (which is under full Israeli military control) in December, the second for municipalities in Gaza and the West Bank's Areas A and B (respectively under the PA's full and partial control) in March 2022.<sup>79</sup>

The PA's strategy in staggering the calendar for local elections, which are primarily about service provision, was to test the waters in rural districts before urban voters headed to the polls against the backdrop of cancelled general elections. Voting in Area C is usually based on communal ties, allowing Fatah to rely on its local power brokers to mobilise votes. A strong showing there would encourage Fatah to proceed with stage two.

The rest of the political factions opposed the local elections move. As they had done in 2017, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad both vowed to boycott the polls, with Hamas conditioning its participation on holding legislative and presidential elections first.<sup>80</sup> An array of other opposition groups echoed this sentiment, also questioning the legality of splitting the local elections into two rounds. They saw local elections as a ploy to deflect attention from the "indefinitely postponed" national elec-

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<sup>75</sup> "The President: There is no peace without Jerusalem, our eternal capital, and we will pursue the perpetrators of crimes against our people in international courts", Wafa, 19 May 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>76</sup> Adnan Abu Amer, "Palestinian factions mull next steps after Abbas calls off elections", *Al-Monitor*, 7 May 2021.

<sup>77</sup> "Abbas: We will end the division if Hamas recognizes international legitimacy and agreements", *Safa News*, 21 December 2021 (Arabic). The Quartet refers to the UN, the U.S., Russia and the EU, which agreed in 2002 to help mediate Israeli-Palestinian peace talks aimed at a two-state solution, based on the three principles outlined above. For background, see Crisis Group Report, *Realigning European Policy toward Palestine with Ground Realities*, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau officials, Gaza, 10 May 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Central Elections Commission officials, members of Fatah splinter groups who stood in local elections and candidates from independent lists, May 2022. For the cabinet decision, see the website of the Central Elections Commission.

<sup>80</sup> Jehad Barakat, "Divisions as Palestinians in occupied West Bank cast local votes", Al Jazeera, 11 December 2021.

tions.<sup>81</sup> The PFLP and anti-Abbas elements of Fatah also joined the boycott, upset about the exclusion of Gaza in the first round and sceptical that the PA would hold a second round.<sup>82</sup>

The first round proceeded on 11 December 2021, yielding positive results for the PA. Despite the boycott, a total of 745 electoral lists participated and voter turnout was just over 66 per cent. The boycott made the races less competitive: only 154 of Area C's 376 districts saw more than one list run. In some of the others, no lists were registered, and the council of ministers had to decide the local councils' composition, as the law permits. Independents, mostly local figures affiliated with Fatah, won over 70 per cent of the seats that were not filled by appointment.<sup>83</sup> Most of the electoral lists in the West Bank are made up of independents, continuing a trend away from factional politics that started in 2017. Many are based on tribal or family relations, though some have loose affiliations with Fatah, the PFLP, the DFLP or Hamas.<sup>84</sup> The independents who were elected in December were mainly linked to Fatah, encouraging the PA to proceed with the second round.

But the picture looked worse for the PA as preparations for elections in Areas A and B got under way. For one thing, the competition was stiffer. New tactical alliances emerged, including between PFLP and Hamas elements who disagreed with the party line boycotting the polls, and between Fatah and Hamas candidates likewise inclined to participate. The parties have often used local figures to boost their success in municipalities as a way to gain influence at the national level.<sup>85</sup> Secondly, independents were poised to do well and, unlike in Area C, the urban independents were mainly anti-Abbas.

As he could not afford to suffer defeat, Abbas put his thumb on the scales. Allegations of voter intimidation and fraud to Fatah's benefit were rife throughout the campaign and on polling day, 26 March.<sup>86</sup> The PA got assistance from Israel, which rounded up a number of independent (anti-Abbas) candidates in the week before the second round, among them the mayor of al-Bireh, Islam al-Tawil, whom they placed in administrative detention for four months; al-Tawil won a seat while in Israeli prison.<sup>87</sup> The elections commission denounced these detentions as "a blatant interference in the electoral process and a violation of freedoms and democratic practices".<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Article 4 of Law (10) of the Local Elections Law of 2005 stipulates that municipal elections should be held together on a single day unless extraordinary circumstances warrant otherwise.

<sup>82</sup> Ahmed Melham, "West Bank local elections bring Hamas, PFLP closer", *Al-Monitor*, 28 March 2022.

<sup>83</sup> "The Election Commission announces the results of the local elections 'first stage'", Central Election Commission, 12 December 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, former Fatah officials (who ran outside of the official Fatah list) and independent candidates and local figures who were being vetted by both the PFLP and Hamas at the time to front their campaigns in selected districts, February-April 2021.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Palestinian NGOs Network official, 28 March 2022.

<sup>86</sup> "Al-Haq press release on monitoring the first phase of the 2021 local elections", Al-Haq, 11 December 2022. See also "Press release: Al-Haq concludes the monitoring of the second phase of the local council elections", Al-Haq, 22 March 2022.

<sup>87</sup> "Independents' dominate in Palestinian local elections", France 24, 27 March 2022.

<sup>88</sup> "Elections commission condemns Israel's detention of Palestinian candidates for the local elections", Wafa, 21 March 2022 (Arabic).

Abbas declared victory in the second round, asserting that the outcome demonstrated “renewed confidence” in Fatah, but his claim was unconvincing.<sup>89</sup> The polls saw 259 electoral lists, most of which presented themselves as independent, stand in 66 districts. Only 50 districts had a truly competitive contest. Independents won over 64 per cent of the 632 available seats.<sup>90</sup> Various political factions and civil society groups – pointing to the urban independents’ anti-Abbas leanings – declared the result a defeat for Fatah and Abbas.<sup>91</sup> The local elections result arguably will discourage Fatah from pursuing national polls, as they undercut its monopoly over local governance, apparently contrary to its expectations. A veteran NGO observer said the elections spread fear among Fatah cadres that local losses could translate to the national level.<sup>92</sup>

Abbas suffered a further setback in the student council election at the West Bank’s main higher educational institution, Birzeit University, on 18 May. Fatah’s Martyr Yasser Arafat Bloc won a mere eighteen of the 51 council seats, while Hamas’s Islamic Bloc won 28; the PFLP took the remaining five.<sup>93</sup> Hamas owed its larger-than-usual margin of victory primarily to the fragmentation of the left, which allowed the Islamist movement to stand as the only viable alternative to Fatah.<sup>94</sup> But the students’ aversion to Fatah was clear, a result that could hardly embolden Abbas to give national elections another try.

### C. *Abbas Promotes His Acolytes*

Another attempt at bridging intra-Palestinian divides occurred in late 2021, ahead of a key PLO gathering slated for the following January. Algeria, historically a strong supporter of the Palestinian national cause and keen to distinguish itself from Morocco, which was then normalising its relations with Israel, launched the endeavour. Meeting with Abbas on 6 December, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune announced a \$100 million Algerian contribution to the State of Palestine, conditioning it on Abbas agreeing to Algeria trying its hand at reconciliation.<sup>95</sup>

Algerian diplomats had little time to build momentum for reconciliation before the PLO’s Palestine Central Council was to meet. The PLO had established this 141-member council in 1973 to function as an intermediary between its legislative body, the 747-member PNC, and its Executive Committee, due to logistical difficulties in

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<sup>89</sup> “Independents’ dominate in Palestinian local elections”, op. cit.

<sup>90</sup> “The Election Commission announces the results of the local elections in the second phase”, Central Election Commission, 27 March 2022.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Palestinian NGO activists and former Fatah officials, March 2022.

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 28 March 2022.

<sup>93</sup> “Birzeit University Student Council Election Results”, Birzeit University, 18 May 2022 (Arabic).

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interviews, candidates in Birzeit University student elections, Ramallah, 3 July 2022. During the previous elections, in 2019, Fatah and Hamas won an equal number of seats, while in 2018 Hamas won with a difference of one seat and in 2017 of three seats. (No elections took place in 2020 or 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.)

<sup>95</sup> “Algeria on the path of Palestinian reconciliation. Tebboune announces hosting a conference of the factions ‘soon’”, *al-Arabi*, 6 December 2021 (Arabic).

convening the former.<sup>96</sup> Since the PA's creation in 1994, the PNC has met only twice – in 1996 and 2018. At the latter session, those present – overwhelmingly Fatah members – formally transferred the PNC's legislative powers to the Central Council, allowing it to appoint members to the PLO Executive Committee.<sup>97</sup> What makes this move significant is that when the Supreme Constitutional Court dissolved the PLC in 2018, it consolidated the PLO's legal authority over the PA, both of which Abbas heads unchallenged.<sup>98</sup>

Algeria's mediation efforts made little headway, however, opening the way to a Central Council meeting that, when it convened a month late in February, would further tighten Abbas's grip on power. On 16 January 2022, delegations of six Palestinian factions – Fatah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, the DFLP and the PFLP-General Command – arrived in Algiers to discuss reconciliation, guided by Algerian officials.<sup>99</sup> To Hamas, Algeria offered an alternative mediator after the group's relations with Egypt had cooled; Egypt wanted to maintain calm in Gaza, whereas Hamas, frustrated with the stalled movement of aid and reconstruction materials into the territory, was again firing rockets into Israel and clashing with Israeli soldiers along Gaza's border.<sup>100</sup> To Fatah, it offered a good-will gesture in advance of the talks: a \$100 million contribution and 300 scholarships for Palestinian students at Algerian universities.<sup>101</sup>

But the factions were too far apart to reach agreement. During the talks, Fatah asked Algerian officials to press Hamas to hold municipal elections in Gaza and transfer governance of the strip to the PA in Ramallah. It also repeated its insistence that Hamas recognise the Quartet conditions before any reconciliation. "After achieving all this", the Fatah delegation head said, "we can move forward with forming a national unity government that includes all factions, including Hamas, and whose main task would

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<sup>96</sup> The PNC's seats are allotted through a quota system to various components of Palestinian society. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad have refused to attend, even as (non-voting) observers, because the PLO, in their view, offers them fewer seats than merited by their political weight. Crisis Group interviews, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas officials, Gaza and Cairo, February-March 2021.

<sup>97</sup> "Final statement issued by the twenty-third session of the Palestinian National Council", 5 May 2018. A former senior Fatah official and PNC member said, "The 2018 convening of the Central Council was illegal because the PNC that was supposed to vote in the Central Council was itself illegal, its mandate having expired. And when the PNC met in Ramallah 2018, almost twenty years after the last time it had met, there were all sorts of violations regarding its composition. Around 900 people turned up for a body that should have 747 members. ... The most bizarre thing was when the PNC then decided to renew its mandate, after transferring its legislative powers to this interim body of the Central Council". Crisis Group telephone interview, 12 April 2022. See also "Senior Palestinian figures to boycott PLO council meeting, citing 'deepening divisions'", *The New Arab*, 6 February 2022.

<sup>98</sup> Abbas established the Supreme Constitutional Court in April 2016 by presidential decree. The court has nine judges, largely drawn from Fatah. It has invariably issued rulings in Abbas's favour, in effect allowing him to rule by decree. See, among others, Iyad Qatrawi, "Is Abbas tightening his grip on power with new constitutional court?", *Al-Monitor*, 26 April 2016.

<sup>99</sup> "Palestinian factions arrive in Algeria to discuss the reconciliation file", *Al-Mayadeen News*, 16 January 2022 (Arabic).

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau officials, Gaza, January-February 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Rasha Abou Jalal, "Can Algeria succeed in Palestinian reconciliation file, where others failed?", *Al-Monitor*, 24 January 2022.

be to hold general Palestinian elections”.<sup>102</sup> Hamas reiterated its own preconditions for reconciliation: a restructuring of the PLO, to be inclusive of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and an end to Fatah’s monopoly over Palestinian decision-making. A Hamas spokesman said “reconciliation cannot succeed without having Hamas in the decision-making circles”.<sup>103</sup>

After talks between Hamas and Fatah broke down, the PLO convened the Central Council in Ramallah on 6-7 February. The council elected four new members to the Executive Committee, all Abbas loyalists, including Ramzi Khoury, the chairman of the Palestinian National Fund that finances PLO activities, and Hussein al-Sheikh, both pegged as possible successors to Abbas.<sup>104</sup>

The PFLP and Palestinian People’s Party (PPP) boycotted the meeting, as did independent figures such as Hanan Ashrawi, a former PLO Executive Committee member and peace negotiator, and Mustafa Barghouthi, head of the Mubadara party.<sup>105</sup> Civil society groups, including the National Campaign for Rebuilding the PLO and the People’s Alliance for Change, accused Abbas of using the meeting to consolidate his inner circle’s hold on power.<sup>106</sup> They also said they expected the Central Council to take no significant decision vis-à-vis Israel, complaining that the PNC had been slowly sidelined, its decisions often ignored.<sup>107</sup> Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad turned down invitations to attend the Central Council meeting, reiterating their demand that Abbas first institute power-sharing reforms.<sup>108</sup> A former senior Fatah/PA official and National Council member said:

The meeting only deepened divisions and aborted the Algerian reconciliation initiative. ... [Its] only real function was to pave the way for guys handpicked by the president to take more prominent positions.<sup>109</sup>

The PA tried to promote the Central Council meeting as an opportunity to set a national agenda in the face of a deteriorating economy and Israeli settlement expansion. Yet the meeting fizzled, certainly in terms of public relations.<sup>110</sup> What it said about settlements Palestinians had heard before. In its closing statement, the Cen-

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. See also “Palestinian reconciliation talks in Algeria ... Factions with multiple visions (report)”, Anadolu Agency, 19 January 2022 (Arabic).

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Abou Jalal, “Can Algeria succeed in Palestinian reconciliation file, where others failed?”, op. cit.

<sup>104</sup> Jihad Barakat, “Abbas accused of power grab after Palestinian appointments”, Al Jazeera, 10 February 2022.

<sup>105</sup> Ashrawi, who had resigned from the PLO executive committee a year earlier, published a letter stating that the meeting was “a step that would deepen the division and harm the principle of cooperation and democratic change”. See “Amid power struggle, boycotts mar Palestinian Central Council convention”, Haaretz, 6 February 2022; and “Senior Palestinian figures to boycott PLO council meeting, citing ‘deepening divisions’”, op. cit.

<sup>106</sup> Kamel Hawwash, “Palestinians should unite to oppose the upcoming PCC meeting”, Al Jazeera, 4 February 2022.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group interviews, PCC members, March-April 2022; and Hamas officials, Gaza, February-March 2022

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau officials, Gaza, 6 February 2022.

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 12 April 2022.

<sup>110</sup> Dalia Hatuqa, “Abbas is destroying democracy to ensure his successor supports Israel”, Foreign Policy, 24 March 2022.

tral Council announced that the PLO was suspending recognition of Israel, and the PA's security coordination with Israeli forces, until Israel halted settlement activity and acknowledged Palestinian sovereignty in the occupied territories.<sup>111</sup> Abbas's critics denounced the statement as an empty threat, recalling that the council had previously said the same in 2015 and 2018, and the PA had done nothing.<sup>112</sup> The announcement's timing was also incongruous, coming not long after Abbas's first meeting with Gantz.

A day after the Central Council meeting, Abbas made a further move to consolidate his faction's control, tabling a decree that would have subsumed the PLO under the PA, as its bureaucratic arm.<sup>113</sup> The decision sparked a wave of condemnation from Palestinian human rights organisations, political analysts, writers and activists on social media, and Abbas revoked the measure.<sup>114</sup>

But this aborted move came alongside another that succeeded. Abbas used the Central Council to promote his right-hand man, Hussein al-Sheikh, to the Executive Committee to replace the late Saeb Erakat as senior Palestinian negotiator with Israel and, soon after, as the committee's secretary-general.<sup>115</sup> Al-Sheikh had been building up his position as PA civil affairs coordinator with Israel, to which he was appointed in 2007 and which made him the intermediary par excellence with Israel, other Palestinian factions and outside governments.<sup>116</sup> In doing so, he has sidelined the PA foreign ministry, a critic charged.<sup>117</sup> Worse, a retired Palestinian judge commented:

When Hussein al-Sheikh became secretary-general, there was talk of the secretary-general becoming the head of the PLO. You never heard this talk during the tenure of his predecessor, Saeb Erakat. It was not even conceivable that Saeb

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<sup>111</sup> The statement read: "The Central Council affirmed the suspension of recognition of the State of Israel until it recognises the State of Palestine on the borders of June 4, 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital and halts settlements, and stopping all forms of security coordination". Cited in Khaled Abu Toameh, "PLO again 'susends' ties with Israel", *Jerusalem Post*, 9 February 2022. For the original Arabic, see "The Central Council decides to suspend recognition of the State of Israel until it recognises the State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and stops settlements", *Wafa*, 9 February 2022.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, PNC members, March-April 2022. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas officials, Gaza, February-March 2022.

<sup>113</sup> "What does it mean to transform President Abbas, the PLO, into one of the circles of the State of Palestine?", *Safa News*, 18 February 2022 (Arabic).

<sup>114</sup> "Beyond the inclusion of the Liberation Organisation within the circles of the Palestinian Authority – risks and consequences", *Amad*, 21 April 2022 (Arabic).

<sup>115</sup> Khaled Abu Toameh, "The Ramallah 'gentleman' who could become PA president", *Jerusalem Post*, 24 January 2022. Al-Sheikh's official title is head of the PA's General Authority of Civilian Affairs.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Palestinian NGO Network representative and senior PA and Fatah officials, including members of the Palestinian Security Forces preventive branch, March-April 2021. Al-Sheikh is also in charge of the Civil Affairs Office, which provides Palestinians with coveted permits to work in Israel or do business with Israeli firms. He has been meeting with European and U.S. officials to discuss bilateral relations as well as ways to revive the moribund peace process with Israel. See, for example, "Al Sheikh meets with the EUSR for the Middle East Peace Process", *husseinalsheikh.com*, 11 October 2021. In January 2022, al-Sheikh met with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid in his official capacity. Aaron Boxerman, "In latest high-level contact, Lapid meets with top PA official Hussein al-Sheikh", *Times of Israel*, 23 January 2022.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Fatah and PA official, 10 March 2022.

would succeed Abu Mazen. Yet suddenly, with the appointment of al-Sheikh, there is talk of his succession. Nowhere in the PLO guidelines is there any mention of a secretary-general, let alone of that person taking over once the head of the PLO passes from the scene.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 13 July 2022.

#### **IV. Inching toward Succession**

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Abbas's advancing age and reported ill health have spurred concerns across the Palestinian political spectrum about who will succeed him. Palestinian society is rife with speculation, with consensus slowly building behind – but no decisive steps toward – transparency in the process for choosing the next PA leader, regardless of whether Abbas ultimately nominates a successor. A crisis could erupt if Abbas were to die suddenly or become incapacitated. For now, the succession question is so sensitive that no PA or Fatah official appears willing to address it head on, not even in casual conversation, with anyone outside his or her immediate political circle.<sup>119</sup>

The route to succession is opaque: viable institutional procedures do not exist, and Abbas himself has avoided nominating a successor or specifying what means, democratic or otherwise, he might use to choose one. He probably will not clear things up any time soon, as that would likely undercut the power he still holds.<sup>120</sup> Within his circle, officials are manoeuvring to put themselves in position to be chosen, if only to raise the price of their loyalty to the eventual winner, including retention of their privileges. Political alliances are thus highly precarious at present.<sup>121</sup>

Palestinians are more divided than ever, both about the impasse in the national cause and the succession question. The unity, especially within Fatah, that facilitated Abbas's ascent following the 2004 death of Yasser Arafat is absent today.<sup>122</sup> So far, not a single figure has emerged who enjoys plurality support among the PA leadership, Palestinian political factions, Palestinian society at large, Israeli officials or other foreign governments.

Complicating matters is the fact that Abbas heads not just the PA but also the PLO and, within it, Fatah. Each has its own internal mechanisms for choosing a new leadership, but in no case is the process likely to be smooth, as Abbas has turned each body into an appendage of himself, sidelining segments of Fatah that were critical to him in 2005 – local powerbrokers known as the Tanzim, as well as youth and other rank and file – and undermining institutional procedures.<sup>123</sup> A former senior Fatah official and PNC member said, “When Abu Mazen passes from the scene, the political vacuum should be dealt with in accordance with the law, but there is no law that

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<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group observations, 2021-2022.

<sup>120</sup> Most observers believe that Abbas's main motivation is still to shore up his own power. Crisis Group telephone interviews, current and former senior Fatah officials Fatah, PA officials, PNC members, representatives of civil society monitoring bodies, member of Hamas political bureau and officials of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the U.S. Security Coordinator and Palestinian security forces, November 2021-April 2022.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interviews, West Bank, July 2022.

<sup>122</sup> For a detailed account of Abbas's ascent to leadership of all three bodies in 2004-2005, see Grant Rumley and Amir Tibon, “The political education of Mahmoud Abbas: How the Palestinian leader tried to escape the ghost of Yasser Arafat”, *The Atlantic*, 2 July 2017.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, current and former Fatah officials and members, including PLC candidates who planned to run in the 2021 elections, March-April 2022. Historically, the Tanzim was Fatah's main political organisation in the occupied territories (as opposed to the diaspora), but over time it has become a group of local intermediaries between Fatah followers and the PA, distributing patronage and mobilising paramilitary forces when needed.

can be implemented, because he has destroyed the laws in Palestine by his decrees and actions".<sup>124</sup>

An additional wrinkle is that today, unlike in 2005, the occupied territories are split institutionally in two, with Hamas ruling the Gaza Strip and the Fatah-dominated PA administering the West Bank.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, Hamas is excluded from the national movement writ large. It is supposed to have representation in the PLC, the PA's legislature, but Abbas has dissolved that body. It has long sought – and been denied – what it views as proper representation in the PNC and, through it, the PLO.<sup>126</sup> Opinions are divided within Hamas about how to confront the succession question in these circumstances. A Hamas political bureau member said:

We may stand on the sidelines and watch from a distance without interfering, allowing the process to unfold organically. But there are others in the movement who want to indirectly facilitate the process by supporting a certain current or figure who would take a more conciliatory approach toward Hamas and reintegrate us into the broader Palestinian political space. This view is especially prevalent among our West Bank cadres, which explains our indirect participation in the local elections there. Yet another part of Hamas, especially in Gaza, thinks everyone in the leadership race is a poor candidate who will act as a stooge for Israel and Western and regional powers. This faction will not support any of them [whatever the outcome].<sup>127</sup>

While the internal divisions and absence of clear procedures do not necessarily presage chaos when the succession takes place, they do suggest a troubled and possibly prolonged process, one that may involve violence and may not have a clear outcome. There are three basic scenarios.

#### A. *Scenario 1: Going by the Rulebook*

A first succession scenario, seemingly the least likely, even if it arguably remains the most popular, would see an ordered, transparent process grounded in law and procedure.<sup>128</sup> When Abu Mazen passes from the scene, this scenario would in theory entail three separate electoral exercises, as he will be vacating three leadership positions. Like his predecessor Arafat, Abbas heads Fatah, the PLO and the PA. Each of these three institutions has its own procedures for managing leadership turnover:

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<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 25 July 2022.

<sup>125</sup> Hamas won seats in the PLC in the 2006 elections. But the PA suspended the body immediately after the split with Hamas the following year, and Abbas dissolved it altogether in 2018 in a move Hamas does not recognise. Hamas has held parliamentary sessions in Gaza with its own council members since 2007.

<sup>126</sup> Fatah has offered Hamas observer status in the PNC in the past, but Hamas has said it wants full membership representative of its weight in the political arena as the second-largest faction after Fatah.

<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gaza, 23 March 2022.

<sup>128</sup> In December 2022, 69 per cent of Palestinians polled in the West Bank and Gaza said they support holding presidential and legislative elections in the occupied Palestinian territories in the near future. Of these, 63 per cent believe no legislative, or legislative and presidential, elections will actually take place soon. "Public Opinion Poll No (86)", Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research, 13 December 2022.

Fatah requires a vote in the party's general congress; the PLO elects its chairman in a simple majority vote by its executive committee; and the PA chooses its president through direct popular elections in the occupied territories.<sup>129</sup>

Fatah's transition could be straightforward but that for the PLO much less so. According to party procedures, when Abbas exits the scene, his deputy is to take over until the general congress convenes to vote on a successor. At present, Abbas loyalist Mahmoud Aloul holds this post. Aloul headed the Fatah list in the aborted 2021 PLC campaign, and many peg him as a potential heir to Abbas as party head. Insiders see him as a unifying figure and say he might thus be able to win an internal Fatah election.<sup>130</sup> From there, however, the scenario gets muddier. The same people who think Aloul could rise to the top of Fatah doubt he could do the same in the PLO, should he seek that role, as he lacks the requisite international connections.<sup>131</sup>

Of Abbas's three jobs, the PA presidency is arguably the most important and, here, the succession picture is the murkiest. The post is desirable: although the president represents only Palestinians in the occupied territories, he or she would be in line to become the head of a future independent Palestinian state. But due to Abbas's own actions as president, the transition would likely be rocky.

A provision of the Palestinian Basic Law – the PA's equivalent of a constitution – stipulates that if the presidency becomes vacant due to death, resignation or loss of legal capacity, "the Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council shall temporarily assume the powers and duties of the Presidency of the National Authority for a period not to exceed sixty (60) days, during which free and direct elections to elect a new President shall take place".<sup>132</sup> This procedure is moot today, however, because Abbas dissolved the council in 2018, thereby removing its elected speaker, Aziz Dweik of Hamas, who would have been in line for the interim presidency.<sup>133</sup> The constitutional provision for succession in the absence of a PLC speaker is uncertain. To be sure, even an interim leadership vacuum lasting for 60 days need not prevent a presidential election: the Supreme Constitutional Court could rule on a way forward, and authorise the Central Elections Commission to proceed.<sup>134</sup> But Abbas's effort to shut down all constitutional means of managing the succession puts resort to constitutional procedure in grave doubt.

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<sup>129</sup> Palestine has seen a presidential election only twice since the PA was established. Arafat won the first one, in 1996, ruling until his death eight years later. The second, in 2005, saw Abbas take the reins. The PLO executive committee extended Abbas's term indefinitely in 2009. Isabel Kershner, "P.L.O. extends President Mahmoud Abbas's term", *The New York Times*, 16 December 2009.

<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Fatah officials; and opposition and civil society representatives, November 2021.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. These insiders also doubt that Aloul could win the PA presidency.

<sup>132</sup> Article 37 of the amended Basic Law, 2003.

<sup>133</sup> Abbas accelerated his authoritarian drift in 2017-2018, dismantling most PA institutions that might have checked his exercise of power. He broke up the judicial system in 2017, enabling him to dissolve the council the next year and thus avoiding the requirement for new elections. The fact that a Hamas member was speaker was doubly concerning for Abbas and Fatah, given its implications for their political hegemony. They may have feared that in a general election, whether for the legislative council or the presidency, Hamas and a Hamas candidate might prevail.

<sup>134</sup> See Nathan J. Brown and Vladimir Pran, "A Procedural Guide to Palestinian Succession: The How of the Who", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 27 September 2022, for a detailed discussion of the technicalities of Palestinian institutional procedures.

Amid this uncertainty, critics suggest that Abbas could attempt to use the Supreme Constitutional Court to rubber-stamp a new office of PA vice president. With that move, he might be able to get around not just the Basic Law's injunction about the parliament speaker but also the whole question of who should become interim president if he resigns, becomes incapacitated or dies.<sup>135</sup> Dweik, among others, has decried the fact that the court gives Abbas the power to cancel laws and disband parliament.<sup>136</sup> In any case, there can be no doubt that in dissolving the PLC, Abbas significantly increased the chances that he can simply designate a successor rather than following proper procedure.

Perhaps to prepare for such an eventuality, Abbas moved to strengthen his hold on the judiciary in October 2022. He issued a presidential decree ordering the establishment of a Supreme Council for Judicial Bodies and Agencies, with himself as its head, to discuss bills related to the judicial system, resolve pertinent administrative issues and oversee the justice system.<sup>137</sup> The council's other members are the heads of the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, the Court of Cassation, the high court for administrative issues, the security forces' courts and the Sharia courts, as well as the justice minister, public prosecutor and president's legal adviser.

Critics decry the move as violating the separation of executive and judicial powers, the Palestinian Basic Law and international conventions that the PA has signed.<sup>138</sup> The council combines all three government branches under Abbas's direct control. Since he has stacked it with loyalists, the council can block any serious legal challenge to an appointed successor.<sup>139</sup>

To put presidential succession back on a legal track, the PA would need to resurrect its legislative council through fresh general elections. As a representative of the Independent Commission for Human Rights, a Palestinian NGO, put it: "The only way forward is a speedy return to elections to ensure a peaceful and legal transfer of power".<sup>140</sup>

General elections appear to be the preferred way forward for opposition groups and civil society. Yet Fatah has resisted holding legislative contests during Abbas's reign, for the most part, and will most likely continue to do so; it cannot afford to see itself vanquished at the ballot box, with a speaker elected from the opposition, who could assume the presidency on an interim basis and, in that capacity, shape the presidential election that must follow. If elections were to go ahead, Fatah leaders

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<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Palestinian lawyers, former and current serving judges, and an assistant attorney-general, 4 November 2021. In an opinion survey, Palestinians reflected this view more broadly: a 72 per cent majority thought Abbas's decree to form a high judiciary council under his chairmanship was intended to weaken the independence of the judiciary. "Public Opinion Poll No (86)", op. cit.

<sup>136</sup> "Aziz Dweik: Dissolving the Legislative Council is a dangerous matter that will leave a constitutional vacuum", *Quds Press*, 11 December 2018 (Arabic).

<sup>137</sup> "Widespread factional and human rights rejection of Abbas's decision to establish a Supreme Council for Judicial Bodies", *Safa News (Palestinian Press Agency)*, 28 October 2022 (Arabic).

<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Palestinian lawyer and constitutional expert, 22 November 2022. He claimed this view was widespread among his colleagues.

<sup>139</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Palestinian lawyer and constitutional expert (different from the person in the preceding footnote), 22 November 2022.

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 31 August 2021.

know that their unpopularity, on display in opinion polls throughout the past year, would cost their faction its monopoly over Palestinian decision-making.<sup>141</sup>

Fatah leaders, as well as Israel, the U.S. and other external stakeholders, especially fear a Hamas victory, as in 2006, or the arrival of a newcomer who could likewise upset the race.<sup>142</sup> As a Western diplomat put it, Abbas does not want an election he thinks he cannot win, while the U.S. may prefer an election that Hamas cannot win.<sup>143</sup> A Palestinian Central Council member went further, contending that PA insiders “are playing on Western fears of what could come next if elections were held”.<sup>144</sup>

Another problem with general elections from Fatah’s point of view is that the party has been unable to bridge the deep internal divides brought to the surface by the 2021 elections debacle and the local polls that followed. The party lacks cohesion even in its senior echelons, as Abbas has pitted his lieutenants against one another to shore up his own position. Against this backdrop, Fatah would likely disintegrate into even more competing factions and electoral lists than the present three, rather than entering legislative elections with a single slate.

Compounding the challenge for Fatah is that the party has lost significant grass-roots support over the past fifteen years, as its base among youth and in the refugee camps, in particular, has become progressively disaffected by Abbas’s effort to concentrate power in his own hands.<sup>145</sup> A retired Palestinian judge remarked, “To bring someone and put them on top, and then assume that people will not push back is naïve”.<sup>146</sup> A prominent Palestinian activist and businessman summed up Palestinians’ predicament as follows:

Most Palestinians feel divorced from the succession process. ... Where are the youth? Women? Institutions? These are needed to remedy all the wrongs and institute the required structural changes. But that’s not going to happen. The best we can hope for is the kind of economic peace Israel is looking to enforce, an “enlightened apartheid” in which it picks whoever the next puppet king will be. The U.S. has no leadership on this issue, and they’ll follow Israel’s lead.<sup>147</sup>

For all these reasons, it is probable that the PA would delay any general elections that might be slated, indeed indefinitely, just as Abbas did in 2021. An orderly, legal presidential succession is thus hard to envision.

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<sup>141</sup> See “Public Opinion Poll No (82)”, op. cit.; and “Public Opinion Poll No (83)”, Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research, 16-20 March 2022, in which three quarters of those surveyed demanded Abbas’s resignation.

<sup>142</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. Security Coordinator official, 29 March 2022. The 2006 elections were the first national contests in which Hamas competed.

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, March 2022. A Palestinian lawyer lamented, “No one wants to support a democratic process here in the West Bank if the alternative is Hamas. Rhetorically, donors support it, but when they know what the implications are, they opt to support the status quo”. Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 15 July 2022.

<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 27 July 2022.

<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Fatah official, 7 April 2022.

<sup>146</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 13 July 2022.

<sup>147</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 27 July 2022.

### B. *Scenario 2: Anointing a Successor*

A second possibility presents itself: succession through appointment, either following the person's anointment by Abbas himself or by a PLO executive committee vote once Abbas passes from the scene. This scenario is legally dubious at best. A Palestinian lawyer and constitutional law expert said:

The Basic Law does not permit the appointment of the PA president by the PLO. But presidential decrees have overridden the Palestinian constitution and Palestine's legal framework for the last fifteen years. We have gone from a presidential system ruled by laws to a system where the president's word is law.<sup>148</sup>

Should Abbas or the PLO insiders cast aside the legal concerns, they would also face political difficulties, as no single figure in the Palestinian national movement has enough clout to assume all three of Abbas's positions. Any appointed successor would almost certainly face enormous pressure to move to a presidential election to establish political legitimacy. Without a vote, the perceived lack of legitimacy could become a lightning rod for the opposition and even serve as a springboard for a serious challenge by other contenders.

The PLO's executive committee, a body that is superior to the PA and in which Abbas equally has concentrated power, is the forum in which succession is most likely to be either determined or ratified. Since 2018, Abbas has worked to fill the top echelons of the PLO's legislative and executive organs with his loyalists, as evidenced by the Executive Committee appointments at the Central Council meeting.

Succession by appointment could take any number of forms. First, the PLO Executive Committee, by dint of the organisation's historical role in the Palestinian national struggle, could bestow power on a single individual, conferring upon him popular legitimacy without needing to go to the ballot box or, as in Arafat's case, using an election afterward to confirm the new leader in his position as head of the PLO and the PA. (This person is likely to be a man, as there are no female candidates in Abbas's circle.) In this scenario, the loyalty of the PA's security forces would be a critical factor. The successful candidate would also need to win the support of his immediate rivals, other political factions and broader Palestinian society.<sup>149</sup>

Yet Abbas has not anointed a successor; indeed, he appears to have constructed his inner circle in such a way that none of his lieutenants would have an easy route to the presidency once he goes. Any move to anoint a successor would dilute the power he has concentrated in himself. Many people would see the heir apparent, with his likely future access to the presidency's resources, as a source of patronage. The centre of political gravity in the Palestinian territories would then shift away from Abbas, slowly but surely. The nearer its end people perceived Abbas's presidency to be, the greater draining effect on his power the anointed candidate would exert.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 10 February 2022.

<sup>149</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, PLO executive committee and PNC members, former and current senior Fatah and PA officials, and Palestinian lawyers, February-April 2022.

<sup>150</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, PA security forces officers, British and U.S. Security Coordinator officials, former and current Fatah and Hamas officials, representatives of local monitoring bodies and Palestinian lawyers, February-April 2022.

As it stands, furthermore, none of the possible successors appears to enjoy much appeal beyond his personal patronage networks and armed loyalists. Significantly, all lack the clout Abbas had when he campaigned to replace Arafat in 2005. Abbas, though he had little support among the Fatah rank and file, was widely recognised as the last survivor among those who had founded the Palestinian national movement in the 1960s. That pedigree sufficed to unite Fatah around him in his bid for the presidency, especially when the more popular Marwan Barghouthi dropped out of the race.<sup>151</sup> Today, the Palestinian national movement has no one of comparable stature. Barghouthi's lengthy prison term has denied him the opportunity to build the base he would need to attain the requisite political weight.

Abbas's two closest aides, Hussein al-Sheikh and Majed Faraj, may be partial exceptions to this assessment. They have become allies and make for a "formidable force", in the words of a former senior Fatah and PA official, because of their proximity to the president.<sup>152</sup> Yet while both men have strong backing from Israel and the U.S., and probably also from neighbouring Jordan and Egypt, which is likely vital for any potential successor, neither has been able to win much support in Palestinian society.<sup>153</sup> With Abbas ageing, al-Sheikh has become the PA leadership's political face. He heads the PA's General Authority of Civil Affairs, where he deals with Israel in its issuance of permits that control many aspects of Palestinian life in the West Bank. But while this post has allowed him to dispense patronage, it has not made him especially popular. Nor has he been able to leverage his power into a meaningful political alignment. Faraj has not, either.

Both al-Sheikh and Faraj rose to prominence from the PA security services. Al-Sheikh was formerly a commander in the PA preventive security forces, and Faraj is still head of PA General Intelligence, giving him considerable sway in the security sector, where he has got rid of several potential rivals.<sup>154</sup> A former legal adviser to the preventive security forces said:

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<sup>151</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Nasser al-Qidwa, 12 April 2022.

<sup>152</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 5 November 2021.

<sup>153</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior Fatah and PA officials, British and U.S. Security Coordinator officials, PA security forces officers and Palestinian NGO representatives, November 2021–April 2022; and Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau officials, Gaza, November 2021–April 2022. In Jordan and Egypt, public debate about the Palestinian succession is non-existent. Officials refuse to speak about the matter, citing the sensitivity of weighing in on a sovereign Palestinian concern. It is clear, however, that both countries would prefer a smooth transition that maintains the status quo.

<sup>154</sup> To tighten his control of the PA security apparatus, Faraj began purging security forces of top commanders with independent power bases in October 2021, when he replaced the civil police chief, Hazem Atallah, with Youssef al-Helou, a lesser-known figure from the PA presidential guard with whom he has close ties. Atallah had held the post for over a decade, developing his influence outside the purview of the strongmen surrounding Abbas. The purges have reached down to the security forces' second and third tiers, with many of the new appointees loyal to Faraj. Crisis Group telephone interviews, U.S. Security Coordinator officials, Palestinian civil police and National Security Forces officers, 11 October 2021. See also "Head of EU POL COPPS mission meets with new chief of Palestinian police", press release, EU Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support, 7 October 2021.

The notion that succession ... could be determined by those from within the security services is telling. The security services ... have become the PA's most important sector in the past ten years, and ... their influence transcends that of any other part of the bureaucracy.<sup>155</sup>

But neither man has parlayed his position in the security forces into broader backing. As the legal adviser said, “one of the challenges the security chiefs face is that they are incapable of creating alliances outside their own group”.<sup>156</sup>

The second rank of would-be successors likewise has no one who could step into Abbas’s shoes. It includes Jibril Rajoub, former head of the preventive security services, and men sidelined by al-Sheikh and Faraj, including Mohammad Dahlan, a former security chief in Gaza; Abbas’s deputy in Fatah, Aloul; Tawfiq al-Tarawi, a former head of general intelligence; Azzam al-Ahmad, a member of Fatah’s central committee and the PLO’s executive committee who has led reconciliation talks with Hamas; and Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh. Each of these men has his own network, and each is allied with al-Sheikh or Faraj in a complex and shifting web of alignments. Of the six, Rajoub and Dahlan are the most likely contenders, but like the others, neither could stand on his own.

In some ways, Rajoub looks stronger than al-Sheikh or Faraj. His power base lies in Fatah and its central committee, where he is aligned with Aloul and Tirawi, and where both al-Sheikh and Faraj have weak standing. Al-Sheikh has no evident support on the committee, and Faraj is not a member at all.<sup>157</sup> Additionally, Rajoub has a solid local constituency, as he hails from the West Bank town of Hebron, home to a population of 800,000, where clan-based loyalties are strong.<sup>158</sup> But he lacks backing from external actors, which would hurt him in contests for the presidency and PLO chairmanship.

Dahlan, for his part, headed Gaza’s preventive security forces branch before Hamas took over the territory in 2007. He tried and failed to retake control in the Western-backed coup that summer. He then fell out of favour with Abbas and, in 2011, was expelled from Fatah on accusations of embezzlement.<sup>159</sup> He has lived in exile in Abu Dhabi since then, though remaining a powerful figure in Palestinian politics, particularly in Gaza, where Hamas has tolerated his role (despite the part he played in the failed 2007 coup) due to his ability to raise aid money in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>160</sup> A Palestinian security official said Dahlan brings with him extensive

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<sup>155</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 5 April 2022.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. See also Tahani Mustafa, “Securitization Dysfunction: Security Sector Reform in the Occupied Palestinian Territories”, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 1 (March 2019).

<sup>157</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Fatah official, 7 April 2022.

<sup>158</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Fatah official, 5 April 2022.

<sup>159</sup> “Ex-PA official Dahlan’s home raided”, Al-Jazeera, 28 July 2011.

<sup>160</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau officials, Gaza, 14 May 2022. Dahlan’s links with the Emiratis are eroding, however, pushing him closer to Egypt, which helped him present his Future list for the aborted 2021 elections. Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Fatah official, 12 April 2022. See also “Between Turkey and the UAE: Where did Dahlan disappear?”, *al-Hadath*, 15 January 2022 (Arabic); “News of Abu Dhabi freezing the activities of Mohammad Dahlan and placing him under house arrest”, *UAE71*, 2 October 2021 (Arabic); and “Are the Palestinian Authority and the Emirates on the path of ‘reconciliation’ and what is the link to Dahlan?”, *Quds*, 30 October 2021 (Arabic).

patronage networks in the security forces and society at large, especially in Gaza.<sup>161</sup> He draws on the support of Fatah members in the strip who are discontented with Abbas. But his standing in the West Bank is lower, undercutting his chances at attaining national leadership positions.

Apart from the main figures around Abbas and in the security services, two outsiders, Marwan Barghouthi and Nasser al-Qidwa, could stand a chance at the top position. Barghouthi, a former leader of Fatah's Tanzim imprisoned by Israel since 2002, enjoys significant support in the Palestinian street, at least among Fatah supporters.<sup>162</sup> His popular appeal gives him the ability to rally anti-Abbas dissidents within Fatah.<sup>163</sup> Qidwa, while lacking that kind of popularity, has good standing in the Palestinian national movement as the nephew of Yasser Arafat and a (former) senior Fatah official. He represented the PLO and Palestine at the UN from 1991 to 2005, was foreign minister in 2005-2006 and head of the Palestinian delegation to the International Court of Justice.<sup>164</sup> As a senior Fatah official said of Qidwa, "the legacy that comes with his name as well as his charisma" makes him an admired figure within Fatah and among Palestinians broadly.<sup>165</sup>

These two men are wild cards; they could become viable alternatives for appointment in the event that no consensus emerges around someone from the first or second tiers.<sup>166</sup> Yet among PA insiders, both are political outcasts; they lack the requisite connections to be appointed successors. Their most likely route to the presidency would be through a post-Abbas election. As a senior Fatah official put it, "If Marwan [Barghouthi] was enough of an electoral threat against Abu Mazen in 2021, winning the [popularity] contest before it even started, what chance do Hussein or Faraj stand against him?"<sup>167</sup> The two men demonstrated during the 2021 election campaign that they can work together, raising the possibility of them cutting a deal over the leadership.

The cases of Barghouthi and Qidwa highlight perhaps the biggest political difficulty Abbas or the PA would face in appointing a successor: the public would likely strongly object. Representatives of opposition groups that geared up for the aborted electoral contest in 2021 say they would accept Barghouthi. But if any front runner other than Barghouthi were to be appointed, they would reject him, insisting instead on elections for both PA president and the PLC. They say they might take this appeal to the constitutional court. A former senior Fatah and PA official said:

They [the leadership] forgot that to gain legitimacy you need to be elected by the people. They don't seem concerned about this, and that is a big problem, as it indicates a lack of basic understanding of the situation, of democracy and elections. Their assumption that they can do away with elections and impose – not appoint,

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<sup>161</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, preventive security official, 13 April 2022.

<sup>162</sup> "Public Opinion Poll No (79)", op. cit.

<sup>163</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, current and senior Fatah officials, 5-12 April 2022.

<sup>164</sup> Al-Qidwa is a member of Crisis Group's Board of Trustees.

<sup>165</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior Fatah official, 5 April 2022; prominent Palestinian activists and representatives of local monitoring bodies, 5-7 April 2022.

<sup>166</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior current and former Fatah officials, March-April 2022; and Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau members, Gaza, March-April 2022.

<sup>167</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Fatah official, 12 April 2022.

but impose – someone on the Palestinian people because he's accepted by the Israelis, Abu Mazen or anyone else is nonsense.<sup>168</sup>

Yet despite the relative popularity of Bargouthi and Qidwa, the opposition is so dis-organised that, should an election take place, it might prove incapable of mounting a successful campaign to support them. This reality led a Fatah member to declare:

The situation is so dire that if Abbas's successor can bring economic stability and hope, even if it's al-Sheikh, people will support that. No one likes him, so their support for him will be transactional. That's what this system has turned into. As someone from Fatah, I may not like him [al-Sheikh] and I wouldn't vote for him if I had a choice, but there are no viable alternatives.<sup>169</sup>

This calculus is further complicated by the massive influence Israel and the U.S. exercise over Palestinian politics. A Palestinian Central Council member said, "Most of us have vested interests in the system Israel runs and can't say no to it. If Israel wants Hussein al-Sheikh as their good puppet in the West Bank, then no one can say no. You'll see some manoeuvring here and there, but at the end of the day, they will obey Israel's orders".<sup>170</sup>

If, as appears likely, no one person is strong enough to win the appointment, the Palestinian political elites could stage-manage the transition in another way. They could enter extended negotiations among themselves that would bring political realignments and a sharing of both power and the spoils. Given tensions in the leadership, this process could be tortuous, and any new president emerging from it would find his ability to rule compromised by the agreements he made to gain the top position. He and his rivals would see the most coveted positions divided among them, starting with the PA presidency but including leadership of the PLO and Fatah, the PA prime ministership and command of the various security forces. This scenario would likely see heavy involvement by external actors to broker a deal – and, possibly, to help bankroll it.<sup>171</sup>

Such consensus-based power-sharing would have its virtues. Notably, it could ensure that Fatah, which is embedded so deeply in PA and PLO institutions that it is virtually indistinguishable from them, does not implode due to sub-factional squabbles over succession following a long period in which power has been concentrated in a single figure. The PLO executive committee would likely have decisive influence over who gets what share. Because of its benefits, many observers consider the elites likely to choose this option. A Palestinian academic and former PA official said, "In the end, it's likely the warring factions will get their act together, as they all have a stake in the system, and destroying it would be problematic. And none commands enough power to outrival the other".<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 12 April 2022.

<sup>169</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 4 August 2022.

<sup>170</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 6 August 2022.

<sup>171</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, British officials, PA security forces officers, senior current and former Fatah officials, PA official, former Palestinian Negotiation Support Unit member, and senior Palestinian NGO representative, November 2021-April 2022. Crisis Group interviews, Hamas political bureau members, Gaza, 4-18 April 2022.

<sup>172</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, PA official, 13 April 2022.

But while a succession along these lines – one resulting from a political accommodation between elites that secured international backing – might provide a modicum of stability and continuity, it would still fail to address the critical legitimacy deficit. It is still hard to envisage how such an arrangement could continue long without enormous pressure building among Palestinians for a vote, at least a presidential election that would vest a new Palestinian leader with the popular legitimacy to maintain his hold on power in the West Bank.

It is quite possible, however, that the elites will be unable to settle on any transition arrangement. In this case, there could be a period of stasis in which negotiations to select two compromise candidates – one to head the PLO and another the PA – become so drawn out as to become the new status quo. Such has been Palestinians' experience with the PA, which under the Oslo accords was supposed to be an intermediary institution lasting only five years, only to become permanent. In this eventuality, the PLO executive committee could instal a toothless caretaker president or leave the presidency vacant, with the committee itself or the Palestinian Central Council stepping in to administer things in the interim.<sup>173</sup>

The bottom line, however, is that Abbas, having made himself the lynchpin of Palestinian politics, is nearing the end of his tenure with no plan for succession. He and the people around him have exploited the fact that many Palestinians, including the PA's most trenchant critics among the opposition, have produced no workable vision of their own for replacing the PA.<sup>174</sup> The PA remains the Palestinians' chief political institution, and with no roadmap for who or what comes after Abbas, it faces an existential crisis. A Palestinian academic and former PA official said:

The longer Abbas stays in power, the more problematic it will be. ... Abbas is holding these institutions hostage. Popular frustrations are manifesting themselves through street protests and social and impromptu political movements we've seen pop up and then fade. ... This waiting game may end up destroying [potential successors to Abbas] before they can take power. They're waiting for him to leave while looking over their shoulders as they struggle with each other to hold on to their respective power bases. In the meantime, they're paralysing institutions until they can take over.<sup>175</sup>

### C. *Scenario 3: Deepening Paralysis and Chaos*

Given the fractured state of Palestinian politics, there is a real risk that an attempt at an anointed succession would go awry, triggering violence and even the PA's collapse. It is again noteworthy that Abbas, at 87, has taken no step toward designating a successor. He may do so only if and when he is ready to retire or faltering health persuades him that the end of his life and/or presidency is imminent. He might thus have little time for an ordered transition that affords his anointed successor the opportunity to secure a smidgen of legitimacy. Instead, elevating such a person could

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<sup>173</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Palestinian lawyers; former and current senior Fatah officials; representatives of local monitoring bodies; and academics at Birzeit University, March-April 2022.

<sup>174</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, leading civil society figures, 5-17 April 2022.

<sup>175</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 13 April 2022.

set off a power struggle involving the designated heir's rivals and others who feel cut out of decision-making. Failing to elevate anyone could have the same outcome.

In the resulting infighting, clashes could erupt, further paralysing both politics and governance. Even an appointed president with little party or popular support could wind up facing an impasse, especially if he cannot play off the various sub-factions against one another to make himself the pole holding up the Palestinian polity's ramshackle edifice.

Such events could only exacerbate divisions between Fatah and Hamas, as they would empower the latter vis-à-vis a weak, illegitimate PA leadership and reduce any inclination toward reconciliation. They would also further fragment the occupied territories, with regions and institutions becoming increasingly autonomous under local sub-factions and strongmen. The ensuing turf battles could turn ugly. This scenario is not purely hypothetical: senior Palestinian officials themselves fret about the potential for a political breakdown if the transition is not well managed. A former senior Fatah member and commander of the preventive security forces in Gaza warned:

If the successor to Abu Mazen is appointed, there is a real risk of a political explosion. Even officers in the security sector, when we meet them on social occasions, say clearly that they couldn't accept any step outside of what Palestinians view as a legitimate succession if it does not involve elections.<sup>176</sup>

Stressing the threat to stability and the danger of a leadership lacking legitimacy, a senior PLO figure warned, "The West Bank is on the verge of collapse. The people Abbas is supporting and putting forward for succession are people no one wants".<sup>177</sup> A prominent activist and adviser to the Palestinian security forces offered this dire prediction: "Everyone here has weapons. Any attempt at a coup would quickly descend into generalised bloodletting, an existential struggle of all against all".<sup>178</sup>

#### D. Israel: Preferences and Preparations

Hanging over all the speculation is what Israeli civilian and military leaders might like to see happen in the transition to the post-Abbas era. This factor is all the more important now that Israel has a new government whose extreme right-wing elements view the PA as an obstacle in their quest to annex the West Bank. Israel's preference could be decisive, given its desire for a military occupation it can manage at minimal expense, particularly in the West Bank, where the settlement enterprise proceeds apace.

Yet there is little discussion of the succession question in Israeli government or political circles. No one among the politicians who are ascendant today – those on the centre-right and far-right – sees the PA or the PLO as an address for peace talks or favours a return to such negotiations at all. Israeli observers argue that the aim of

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<sup>176</sup> Crisis Group interview, Nablus, 7 August 2022.

<sup>177</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 9 August 2022.

<sup>178</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 4 August 2022. By contrast, a National Security Forces chief said, "Palestinians are not the chaotic type. People are fearful. They are more afraid of chaos than of the occupation [Israel]. The traumas of the last two intifadas taught us that". Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 9 July 2022.

politicians across the spectrum is something else entirely. “The endgame would be to make the Palestinians forget about their national cause”, said Assaf David of the Van Leer Institute. “This has been Israel’s effort for at least twenty years”.<sup>179</sup> In this vein, the political echelon has given little thought to who might take Abbas’s place. As an Israeli journalist put it, “Israeli governments just want quiet in Gaza and the West Bank, and for [foreign] capitals and the media to leave them alone. That’s considered a good policy outcome”.<sup>180</sup>

Discussions about Palestinian succession are taking place mainly within the security establishment. Ehud Yaari, a prominent Israeli journalist and researcher, said:

It’s basically the head of the security service [who] has the last word on policy [toward the Palestinians] ... before [any] decision of the prime minister. This has made the security service a body which is not just in charge of counter-terrorism; it made them the de facto agency running Israeli-Palestinian policy.<sup>181</sup>

Succession is nowhere near Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas on the list of the Israeli security agencies’ concerns, but it is on the list.<sup>182</sup>

There appears to be broad agreement among Israeli security officials that Israel needs the PA to survive a leadership transition, if only because having an established, formal communication channel allows Israel to keep shaping events in those parts of the occupied territories under the PA’s sway.<sup>183</sup> From there, views diverge as to what PA rule should mean in practice. Most may prefer something like the status quo. A minority advocate a degree of devolution by which warlords loosely affiliated with the PA would impose order in their own geographic areas.<sup>184</sup> Israel already views the Palestinian polity as splintered among those living in the West Bank, Gaza, inside Israel and in the diaspora. As Israeli journalist Anshel Pfeffer put it, “It’s not just about the PA; it’s about having the Palestinians divided into four different areas and jurisdictions. Israel has its relationships with and degrees of control over these groups. The PA is just one of them. The death of Abbas doesn’t need to change that set-up”.<sup>185</sup>

Regarding the more specific question of who should succeed Abbas, Israeli sources following the matter express extreme caution, citing Israel’s negative experience in Lebanon in 1982 and afterward, when its attempts to anoint a leader failed dismally.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 16 June 2022.

<sup>180</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 6 June 2022.

<sup>181</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 18 June 2022.

<sup>182</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Anshel Pfeffer, senior correspondent and columnist for *Haaretz* and Israel correspondent for *The Economist*, 1 June 2022.

<sup>183</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Israeli security experts and former senior security officials, June 2022. Hillel Frisch, professor emeritus at Bar Ilan University, said, “There is a consensus about the importance of the continuation of the Palestinian Authority”. Crisis Group telephone interview, 2 June 2022.

<sup>184</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, June 2022.

<sup>185</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 1 June 2022.

<sup>186</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Hillel Frisch, professor emeritus at Bar Ilan University, 2 June 2022; and Brigadier General (ret.) Dov Sedaka, senior adviser at the Economic Cooperation Foundation and former head of the Israeli military’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, 8 June 2022. In June 1982, Israeli forces invaded Lebanon. They expelled the PLO from Beirut and installed a Christian politician, Bachir Gemayel, as president. Gemayel was assassinated that September, before he could take office.

There appears to be broad agreement that openly supporting a candidate to succeed Abbas would amount to robbing that person of all credibility on the Palestinian street. Moreover, said an Israeli journalist, doing so while Abbas remains in power would undermine the good relationship Israel has with the president.<sup>187</sup>

That said, a clear Israeli preference appears to have emerged for a person in Abbas's immediate entourage, one who would assume the mantle through Palestinian deal-making and possibly by acclamation, not through an election, lest Hamas take advantage.<sup>188</sup> Israeli predictions about the individual most likely to succeed Abbas centre on those with the best access to funding and the security apparatus, in other words, Hussein al-Sheikh and Majid Faraj, as well as, to a lesser extent, Mohamed Dahlan.<sup>189</sup> The Israeli media frequently report on al-Sheikh as if Abbas has already anointed him the successor. Some Israeli interlocutors noted that no single person has the stature of Arafat or Abbas, meaning that the most likely scenario is a triumvirate in which one person is PA president, another Fatah chief and still a third PLO chair.<sup>190</sup>

Many Palestinians agree with the assessment that Israel's undeclared preference is for Hussein al-Sheikh, pointing to his central place at all the meetings Israel held with the PA on economic concessions under the Bennett-Lapid government.<sup>191</sup> A Palestinian observer said, "It's not what the Israelis say but what they do; they continue to boost Hussein al-Sheikh".<sup>192</sup> Indeed, Israel could use subtle means of signalling its approval or disapproval of particular candidates. Kobi Michael, a former Israeli government official, suggested that Israel might:

do something behind the scenes in order to enable Hussein al-Sheikh to do things that would help him. Not in a direct way or a public manner. Not with footprints. Facilitating economic agreements, facilitating improvements in the daily life of Palestinians in the West Bank, gestures, maybe even with regard to Area C.<sup>193</sup>

A common refrain is the likelihood of chaotic competition for overall leadership, leading to clashes. Michael said, "It looks like there's an understanding among most analysts in the security establishment that the succession of Abu Mazen will not be a piece of cake. The most probable scenario is violence – violent political struggle between those who perceive themselves as the successors of Abu Mazen". The worst-case scenario, he added, is the PA's utter collapse.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 6 June 2022.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid. Michael said, "There won't be an election because Fatah would lose for sure [to Hamas]. Abbas and Fatah do not want elections, and Israel does not want elections". Other Israeli observers echoed this sentiment.

<sup>189</sup> Yaari said, "Those Israelis who are interested ... see a very messy situation, in which maybe the combination of Hussein al-Sheikh and Majed – with the advantages they have controlling the funding and the security organs – will be able to have a first shot at succession". Crisis Group telephone interview, 18 June 2022.

<sup>190</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, June 2022.

<sup>191</sup> Crisis Group interviews, West Bank, July 2022.

<sup>192</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 1 July 2022.

<sup>193</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Kobi Michael, senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies and former deputy director-general and head of the Palestinian desk at Israel's Ministry for Strategic Affairs, 7 June 2022.

<sup>194</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 7 June 2022.

To prepare for all eventualities, the Israeli security services are working to suppress any new leader emerging in the West Bank, as Dov Sedaka, a former head of the Israeli military's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, suggested, mainly to pre-empt Hamas from exploiting chaos during a succession crisis.<sup>195</sup> This policy is not new, and Israel has long demonstrated its willingness to intervene in Palestinian politics. It has often moved to suppress political violence in the occupied territories, especially if the PA's security forces prove incapable of doing so – or are themselves involved, as may turn out to be the case in various succession scenarios.

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<sup>195</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 8 June 2022. Other analysts concurred. Crisis Group telephone interviews, June 2022.

## V. A Way Forward

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The best bet for ensuring stability in the occupied territories would be an orderly leadership transition based on the rule of law and established procedure. Ideally, the Palestinians would hold elections for all three of the national movement’s top posts. Those who rose to power in this way would enjoy the greatest possible degree of popular legitimacy.<sup>196</sup>

But such an orderly transition seems improbable. President Abbas has actively worked to erode the rule of law, establishing alternative institutions with himself at the helm. As a result, the PA has become entrenched in its authoritarian ways and has grown increasingly unresponsive, unaccountable, inept and corrupt. These developments bode ill for a succession that is almost certain to happen in the foreseeable future. With Abbas growing elderly, the succession cannot be avoided, even if it might be delayed. A backup plan is needed.

### A. *The Best Case*

Of the scenarios outlined above, the first – elections based on legal procedure – is best, though seemingly the least likely.

Ideally, Abbas would agree to return to the plans of barely over a year ago. In other words, he would authorise holding elections to reconstitute the three most important Palestinian institutions – the PNC, which holds the key to PLO leadership but has never held elections for reasons relating to the policies of countries hosting Palestinian refugees, the PA presidency and the PLC – rather than anointing a successor. Indeed, the need for elections presents itself even without a looming succession. They are the only way to bestow fresh legitimacy on Palestinian institutions, without which the risk of instability in the occupied territories will grow, and what remains of the Palestinian national movement might dissipate.

This best-case scenario would entail Abbas, with an eye to a legacy of having been more than a mere post-Arafat officeholder, taking steps to start rebuilding Palestinian institutions and legal procedures. His first moves toward this end would be to reinstate the Basic Law, as well as the PLC, including its elected deputy speaker, and staging elections for the aforementioned three institutions. Next, he would dissolve the Supreme Council for Judicial Bodies and Agencies he established in October 2022 and re-empower the Supreme Constitutional Court, allowing it to become an impartial arbiter of Palestinian politics by removing it from under his own faction’s control. He would also reactivate the PA’s regulatory institutions: the Office of Financial and Administrative Oversight, the Anti-Corruption Authority and the National Preventive Mechanism (which provides oversight in the judicial system and prisons).<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Crisis Group interviews, representatives of local monitoring bodies (the Central Elections Commission, Al-Haq, the Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights, the Democracy Media Centre, MASARAT Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies, and the Palestinian NGOs Network), prominent civil society activists including candidates who ran for national legislative and local elections on independent and factional lists, Palestinian academics, members of the Palestinian security forces, and judges and lawyers, June–November 2022.

<sup>197</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Fatah and PA officials including from the interior and finance ministries, representatives of local monitoring bodies, Palestinian academics, members of the Palestinian security forces, and Palestinian judges and lawyers, Palestine, June–August 2022.

Ideally, too, he would signal to the Palestinian public at the earliest opportunity that he favours an orderly political transition based on established law and democratic procedure and in full observance of the separation of powers, including through elections. He would state clearly that the same person need not occupy the three top positions, as he has done, and indeed that it would be better that three different persons hold them, selected based on the procedures established for each office.<sup>198</sup>

It appears unlikely, however, that Abbas will do any such thing. Every indication Abbas has given so far points to his intention to further concentrate power in his own hands, and then to bequeath his authority to a successor or successors appointed either by him or by his senior aides if he is unwilling or no longer able to do so. Nor does Israel, particularly under its new government, seem inclined to enable a transition over which it has less control. Western powers might work around the edges to encourage a more democratic succession. But none, and particularly not the U.S., will exert enough pressure to make a difference, even in the face of a Netanyahu-led government that is almost certain to pursue policies that will raise hackles in Western capitals. Mostly, they are simply too fearful of Hamas winning elections and supplanting the PLO as the leader of the Palestinians.

#### B. *The More Realistic Case*

The more likely scenario is an attempt at succession by appointment. Either Abu Mazen himself would select a new leader, or Fatah elites or the PLO executive committee would do so if he passes from the scene without having made an explicit choice. Clearly, that outcome would be far less salutary for the well-being of the Palestinian polity and would carry much graver risks. But it might still present opportunities to lay the foundation for a return to some measure of democratic politics and prevent an even worse scenario: the fragmentation of the PA and its security forces, or even a descent into civil war.<sup>199</sup>

Any anointed successor would likely face considerable pressure to move to elections or be rejected. Most Palestinians still value the PA as a service provider, however deficient, in the occupied territories. But most have long ago withdrawn support from the president and the PA as political actors. They will almost certainly object to any of the likely candidates. Moreover, the appointed successor's many rivals, especially within Fatah, are also unlikely to concur.<sup>200</sup> Calls will likely grow for precisely the type of electoral exercise that Abbas and his entourage have long spurned, at

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<sup>198</sup> Crisis Group interviews, members of the PLO Central Council and Executive Committee, senior PA and Fatah officials (including officials responsible for the Fatah-Hamas unity talks at the end of 2020 that led to the Cairo agreements and the promise of legislative elections), representatives of local monitoring bodies, prominent civil society activists including candidates who ran for national legislative and local elections on independent lists, academics, prominent businessmen, senior members of the Palestinian security forces, and judges and lawyers, Palestine and by telephone, June-November 2022.

<sup>199</sup> Crisis Group interviews, members of the PLO Central Council and Executive Committee, senior PA and Fatah officials, prominent civil society activists, academics, and judges and lawyers, Palestine and by telephone, June-December 2022.

<sup>200</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior PA and Fatah officials, including members of the PLO Central Council and Executive Committee, Ramallah, July-August 2022.

least for the presidency, but also for the PLC as a way to revive the PA's moribund institutions.<sup>201</sup> It is unlikely that an appointed candidate could serve in much more than a de facto interim capacity until some form of vote.

While many of the same challenges to elections would remain, even after Abbas passes from the scene, the politics of a vote could be different. Any would-be successor will lack the advantage of being one of the PLO's founders or enjoy Abbas's grip on Palestinian institutions. He would thus be less able to resist the move toward a vote. Moreover, he will almost certainly be pressed to undertake repressive actions by a right-wing Israeli government, deepening his unpopularity.

As pressure for a vote builds, foreign powers should do what they can to nudge the new Palestinian leadership in that direction and Israel to allow elections to take place. The appointed successor and his supporters are unlikely to easily acquiesce. They could cite Israeli obstruction to elections in East Jerusalem, which will probably continue, as grounds for indefinite delay. Western capitals may well baulk at pressing Israel, given their fear of a Hamas victory. Yet Hamas's track record suggests it is unlikely to contest a presidential vote, so perhaps Palestinians could move ahead with that vote to give a new leader legitimacy, even if forgoing PLC elections. If Israel were to block East Jerusalem Palestinians' participation, an informal understanding could enable elections to proceed by allowing East Jerusalem's 6,300 Palestinian residents to vote in East Jerusalem suburbs under PA control. As Crisis Group has written before, it is past time for a more profound change in Western policy toward the conflict, but even absent that, at least Western governments should support the popular demand for elections during a transition.<sup>202</sup>

At the same time, all political factions beyond Fatah should support an intra-Palestinian dialogue that could usher in political and institutional renewal, building on previous attempts in this direction.<sup>203</sup> Such discussions would help create the right conditions for a peaceful, democratic transition of power.

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<sup>201</sup> One year after presidential elections that brought Abbas to power in 2005 (following the death of Yasser Arafat the previous year), the PA held legislative elections.

<sup>202</sup> See, for instance, Crisis Group Report, *Realigning European Policy toward Palestine with Ground Realities*, op. cit.

<sup>203</sup> Crisis Group interviews, prominent civil society activists including candidates who ran for national legislative and local elections on independent lists, academics, prominent businessmen, judges and lawyers, and PNC members, Palestine and by telephone, June-October 2022.

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## VI. Conclusion

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Deeply invested in their hold on power, Abbas today and any possible successor(s) in the future are unlikely to heed calls for a return to the rule of law in the Palestinian territories that would present the strongest prospects for a stable transition. Instead, he or his close entourage seem more likely to resort to some form of anointed succession. But it is doubtful, given the evident unpopularity of the figures around him, that one of them could lead any of these institutions, much less all three, without gaining popular approval. Despite their reticence with regard to Palestinian elections in 2021, Western capitals should do what they can to support such a vote – at the very least a presidential contest – this time around.

Absent that, the looming succession could trigger a descent into mass protest, repression, violence and even the PA's collapse. Whatever else one may say about the PA and its complicity in Israel's colonisation, dispossession and annexation, it provides vital support in the form of jobs and essential services to millions of Palestinians. A botched succession would thus be harmful for all main players in this conflict, but most of all for Palestinians in the occupied territories themselves, who would stand to lose the safety net of socio-economic support, however fraying, that the PA has continued to provide despite the military occupation.

**Ramallah/Brussels, 1 February 2023**

## Appendix A: Map of Israel-Palestine



## **Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group**

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Canadian Department of National Defence, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy), United Nations Development Programme, United Nations World Food Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations and organizations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, Global Challenges Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Stiftung Mercator, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

**January 2023**

## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2020

### Special Reports and Briefings

*COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

*A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022*, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

*7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine*, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

*Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War*, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

### Israel/Palestine

*The Gaza Strip and COVID-19: Preparing for the Worst*, Middle East Briefing N°75, 1 April 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Gaza's New Coronavirus Fears*, Middle East Briefing N°78, 9 September 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Beyond Business as Usual in Israel-Palestine*, Middle East Report N°225, 10 August 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*The Israeli Government's Old-New Palestine Strategy*, Middle East Briefing N°86, 28 March 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Realigning European Policy toward Palestine with Ground Realities*, Middle East Report N°237, 23 August 2022 (also available in Arabic).

### Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

*Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon*, Middle East Report N°211, 13 February 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib*, Middle East Report N°213, 15 May 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit*, Middle East Report N°214, 8 June 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk*, Middle East Report N°215, 15 June 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Exiles in Their Own Country: Dealing with Displacement in Post-ISIS Iraq*, Middle East Briefing N°79, 19 October 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*How Europe Can Help Lebanon Overcome Its Economic Implosion*, Middle East Report N°219, 30 October 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Avoiding Further Polarisation in Lebanon*, Middle East Briefing N°81, 10 November 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box*, Middle East Report N°223, 26 July 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*Managing Lebanon's Compounding Crises*, Middle East Report N°228, 28 October 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria: Shoring Up Raqqa's Shaky Recovery*, Middle East Report N°229, 18 November 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria: Ruling over Aleppo's Ruins*, Middle East Report N°234, 9 May 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar*, Middle East Report N°235, 31 May 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and Northeastern Syria*, Middle East Report N°236, 18 July 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Limiting the Damage of Lebanon's Looming Presidential Vacuum*, Middle East Briefing N°88, 27 October 2022 (also available in Arabic).

### North Africa

*Avoiding a Populist Surge in Tunisia*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°73, 4 March 2020 (also available in French).

*Algeria: Bringing Hirak in from the Cold?* Middle East and North Africa Report N°217, 27 July 2020 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Fleshing Out the Libya Ceasefire Agreement*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°80, 4 November 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Time for International Re-engagement in Western Sahara*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°82, 11 March 2021.

*Libya Turns the Page*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°222, 21 May 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*Jihadisme en Tunisie : éviter la recrudescence des violences*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°83, 4 juin 2021 (only available in French).

*Relaunching Negotiations over Western Sahara*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°227, 14 October 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*Steering Libya Past Another Perilous Cross-roads*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°85, 18 March 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Saïed's Tunisia: Promoting Dialogue and Fixing the Economy to Ease Tensions*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°232, 6 April 2022 (also available in French).

#### **Iran/Yemen/Gulf**

*The Iran Nuclear Deal at Four: A Requiem?*, Middle East Report N°210, 16 January 2020 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

*Preventing a Deadly Showdown in Northern Yemen*, Middle East Briefing N°74, 17 March 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Flattening the Curve of U.S.-Iran Tensions*, Middle East Briefing N°76, 2 April 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*The Urgent Need for a U.S.-Iran Hotline*, Middle East Briefing N°77, 23 April 2020 (also available in Farsi).

*The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown*, Middle East Report N°212, 27 April 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Rethinking Peace in Yemen*, Middle East Report N°216, 2 July 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Iran: The U.S. Brings Maximum Pressure to the UN*, Middle East Report N°218, 18 August 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*The Iran Nuclear Deal at Five: A Revival?*, Middle East Report N°220, 15 January 2021 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

*The Case for More Inclusive – and More Effective – Peacemaking in Yemen*, Middle East Report N°221, 18 March 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*Iran: The Riddle of Raisi*, Middle East Report N°224, 5 August 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*A Time for Talks: Toward Dialogue between the Gulf Arab States and Iran*, Middle East Report N°226, 24 August 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*After al-Bayda, the Beginning of the Endgame for Northern Yemen?*, Middle East Briefing N°84, 14 October 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*The Iran Nuclear Deal at Six: Now or Never*, Middle East Report N°230, 17 January 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Brokeraging a Ceasefire in Yemen's Economic Conflict*, Middle East Report N°231, 20 January 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives*, Middle East Report N°233, 29 April 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Is Restoring the Iran Nuclear Deal Still Possible?*, Middle East Briefing N°87, 12 September 2022 (also available in Farsi).

*How Huthi-Saudi Negotiations Will Make or Break Yemen*, Middle East Briefing N°89, 29 December 2022 (also available in Arabic).

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