



The Race to Replace Mahmoud Abbas

Understanding and Shaping Palestinian Succession

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Palestinian Succession in Theory and Practice.....	6
The Silent Primary.....	7
The Palestinian Aristocracy	7
The Challengers.....	10
The Wild Cards.....	13
Options for the United States	17
Conclusion	19



Map of the West Bank

Source: CIA, The World Fact Book

Executive Summary

The Palestinian national project is at a crossroads. Mahmoud Abbas—the aging president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and leader of Fatah—is 10 years into a four-year term as PA president and shows no signs of stepping down. Not only has he consolidated his grip on power in Ramallah, he has made no clear move toward naming a successor or preparing for elections. A crisis is looming.

Policymakers know what is legally stipulated in the event of a sudden vacation of Abbas's post. According to Palestinian Basic Law, the duties of the president will pass to the speaker of the PA's parliament for a period of 60 days while national elections are prepared. The trouble is that parliament has been defunct since the 2007 internecine conflict between Fatah and its Hamas rivals left the West Bank under the control of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority and the Gaza Strip under Hamas. Further complicating this issue is the fact that were the presidential duties to pass to the last elected speaker of parliament, that position is currently occupied by a member of Hamas. Such a scenario would likely trigger both a cut in U.S. funding and a political crisis in the West Bank.

Though PLO and Fatah officials may disagree over who should succeed Abbas, they will surely agree that power should not fall to Hamas. Thus, the West Bank leadership will likely do everything in its power to exclude Hamas from any access to the corridors of power in Ramallah.

The best-case scenario for a peaceful transition is a silent primary among the Palestinian political elite. The problem with this scenario is that it is decidedly undemocratic. The precedent for this was the succession following the death of Yasser Arafat, when the PLO's highest decision-making body selected Abbas within hours. Abbas's selection established him as the *de facto*

leader of the Palestinian Authority before presidential elections were even held a year later. It is likely that the Palestinian aristocracy will hold such a conclave again in the event of another sudden vacancy.

Abbas's rule has alienated the traditional Palestinian political leadership from its base. The elder aristocracy may assume the top spot is theirs, but a new cadre of leaders may also be eyeing the throne. These are the leaders actively antagonizing Abbas and rallying their respective bases in the Palestinian Territories. In the event of political gridlock or instability among the aristocracy, these challengers—including security officials, negotiators, and veteran technocrats—may emerge as potential contenders. Their path to the top is less clear, but their ambition is not.

However succession unfolds, it is likely to take place without a meaningful vote from the Palestinian people. This is troubling in light of the unrest across the Middle East and the aftershocks from the Arab Spring. U.S. policymakers have a clear interest in trying to guide the Palestinians toward a more representative leadership. Washington may lack the political will to implement reform, but effective methods exist to prevent an unstable transfer of power.

This report provides an overview of the players and challenges associated with Palestinian succession, and suggests a two-step approach to guide the Palestinians toward a relatively soft landing. The first phase aims to counter the autocratic trends under Abbas. This includes the designation of a vice president to Abbas to dilute his executive power and to ensure a peaceful transition. The second phase aims to rebuild Palestinian democratic institutions. By empowering the vice president over the speaker of parliament, policymakers can begin to bolster the technocratic ranks within the Palestinian political system. From here, the U.S. can boost its relations with the pro-democratic currents within the Palestinian political landscape and pressure the PA to set itself on a course for national elections.

Introduction

Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas made a rare public appearance on the streets of Ramallah in December 2014. Touring shops and stands, the aging and reclusive leader smiled for local TV crews as he greeted residents. This was not a campaign stop; Abbas has made elections increasingly less likely with every passing year of his decade in office. Rather, a simple rumor had forced the president out into the streets: that Abbas had suffered a stroke and was incapacitated.¹ For a few hours in December, many Palestinians were uncertain about who was pulling the strings in Ramallah.

Power is centralized in Palestinian politics. Abbas, now 10 years into a four-year term as PA president, is also the head of Fatah, the largest Palestinian political party, and the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the umbrella political organization for the Palestinian national project. He has wrapped control of all three organizations so tightly in recent years that it is often unclear where one entity begins and the other ends.

It is equally unclear what happens when Abbas, who smokes a pack of cigarettes a day and has had two heart surgeries, vacates his posts.² There may be a succession strategy, but it is hardly discernible. Technically, it should hew to Palestinian Basic Law, but the zero-sum mentality that has long characterized the rivalry between Hamas and Fatah has rendered that exceedingly unlikely.

Succession following the death of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat in 2004 may provide the road map for

the next succession scenario. At the time, the upper echelons of the PLO met after Arafat's passing and anointed Abbas—the acting chairman during Arafat's last months—as chairman of the organization after less than two hours of backroom dealing.³ If a similar “silent primary” scenario occurs this time, the PLO aristocracy will name a new leader, and if past is prologue, that leadership will likely extend to the PA and Fatah.

As of August 2015, assessing the likely successors from among that aristocracy is a straightforward project. Familiar names such as Saeb Erekat (the longtime negotiator), Nabil Shaath (the head of Fatah's foreign-relations team), and Hanan Ashrawi (a member of the negotiating delegation at the 1991 Madrid peace talks and longtime prominent face of the Palestinian movement), all likely see themselves as potential successors to Abbas. But while they occupy seats in the highest bodies of leadership, their support from others within the political elite is far from certain, and their popularity on the street is low. Their chances are therefore minimal, though not impossible. Hardline Palestinian leaders may be loath to support the longtime negotiator Erekat as successor to Abbas, but the prospect of leadership gridlock—or alternatively, unrest on the streets—is a powerful incentive for a smooth transition.

Still, a smooth transition is not guaranteed. If the status quo were to change in the West Bank, if the political system experienced some type of reformation, or if no figure among the aristocracy separates him or herself as the clear front-runner, a free-for-all may ensue. In such a scenario, several figures may emerge. Chief among these challengers would be Mohammad Dahlan, Fatah's former Gaza strongman exiled by Abbas in 2011.⁴ Dahlan is

1. Khaled Abu Toameh, “Palestinian Internal Strife Sparks Rumors About Abbas's Health,” *The Jerusalem Post*, December 7, 2014. (<http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Palestinian-internal-strife-sparks-rumors-about-Abbas-health-383913>)

2. Ghaith al-Omari & Neri Zilber, “After Abbas, An Abyss,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 20, 2015. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/palestinian-authority/2015-05-20/after-abbas-abyss>)

3. “Mahmoud Abbas Elected Chairman of PLO,” *NBC News*, November 11, 2004. (http://www.nbcnews.com/id/6459196/ns/world_news-yasser_arafat/t/mahmoud-abbas-elected-chairman-plo/#.Vd9RUffViko)

4. Simona Sikimic, “Profile: Mohammed Dahlan, Gaza's Comeback Kid,” *Middle East Eye* (U.K.), April 7, 2014. (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/profile-mohammed-dahlan-gazas-comeback-kid-1305037516>)

Abbas's archrival, and now makes his home in the United Arab Emirates, where he reportedly orchestrates financial gifts to various anti-Abbas allies in Gaza and the West Bank.⁵ Despite being the architect of a brutal crackdown on Hamas in the 1990s and early 2000s while serving as Arafat's security chief in Gaza, Dahlan has reportedly reconciled with the group, making the territory a sphere of influence that Abbas cannot penetrate.⁶ Dahlan also has money, appeal, and the advantage of youth; he's nearly 30 years younger than Abbas.⁷

But he's not alone in the group of potential challengers. Senior Fatah officials such as Jibril Rajoub (another former security strongman and the architect of the anti-Israel campaign at the soccer governing body FIFA⁸) and Mohammad Shtayyeh (the former peace negotiator and current advocate for trying Israel at the International Criminal Court⁹) also harbor presidential ambitions. Both are senior Fatah officials with a more straightforward path than Dahlan to succeeding Abbas as the party's leader. Dahlan may have the resources and support from Fatah's rank and file, but he lacks legitimacy and support from the organization's political elites.

5. Mohammed Omer, "Is a Mass Wedding in Gaza Part of a UAE-Dahlan Arranged Marriage?" *Middle East Eye* (U.K.), April 15, 2015. (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/uae-gets-game-1623032740>)

6. Shlomi Eldar, "Dahlan-Hamas Reconciliation to Open Doors in Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, March 7, 2014. (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/mohammed-dahlan-fatah-hamas-reconciliation-meeting-egypt.html#>)

7. Simona Sikimic, "Profile: Mohammed Dahlan, Gaza's Comeback Kid," *Middle East Eye* (U.K.), April 7, 2014. (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/profile-mohammed-dahlan-gazas-comeback-kid-1305037516>)

8. Matthew Kalman, "Rajoub Begins His Run," *Haaretz* (Israel), May 15, 2014. (<http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/2.1167/.premium-1.590851>)

9. William Booth & Ruth Eglash, "Palestinian Move at International Criminal Court Signals a Volatile New Stage," *The Washington Post*, January 18, 2015. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/palestinian-move-at-international-criminal-court-signals-a-volatile-new-stage/2015/01/18/15336c6e-9ed5-11e4-86a3-1b56f64925f6_story.html)

A succession crisis is a nightmare scenario for Israel, which above all else prioritizes stability and quiet in the West Bank. Equally disconcerting to Israeli officials is the prospect that their current security cooperation with Abbas and the PA may falter with new leadership. Abbas deserves criticism for his autocratic tendencies, but he has been a bulwark against terrorism in the West Bank, and a reliable partner to the Israelis in containing Hamas.

In August 2015, Abbas suddenly announced his resignation as chairman of the PLO's Executive Committee, the organization's highest decision-making body.¹⁰ Abbas quit along with several other committee members, triggering new committee elections in September.¹¹ Abbas's detractors criticized the move as a "farce,"¹² while other analysts predicted he was using the PLO's bylaws to consolidate his control over the committee.¹³ Regardless, the move's unexpectedness and the uncertainty as to who controls the PLO highlights the potential for crippling instability in the West Bank.

In the event of such instability, Hamas will almost certainly seek to exploit the power vacuum. Indeed, Hamas may activate its underground political structures in the West Bank as a means to assert its claim to the PA.

Decades of effort have been devoted to peacemaking between the Palestinians and Israel, but little attention

10. Isabel Kershner, "Mahmoud Abbas to Resign PLO Leadership Position, Officials Say," *The New York Times*, August 22, 2015.

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/23/world/middleeast/mahmoud-abbas-to-resign-plo-leadership-position-officials-say.html>)

11. "PNC to Elect New Members of PLO Executive Committee," *Ma'an News Agency* (Palestinian Territories), August 24, 2015.

(<http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=767201>)

12. "PLC Member: Abbas' Resignation Is Just Farce," *Al Resalah* (Palestinian Territories), August 24, 2015. (<http://english.alresalah.ps/en/post.php?id=4798>)

13. Michael Kaplan, "Palestinian Leader Mahmoud Abbas' Resignation from PLO Intended to Oust Opposition, Consolidate Power: Experts," *International Business Times*, August 24, 2015. (<http://www.ibtimes.com/palestinian-leader-mahmoud-abbas-resignation-plo-intended-oust-opposition-consolidate-2065927>)

has been paid to the looming Palestinian succession crisis and the instability it could bring. This study describes the scenarios and likely contenders in the political contest that is slowly brewing. It also provides some guidance on how to contain the crisis, in the hope that the West Bank does not follow so many of its neighbors in devolving into the instability that characterized the Arab Spring.

Palestinian Succession in Theory and Practice

The Palestinian Authority's guiding legal document, Palestinian Basic Law, has a clear road map for succession. According to the legal framework, the office of the president is considered vacant under three scenarios: 1) death of the president, 2) presidential resignation, or 3) loss of legal authority, as approved by the High Constitutional Court and a two-thirds majority in the PLC.¹⁴ In any of these scenarios, Palestinian law clearly directs the parliament to navigate the PA to a new round of elections:

“The Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council shall assume the responsibilities of the Presidency provisionally for a period that does not exceed sixty days provided that free and direct elections to elect the President, in accordance with the provisions of this law, shall be organized. The provisional presidential term shall finish after the announcement of the final election results and immediately after the elected President takes a legal oath in accordance with the provisions of the Basic Law.”¹⁵

This process may seem straightforward, but authority would pass to the last elected speaker of the now-defunct PLC, Hamas member Aziz Dweik.¹⁶ Given the long-standing, bitter, and often bloody rivalry between the two largest Palestinian parties, there is little to no chance of Fatah allowing for this. Hamas and Fatah have been in a state of internecine conflict since 2007. Moreover, the notion of Hamas taking the reins of the PA would not sit well with the United States or Europe—the PA's biggest donors—and could precipitate a cut in funding.

The odds of Abbas vacating his office—despite overstaying his term in office by six years—are also close to nil. Palestinian courts, which are largely under the control of the PA president, are unlikely to revoke his authority.¹⁷ Further, even if the courts were to confront Abbas, their ruling on impeaching him would have to pass a majority vote in the defunct PLC, which Abbas would, in any event, be unlikely to recognize.¹⁸

Therefore, the only likely scenarios for a presidential vacancy are an Abbas resignation or sudden death. Despite continuing reports of his exhaustion and poor health, rumors that he plans to step down soon are still just rumors. Even at the end of his first presidential term in 2009, when he hinted that he was done with politics, Abbas directed the PLO to extend his mandate as head of the PA.¹⁹ The likelihood now, amid a long-

.....
16. “2003 Amended Basic Law,” *Palestinian Basic Law*, March 18, 2003. (<http://www.palestinianbasiclaw.org/basic-law/2003-amended-basic-law>)

17. Diana Atallah, “Palestinian Justice System Still a Work in Progress,” *The American Task Force on Palestine*, March 4, 2013. (http://www.american taskforce.org/daily_news_article/2013/03/04/palestinian_justice_system_still_work_progress)

18. “2003 Amended Basic Law,” *Palestinian Basic Law*, March 18, 2003. (<http://www.palestinianbasiclaw.org/basic-law/2003-amended-basic-law>)

19. Isabel Kershner, “P.L.O. Extends President Mahmoud Abbas's Term,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 2009. (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/17/world/middleeast/17mideast.html?_r=0)

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14. “2003 Amended Basic Law,” *Palestinian Basic Law*, March 18, 2003. (<http://www.palestinianbasiclaw.org/basic-law/2003-amended-basic-law>)

15. “2007 Presidential Decree Annuling the 2005 Elections Law,” *Palestinian Basic Law*, September 2, 2007. (<http://www.palestinianbasiclaw.org/downloads/2007-anullment.pdf>)

term Palestinian plan to seek statehood recognition at the United Nations, is that he will hold this post until he achieves that aim or dies trying. And because he has so far refused to officially appoint a vice president or successor, a chaotic succession battle may now be likely.

The key to succession therefore is Abbas's Fatah party. Fatah populated the Palestinian Authority in the years after the latter's creation in the 1993 Oslo Accords, ultimately creating a bloated PA bureaucracy.²⁰ Its control of the PA persists today; true power in the PA resides with the Fatah members.²¹

Israel is also unlikely to stand in the way of the Fatah party. Reducing Hamas's presence in the West Bank has been an Israeli priority for years—a priority that took on additional urgency after the summer 2014 grueling 50-day Gaza war. Thus, even as political tensions simmer, Israeli officials have a reluctant interest in keeping Fatah entrenched, so long as Fatah is the only viable alternative to Hamas.²²

The Silent Primary

As of August 2015, the most probable succession scenario appears to be a repeat of the process that occurred after Arafat's death in 2004, when Abbas was elected PLO chairman within hours by a secret ballot in the Executive Committee.²³ The precedent

of this "silent primary" reaffirmed the PLO's position of importance over the PA by selecting a chairman before setting presidential elections for the PA. Once Abbas was named PLO chairman, he also was named Fatah's candidate for the 2005 presidential elections, which he won handily.²⁴

The silent primary was deceptively unstable, however. After Arafat's death, the Tunisia-based Farouq Qaddoumi was named head of Fatah, a surprising move given that he had refused to return to the West Bank in protest against the Oslo Accords with Israel.²⁵ Though Abbas held de facto control over Fatah's politics, Qaddoumi was officially its leader. Abbas finally consolidated power after he wrested control from Qaddoumi in 2009 at the Fatah General Conference, where he was elected party chief by acclamation.²⁶

The Palestinian Aristocracy

In the silent primary scenario, the names on the top of the docket would likely belong to senior PLO and Fatah officials. They are the accomplices to Abbas's consolidation of power, and ironically weaker for it. Over 10 years, Abbas has hollowed out the top Palestinian decision-making bodies such as the PLO's Executive Committee, making even the top figures virtually irrelevant in terms of policymaking.

Still, by merit of their position in these bodies and their time spent in the spotlight of Palestinian politics, these

20. Nigel Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority: From Oslo to al-Aqsa*, (NY: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), pages 136-151.

21. Grant Rumley, "One Year Later, A Unity Government without Palestinian Unity," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, June 2, 2015. (<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/grant-rumley-one-year-later-a-unity-government-without-palestinian-unity/>)

22. Yaakov Lappin, "Hamas in West Bank 'Planned to Topple Palestinian Authority,'" *The Jerusalem Post*, August 18, 2014. (<http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Massive-Hamas-infrastructure-in-West-Bank-planned-to-topple-the-Palestinian-Authority-371409>)

23. "Mahmoud Abbas Elected PLO Leader," *CNN*, November 11, 2004. (<http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/11/11/arafat.plo/>)

24. "Abbas Declared Victor in Palestinian Election," *CNN*, January 10, 2005. (<http://www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/meast/01/10/palestinian.elections/>)

25. "Mahmoud Abbas Elected PLO Leader," *CNN*, November 11, 2004. (<http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/11/11/arafat.plo/>)

26. "Palestine: Salvaging Fatah," *International Crisis Group*, November 12, 2009. (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/israel-palestine/091-palestine-salvaging-fatah.aspx>)

officials likely view themselves as potential successors. All of them had close relationships with Arafat, all worked closely with the Palestinian leadership while it was in exile before the Oslo Accords, and all played a role in the development of the Palestinian Authority. If the next succession scenario mirrors the last one, these are the officials who will point to precedent as grounds for their consideration.

Saeb Erekat

Saeb Erekat, 60, sits on the highest bodies in both Fatah and the PLO. The longtime negotiator is a member of both Fatah's Central Committee and the PLO's Executive Committee.²⁷ Educated in San Francisco and the United Kingdom, Erekat got his start in politics as a columnist for *Al-Quds* newspaper in East Jerusalem. From there, Erekat was appointed to the Palestinian-Jordanian delegation for the Madrid talks in 1991. Since Madrid, Erekat has played a role in every major round of negotiations.²⁸ Erekat formally entered politics when he won a parliamentary seat on the PLC in 1996; by the 2000 Camp David Summit he was one of Arafat's closest aides.²⁹ He is reportedly close with Abbas, and was the lead negotiator for the 2013-2014 peace talks led by Secretary of State John Kerry.³⁰



Saeb Erekat

In July 2015, Abbas elevated Erekat to secretary general of the PLO, a position second only to the chairman.³¹

Many Palestinians still hold negative views of Erekat stemming from a 2011 leak alleging that he made major concessions on final-status issues with Israel.³² Still, he has lingered on as chief negotiator of the Palestinians and a close confidant of Abbas. Long dismissed as having reached his political apex, Erekat's status on the highest bodies of the PLO and Fatah—as well as his new appointment as No. 2 in the PLO—means he cannot be discounted as a potential successor.

Nabil Sha'ath

Nabil Sha'ath, 77, is also a senior figure on the Palestinian political scene. Born in the Galilee during the British Mandate period, Sha'ath obtained a MBA from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. By the 1960s, he was teaching at the American University in Beirut, where he joined Fatah and the PLO, and eventually ran the PLO's Planning Center. In 1989, Arafat appointed him to Fatah's Central Committee.³³ During the 1991 Madrid negotiations, Sha'ath was the liaison for the Palestinian



Nabil Sha'ath

27. "Fatah Central Committee Profiles," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2015. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/FCCProfiles2.pdf>)

28. Ilene Prusher, "Chief Palestinian Negotiator Saeb Erekat," *Haaretz* (Israel), August 3, 2013. (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/keeping-track-of-the-peace-process/1.539690>)

29. "Fatah Central Committee Profiles," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2015. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/FCCProfiles2.pdf>)

30. Ben Birnbaum & Amir Tibon, "The Explosive, Inside Story of How John Kerry Built an Israel-Palestine Peace Plan—and

Watched it Crumble," *The New Republic*, July 20, 2014. (<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118751/how-israel-palestine-peace-deal-died>)

31. Khaled Abu Toameh, "Mahmoud Abbas Appoints Saeb Erekat to Secretary-General of PLO," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 4, 2015. (<http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Mahmoud-Abbas-appoints-Saeb-Erekat-to-number-two-position-in-PA-407975>)

32. "Fatah Central Committee Profiles," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2015. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/FCCProfiles2.pdf>)

33. "Shaath, Nabil," *European Institute for Research on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation*, accessed August 26, 2015. (<http://www.medea.be/en/themes/biographies/stu/shaath-nabil/>)

delegation and the exiled Palestinian leadership in Tunisia.³⁴ With the creation of the Palestinian Authority, Sha'ath served in a number of positions, from foreign minister to acting prime minister.³⁵

Currently, Sha'ath serves as the head of Fatah's foreign relations committee, a quasi-governmental agency in charge of conducting the party's foreign affairs with the international community.³⁶ From that position, Sha'ath wields considerable diplomatic power, often revealing details of Palestinian foreign policy objectives to the international media—and further blurring the boundaries between the PA, the PLO, and Fatah.

Hanan Ashrawi

Hanan Ashrawi, 68, is one of the more recognizable faces of the Palestinians, and an active proponent of the diplomatic campaign against Israel.³⁷ Born in Ramallah to Anglican parents in 1946, Ashrawi left for the American University of Beirut in the 1960s, where she became involved with the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS). After the outbreak of the 1967 Six-Day War, Ashrawi



Hanan Ashrawi

was unable to return to Ramallah and instead went to the U.S., where she earned a Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Virginia.³⁸ She later returned to the West Bank to teach at Birzeit University and became the spokeswoman for the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid talks. After the Oslo Accords, Ashrawi was involved with several projects within the Palestinian Authority, notably serving as the minister of higher education from 1996 to 1998. In 2006, she ran and won a seat on the PLC as a member of the independent Third Way party.³⁹

In 2009 Ashrawi ascended to the highest echelon of the PLO. Her role on the Executive Committee is to make the case for the Palestinians in the international arena.⁴⁰ At times, she has strayed from the official party script, most recently when she called for new PA elections at a hearing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the international body responsible for Palestinian refugees.⁴¹

34. Milton Viorst, *Sandcastles: The Arabs in Search of the Modern World*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), page 228.

35. "Shaath, Nabil," *European Institute for Research on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation*, accessed August 26, 2015. (<http://www.medeia.be/en/themes/biographies/stu/shaath-nabil/>)

36. "Backgrounder: Profile of Members of Palestinian Delegation to Washington," *Xinhua News* (China), September 3, 2010. (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-09/03/c_13475877.htm)

37. Somini Sengupta & Rick Gladstone, "Palestinian Leaders Seek Actions in Security Council and Court," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2014. (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/world/middleeast/abbas-plans-to-seek-security-council-help.html?_r=0)

38. "Hanan Ashrawi: Palestinian Educator and Diplomat," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed August 26, 2015. (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/38365/Hanan-Ashrawi>)

39. "Dr. Hanan Ashrawi: PLO Executive Committee Member, Member of Palestinian Legislative Council and Head of the PLO Department of Culture and Information," *The Palestine Liberation Organization: Department of Culture and Information*, accessed August 26, 2015. (http://dci.plo.ps/EN/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=495&Itemid=386)

40. Ibid.

41. "June 2, 2015: Statement by Dr. Hanan Ashrawi Before UNRWA 65th Anniversary High-Level Conference: Sustaining Human Development and Protecting Rights of Palestine Refugees," *The Palestine Liberation Organization: Department of Culture and Information*, June 2, 2015. (http://dci.plo.ps/EN/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3351:statement-by-dr-hanan-ashrawi-before-unrwa-65th-anniversary-high-level-conference-sustaining-human-development-and-protecting-rights-of-palestine-refugees-june-2-2015&catid=92:news&Itemid=420)

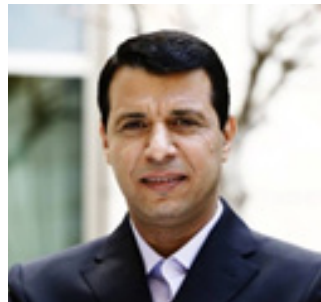
The Challengers

Public opinion has rarely affected political direction in Palestine. Yet that does not mean the public will not attempt to play a role. The appointment of an official deemed too similar to Abbas is likely to draw the ire of a disillusioned Palestinian street. In the event of such discontent, or of political gridlock at the highest levels, a new cadre of figures may push for the top spot. In this scenario, Palestinian succession could become a battle, and several challengers are readily discernible.

These are political figures with the resources, political acumen, support base, and desire to try to succeed Abbas as head of the PLO, PA, and Fatah. They lack the traditional pedigree of the aristocracy, but given the disillusionment of many Palestinians with their political system, that may be a net positive.

Mohammad Dahlan

Mohammad Dahlan, 53, was born in the Khan Younis refugee camp in Gaza in 1961. From an early age, he took an active role in Fatah politics, helping to set up a branch of the youth movement in Gaza. By the late 1980s, he was working for Arafat in Tunisia, and after the signing of the Oslo Accords was named head of the PA security services in Gaza.⁴² Dahlan's brutality in clamping down on Hamas activities in the 1990s earned him the trust of Israel and the U.S., specifically the CIA. By 1996, then-CIA director George Tenet



Mohammad Dahlan

was working openly with Dahlan to build up the Palestinian security services.⁴³ Dahlan's appointment atop the security services was not without controversy, however. Some—including Abbas—thought him too young for his responsibilities.⁴⁴

After Arafat's death, friction between the two men became more discernible. Dahlan represented the younger cadre of Fatah leaders, the ones born and raised in the West Bank and Gaza rather than those who spent much of their lives in exile.⁴⁵ Though Abbas distrusted Dahlan, he kept him on as an adviser after Arafat's death. From there, Dahlan launched a political career, winning a seat on the PLC in 2006.⁴⁶ But those were the same elections in which Hamas scored a surprise victory, and within a year the group had seized Gaza from Fatah and Dahlan.⁴⁷ Though Dahlan was out of the Gaza Strip at the time for surgery, Abbas placed the blame largely on him.⁴⁸

From there, tensions grew: Dahlan accused Abbas of failing to reform the PA, and Abbas filed corruption and embezzlement charges against Dahlan.⁴⁹ In 2011,

43. Cam Simpson & Neil King Jr., "Hamas to Show an Improved Hand," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2007. (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB118575064310581669>)

44. Jonathan Schanzer, *State of Failure: Yassir Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas, and the Unmaking of the Palestinian State*, (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), page 144.

45. Daoud Kuttub, "The Return of Mohammed Dahlan," *Al Monitor*, October 30, 2013. (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/mohammad-dahlan-fatah-plo-abbas-uae.html>)

46. Jonathan Schanzer, *State of Failure: Yassir Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas, and the Unmaking of the Palestinian State*, (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pages 143-147.

47. Conal Urquart, Ian Black, & Mark Tran, "Hamas Takes Control of Gaza," *The Guardian* (U.K.), June 15, 2007. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/15/israel4>)

48. Jonathan Schanzer, *State of Failure: Yassir Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas, and the Unmaking of the Palestinian State*, (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pages 143-147.

49. Grant Rumley, "In Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas vs Mohammad Dahlan," *The National Interest*, January 3, 2015. (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/palestine-mahmoud-abbas-vs-mohammad-dahlan-11953>)

42. Simona Sikimic, "Profile: Mohammed Dahlan, Gaza's Comeback Kid," *Middle East Eye* (U.K.), April 7, 2014. (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/profile-mohammed-dahlan-gaza-comeback-kid-1305037516>)

the PA president exiled Dahlan from the Palestinian Territories. Since then, Dahlan has found favor in the court of Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi.⁵⁰

Dahlan's strategy to succeed Abbas is twofold: secure support from regional actors and raise his popularity on the Palestinian street. Toward the first objective, he has operated as a money man for the Emiratis, facilitating business deals in Europe and the Middle East (one of these deals even led to a reward of citizenship in Serbia for Dahlan and his entourage).⁵¹ He has also negotiated agreements between Egypt and Ethiopia over a Nile River dispute.⁵² In acting as a diplomatic mercenary-for-hire, Dahlan is attempting to position himself as the statesman-in-waiting for the Palestinians.

On the second front, Dahlan has worked to curry favor on the streets in Gaza, and has even coordinated with Hamas to produce anti-Abbas rallies.⁵³ The alliance between Hamas and Dahlan seems improbable given Dahlan's past crackdowns on the group, but Hamas officials today insist that "Dahlan's past is better than Abbas's present."⁵⁴

Jibril Rajoub

Jibril Rajoub, 62, has a natural flair for politics. It is a trait he developed while spending 17 years in Israeli prisons for throwing a grenade at soldiers in 1970,⁵⁵ while working as deputy to Fatah's No. 2, Khalil al-Wazir, in Tunisia during the 1980s,⁵⁶ and as Arafat's deputy in Tunis before the Oslo Accords.⁵⁷ When the PA was formed in 1994, Rajoub sat where true power resided in the West Bank: the security apparatus. As head of the PA's security wing in the West Bank, he quashed political dissent, often with excessive force.⁵⁸



Jibril Rajoub

Rajoub was sidelined in 2002 after suffering a heart attack, yet the following year Arafat elevated him to security adviser.⁵⁹ Rajoub rose to Fatah's highest decision-making body, the Central Committee, in 2009, where he was also appointed deputy secretary general. His primary role today is head of the Palestinian Olympic Commission and the Palestinian Football Association,⁶⁰

50. Mohammed Daraghme & Karin Laub, "Dahlan, Exiled Palestinian Leader, Builds Comeback," *Associated Press*, February 28, 2014. (<http://news.yahoo.com/dahlan-exiled-palestinian-leader-builds-comeback-070439619.html>)

51. Ivan Angelovski & Lawrence Marzouk, "Mahmoud Abbas Rival Given Serbian Citizenship, Documents Reveal," *The Guardian* (U.K.), January 30, 2015. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/30/palestinian-president-rival-given-serbian-citizenship>)

52. Jack Moore, "Exiled Palestinian Leader Looks for Regional Allies in Mediation of Nile Dam Deal," *Newsweek*, April 28, 2015. (<http://europe.newsweek.com/exiled-palestinian-leader-looks-regional-allies-mediation-nile-dam-deal-326036>)

53. "Gazans Rally for Ex-Strongman as Corruption Trial Opens," *The Times of Israel*, December 18, 2014. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/gazans-rally-for-ex-strongman-as-corruption-trial-opens/>)

54. Adnan Abu Amer, "Will Hamas, Dahlan Unite?" *Al-Monitor*, October 31, 2014. (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/palestine-hamas-alliance-dahlan-fatah.html>)

55. Matthew Kalman, "Rajoub Begins His Run," *Haaretz* (Israel), May 15, 2014. (<http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/2.1167/.premium-1.590851>)

56. "Fatah Central Committee Profiles," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/FCCProfiles2.pdf>)

57. Matthew Kalman, "Rajoub Begins His Run," *Haaretz* (Israel), May 15, 2014. (<http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/2.1167/.premium-1.590851>)

58. "Profile: Jibril Rajoub," *BBC News*, March 25, 2002. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1881756.stm)

59. Greg Myre, "Political Sibling Rivalry: Hebron Parliamentary Race Pits Brother Against Brother," *The New York Times*, January 24, 2006. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/24/international/middleeast/24brothers.html>)

60. Matthew Kalman, "Rajoub Begins His Run," *Haaretz* (Israel), May 15, 2014. (<http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/2.1167/.premium-1.590851>)

where he has launched attacks on Israel at FIFA, seeking its expulsion.⁶¹

From his perch as head of Palestinian soccer to his bombastic comments against Israel (he has called for Israel to be “nuked”⁶²), Rajoub has steadily gained prominence in Palestinian politics while subtly undercutting his party’s leader, Abbas.⁶³ Though he failed to suspend Israel from FIFA, he managed to pass a resolution at its annual congress on greater freedom of movement for Palestinian soccer players.⁶⁴

In a succession scenario, Rajoub would be among the political elite geographically and politically nearest the Palestinian political epicenter in Ramallah. Given his years of working for Arafat and his rank within Fatah, his case for the top spot will not be ignored.

Mohammad Shtayyeh

Mohammad Shtayyeh, 57, is a more measured political figure than Rajoub, but what he lacks in popular backing he makes up for in a balanced appeal to global leaders. Born in a northern West Bank village in 1958, Shtayyeh



Mohammad Shtayyeh

earned his Ph.D. in economics from Sussex University in 1989. He returned shortly after to teach economics and eventually become the dean at Birzeit University, the flagship Palestinian academic institution near Ramallah.⁶⁵ In 1991, Fatah and the PLO tapped him to head the advance team in meeting with the Israelis at the Madrid Peace Conference.⁶⁶

Shtayyeh has since served in a number of roles within the PA, including as secretary general of its Central Elections Commission (1995-1998), and minister of public works and housing (2005-2008, 2008-2010).⁶⁷ More recently, Shtayyeh was a member of the Palestinian negotiating team during the U.S.-led peace negotiations of 2013-2014,⁶⁸ but quit halfway through to advocate for a more aggressive international campaign against Israel.⁶⁹ Since 2008 he has helped lead the Palestine Strategy Group, a Palestinian think tank promoting reform and advocating for a new national strategy.⁷⁰

Shtayyeh appeals to both ends of the Fatah political spectrum. For the members of Fatah who support Abbas’s stance of negotiating with Israel, Shtayyeh’s credentials as

61. “Palestinians Abandon Bid to Have Israel Banned from FIFA,” *The Times of Israel*, May 29, 2015. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinians-drop-bid-to-have-israel-banned-from-fifa/>)

62. Sharona Schwartz, “‘Moderate’ Palestinian Leader Swears: ‘If We Had a Nuke, We’d Have Used It This Very Morning,’” *The Blaze*, May 13, 2013. (<http://news.yahoo.com/moderate-palestinian-leader-swears-had-nuke-d-used-120410701.html>)

63. Matthew Kalman, “Rajoub Begins His Run,” *Haaretz* (Israel), May 15, 2014. (<http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/2.1167/.premium-1.590851>)

64. “Palestinians Abandon Bid to Have Israel Banned from FIFA,” *The Times of Israel*, May 29, 2015. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinians-drop-bid-to-have-israel-banned-from-fifa/>)

65. “Backgrounder: Profile of Members of Palestinian Delegation to Washington,” *Xinhua* (China), September 3, 2010. (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-09/03/c_13475877.htm)

66. “An Insider’s View of the Peace Process: A Palestinian Perspective,” *Brookings Doha Center*, December 8, 2010. (<http://www.brookings.edu/events/2010/12/08-mideast-peace>)

67. “CV: Dr. Mohammad Shtayyeh,” *Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction*, accessed August 26, 2015. (<http://www.pecdar.ps/etemplate.php?id=644>)

68. “Backgrounder: Profile of Members of Palestinian Delegation to Washington,” *Xinhua* (China), September 3, 2010. (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-09/03/c_13475877.htm)

69. Harriet Sherwood, “Palestinian Negotiator Calls for Summit of Great Powers to Resolve Conflict,” *The Guardian* (U.K.), December 6, 2013. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/06/palestinian-negotiator-summit-great-powers-conflict>)

70. “Regaining the Initiative: Palestinian Strategy Options to End Israeli Occupation,” *Palestine Strategy Group*, August 2008. ([http://www.palestinestrategygroup.ps/Regaining_the_Initiative_FINAL_17082008_\(English\).pdf](http://www.palestinestrategygroup.ps/Regaining_the_Initiative_FINAL_17082008_(English).pdf))

a negotiator are unassailable. For those within the party looking for a more antagonistic stance against Israel, Shtayyeh's lobbying for the Palestinians to join the ICC and other international organizations is also appealing. He is also reportedly close to Abbas.⁷¹ In the event of crippling indecision within the Palestinian leadership, Shtayyeh could be an attractive "compromise candidate."

The Wild Cards

In the case of a protracted power struggle, a number of "wild card" actors could also play a role. These are the figures who may lack either a political base or the resources to reach the top spot, but who are still influential political insiders in the West Bank. Some are notorious for butting heads with Abbas; others are widely viewed as yes-men for the president. While unlikely to ascend to the presidency, they cannot be ruled out. More important, they are likely to play a role in deciding who succeeds Abbas. At the very least, their support and endorsements could help decide the outcome.

Marwan Barghouti

Marwan Barghouti, 57, is a senior Fatah official and by far the most popular Palestinian figure in the West Bank and Gaza.⁷² He is currently serving multiple life sentences in an Israeli prison for orchestrating terror attacks during the second *intifada* (2000-2005).⁷³ Born in 1958 outside Ramallah, Barghouti served his first

prison sentence in 1976 for his role in armed activities, learning Hebrew and honing his political skills. During the first *intifada* (1987-1993), the Israelis deported Barghouti to Jordan for his role in organizing protests in the West Bank.⁷⁴ In 1996, he was elected to the PLC. That year, he launched a campaign against Arafat on charges of human rights abuses and corruption.⁷⁵ At the start of the second *intifada*, Barghouti founded al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a terror wing affiliated with Arafat's Fatah. The Israelis arrested Barghouti in April of 2002 and sentenced him to five life terms in 2004.⁷⁶



Marwan Barghouti

Barghouti has stayed active by leveraging a popular pulpit in Palestinian politics—Israeli prisons—where he has been issuing statements and even advising graduate students.⁷⁷ He regularly challenges decisions made by Abbas and issues his own policy prognoses.⁷⁸ Many Palestinians envision a Nelson Mandela scenario with Barghouti, whereby some form of popular pressure might secure his freedom and pave his way to power.⁷⁹

71. Isabel Kershner, "Abbas Seeks a New Government That Would Seal Alliance With Hamas," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2014. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/30/world/middleeast/abbas-palestinian-government.html>) and "Fatah Central Committee Profiles," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2015. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/FCCProfiles2.pdf>)

72. "Poll: Marwan Barghouti Would Win Palestinian Presidential Election," *Haaretz* (Israel), May 22, 2014. (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.592337>)

73. Mohammed Daraghme, "Jailed Palestinian Leader a Key to Mideast Talks," *The Times of Israel*, March 20, 2014. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/jailed-palestinian-leader-a-key-to-mideast-talks/>)

74. "Fatah Central Committee Profiles," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2015. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/FCCProfiles2.pdf>)

75. "Profile: Marwan Barghouti," *BBC News*, June 2, 2011. (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13628771>)

76. "Marwan Bin Khatib Barghouti," *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, September 5, 2002. (<http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/mfa-archive/2002/pages/marwan%20bin%20khatib%20barghouti.aspx>)

77. "Palestinian Prisoner Obtains MA Degree in Israeli Studies," *Ma'an News Agency* (Palestinian Territories), April 8, 2015. (<http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=760363>)

78. "Barghouti Criticizes UN Draft Resolution on Palestinian Statehood," *Al Akhbar* (Lebanon), December 23, 2014. (<http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/22996>)

79. Sharif Nashashibi, "Barghouti May Be the One Who Can Create Peace with Israel," *The National* (UAE), April 9, 2014. (<http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/barghouti-may-be-the-one-who-can-create-peace-with-israel>)

Salam Fayyad

If Marwan Barghouti is the Palestinians' most recognizable terrorist, Salam Fayyad, 63, is their most recognizable technocrat. Born near the West Bank town of Tulkarm in 1952, Fayyad earned his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Texas at Austin in 1986 before joining the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1987.⁸⁰ Fayyad spent nearly 15 years at the IMF, serving as its representative to the West Bank and Gaza Strip from 1996 to 2001. In 2002, Arafat, under pressure from the international community to provide financial transparency, tapped Fayyad to be PA minister of finance. In 2006, he was elected as a third-party candidate to the PLC in elections that were ultimately marred by the dominance of Hamas. In 2007, after Hamas seized the Gaza Strip, he was again appointed minister of finance and later prime minister—this time by Abbas.⁸¹



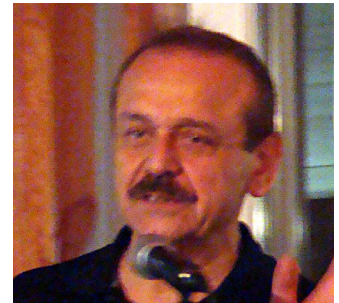
Salam Fayyad

The celebrated reformer, however, found himself marginalized in Ramallah after repeatedly challenging Abbas's authoritarian style.⁸² After resigning under duress in April 2013, Fayyad has stayed active in grassroots Palestinian politics, launching several nongovernmental organizations in the West Bank. Fayyad's biggest liability may be his political independence; few have come to his defense as PA

security forces have conducted politicized raids on his NGOs.⁸³ Fayyad is unlikely to assume the mantle of leadership because he lacks grassroots support and the resources of the Fatah faction. But his reputation as a fair, trustworthy and transparent technocrat who can bring in foreign aid will be an attractive quality for any new leader.

Yasser Abed Rabbo

Yasser Abed Rabbo, 70, is an on-again, off-again adviser to Abbas. Formerly a member of several leftist parties, he sits on the PLO Executive Committee as an independent.⁸⁴ However, Abbas recently fired him as secretary general of the PLO.⁸⁵ A former adviser to Arafat, Abed Rabbo quit his party—the socialist Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine—to support the Madrid process in 1991.⁸⁶ He then became an ardent supporter of the Oslo peace process and a subsequent member of the Palestinian negotiation teams to the Camp David and Taba talks.⁸⁷ Abed



Yasser Abed Rabbo

80. "Profile: Salam Fayyad," *BBC News*, June 17, 2007. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6757273.stm)

81. "Salam Fayyad: Distinguished Statesman," *The Atlantic Council*, accessed August 26, 2015. (<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/about/experts/list/salam-fayyad#fullbio>)

82. Thomas Friedman, "Goodbye to All That," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2013. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/24/opinion/friedman-goodbye-to-all-that.html>)

83. Barak Ravid & Jack Khoury, "PA Security Questions Salam Fayyad's Aid NGO Over Campaign to Help Gazans," *Haaretz* (Israel), August 26, 2014. (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.612458>)

84. "Background: Profile of Members of Palestinian Delegation to Washington," *Xinhua News* (China), September 3, 2010. (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-09/03/c_13475877.htm)

85. "Top PLO Official Says Abbas Fired Him Illegally," *The Times of Israel*, July 12, 2015. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/top-plo-official-says-abbas-fired-him-illegally/>)

86. Spencer Tucker & Priscilla Roberts, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Political, Social, and Military History*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008), page 26.

87. "Palestinian National Authority: The PA Ministerial Cabinet List, April 2003–October 2003," *Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre*, accessed August 26, 2015. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070927220148/http://www.jmcc.org/politics/>)

Rabbo has been accused of both conspiring against Abbas and cooperating with him. His relationship with the president is currently strained. In August 2015 Abbas announced that Abed Rabbo's nongovernmental organization, the Palestinian Peace Coalition, would be shut down.⁸⁸

Abed Rabbo's role is something of a mystery—he is neither a Fatah loyalist nor a towering political figure, yet he has lingered in the PLO's most powerful body, cycling in and out of the centers of power in Ramallah. Some reports of questionable veracity point to an Abed Rabbo alliance with Mohammad Dahlan or Salam Fayyad.⁸⁹ The latest rumors had the three meeting late in 2014 with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in the United Arab Emirates.⁹⁰ While Abed Rabbo has neither the clout nor political base to try for the presidency, he will undoubtedly be involved in the post-Abbas succession.

Rami Hamdallah

Rami Hamdallah, 56, is the current prime minister of the Palestinian Authority, appointed in the wake of Salam Fayyad's sudden resignation in 2013.⁹¹

pna/newpagov03.htm

88. "Abbas Orders Palestinian NGO Closed in Spat with Former Deputy," *Reuters*, August 19, 2015. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/19/us-palestinians-abbas-rival-idUSKCN0QO17320150819>)

89. Grant Rumley, "In Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas vs Mohammad Dahlan," *The National Interest*, January 3, 2015. (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/palestine-mahmoud-abbas-vs-mohammad-dahlan-11953>)

90. Khaled Abu Toameh, "Report: Kerry Met with Abbas Rivals, Palestinian Politicians in UAE," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 6, 2014. (<http://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Report-Kerry-met-with-Abbas-rivals-Palestinian-politicians-in-UAE-383798>)

91. "British-Educated Independent Rami Hamdallah Named New Palestinian Prime Minister," *The Telegraph* (U.K.), June 2, 2013. (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/palestinianauthority/10094920/British-educated-independent-Rami-Hamdallah-named-new-Palestinian-prime>)

Within weeks of Hamdallah's appointment, however, he resigned abruptly, apparently over his lack of autonomy and authority.⁹² Abbas managed to convince Hamdallah to resume his duties, and he has established a reputation as a pragmatic technocrat.⁹³

An academic by training, Hamdallah has a Ph.D. in applied linguistics from the University of Lancaster in the United Kingdom. After returning to the West Bank, he joined the staff at An-Najah University in Nablus, eventually becoming its president in 1998, where he remained full time until he was brought into the PA in 2013.⁹⁴



Rami Hamdallah

While many scoffed at his initial appointment, Hamdallah has steadily climbed in Palestinian polls.⁹⁵ One of the primary duties for the prime minister of the Palestinian Authority is to raise foreign aid to keep the PA operational. Hamdallah has proven his worth in that regard, serving as a capable emissary to foreign donors and dignitaries.⁹⁶ In the case of an abrupt vacancy in the presidency, Palestinians may look to the prime minister to steer the bureaucratic ship through stormy seas.

[minister.html](http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Report-Newly-appointed-Palestinian-Authority-PM-Hamdallah-resigns-317229))

92. Khaled Abu Toameh, "Palestinian Authority PM Hamdallah Resigns," *The Jerusalem Post*, June 20, 2013. (<http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Report-Newly-appointed-Palestinian-Authority-PM-Hamdallah-resigns-317229>)

93. "Rami Hamdallah: Palestinian Government Official," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 5, 2015. (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1957149/Rami-Hamdallah>)

94. Ibid.

95. "Palestinian Public Opinion No. 52," *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research*, June 5-7, 2014. (<http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/465>)

96. "Hamdallah Meets with German Delegation in Ramallah," *Ma'an News Agency* (Palestinian Territories), April 27, 2015. (<https://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=765109>)

Majid Faraj

In the heat of the 2014 Gaza war between Israel and Hamas, Abbas dispatched two deputies to Cairo for ceasefire negotiations.⁹⁷ One was an expected choice, Azzam al-Ahmad—Fatah’s point man for all relations with Hamas.⁹⁸ The other was Majid Faraj, the mysterious PA intelligence chief.⁹⁹

Faraj, 53, has emerged as one of the figures closest, if not the closest, to Abbas. His appointment as negotiator was not his first stint in the diplomatic realm: after Shtayyeh abruptly quit the U.S.-led peace talks in 2013, Abbas appointed Faraj to fill the post.¹⁰⁰ Born and raised in the Dheisheh camp outside of Bethlehem, Faraj has been a loyal member of Fatah since childhood. He led the party’s youth movement while in college and became a prominent figure as a local leader during the first *intifada*. After Oslo, he joined the security services, where he rose through the ranks.¹⁰¹



Majid Faraj

Intelligence officials have historically played important roles in Palestinian politics. Two of the three leading candidates for replacing Abbas were

97. “Palestinian Delegation to Head to Cairo for Ceasefire Talks Saturday,” *Ma’an News Agency* (Palestinian Territories), August 3, 2014. (<http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=717363>)

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid.

100. Ben Birnbaum & Amir Tibon, “The Explosive, Inside Story of How John Kerry Built an Israel-Palestine Peace Plan—and Watched it Crumble,” *The New Republic*, July 20, 2014. (<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118751/how-israel-palestine-peace-deal-died>)

101. “Abbas Appoints Majid Faraj Head of Palestinian Intelligence,” *Ma’an News Agency* (Palestinian Territories), September 16, 2009. (<http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=226151>)

former intelligence and security officials (Dahlan and Rajoub), and other officials have used their position as a springboard into politics.¹⁰² While his political aspirations are unclear, Faraj will have a significant role to play in Palestinian succession.

Mohammad Mustafa

Muhammad Mustafa, 61, could be the most important person in the Palestinian economy. Until recently, he was PA minister of national economy while simultaneously serving as head of the Palestine Investment Fund (PIF), a sovereign wealth vehicle with roughly \$1 billion in assets. Mustafa is also one of the closest allies of Abbas; the president entrusted him in 2007 with consolidating financial organizations within the PA under the authority of the presidency to save them from a potential Hamas takeover.¹⁰³ Abbas’s trust in Mustafa only grew after this; in 2013 he was appointed deputy prime minister; in 2014 he added the title of economy minister. His tenure lasted until early 2015, when he abruptly resigned both government posts but retained control of the PIF.¹⁰⁴



Mohammad Mustafa

Mustafa’s role and resume make him an interesting figure in any succession scenario. He holds a Ph.D. in management from The George Washington University

102. Grant Rumley, “Middle East Watchers: Keep Your Eye on Majid Faraj,” *The National Interest*, August 20, 2014. (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/middle-east-watchers-keep-your-eye-majid-faraj-11107>)

103. Omar Shaban, “Palestine Investment Fund Needs Reform,” *Al-Monitor*, May 14, 2013. (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/palestinian-investment-fund-reform.html>)

104. Jonathan Schanzer & Grant Rumley, “If a Palestinian Minister Falls and No One Is Around to Hear It...,” *Foreign Policy*, April 1, 2015. (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/01/palestine-abbas-mohammed-mustafa-resignation/>)

and spent 15 years at the World Bank.¹⁰⁵ His experience and relations with Western governments could prove useful to a candidate vying for the top spot.

Options for the United States

The articulated U.S. position, across both Democratic and Republican administrations, favors a Palestinian state living side-by-side peacefully with Israel. Unfortunately, it is also a bipartisan position to ignore the specific mechanisms and reforms that are needed to create a Palestinian state.

The George W. Bush administration briefly placed an emphasis on Palestinian transparency and democratic governance, but interest waned after Hamas won the 2006 elections that Washington had pushed. The Obama administration, for its part, has largely eschewed the principles of the so-called Bush Doctrine. More important, this White House has made few if any demands on the Palestinians, despite the many opportunities during final-status negotiations in 2013 and 2014. As it stands now, Abbas is unlikely to embrace a plan for better governance, let alone a succession plan, in the final years of the Obama presidency.

Yet a leadership crisis is looming, and Washington must not wait to reengage. U.S. policy should focus on short-term, achievable adjustments within the Palestinian political system while preparing for a long-term, holistic shift in Palestinian governance.

1. Pressure Abbas to appoint a vice president

Appointing a vice president is a short-term adjustment that would help ensure a stable transition in a post-Abbas era. This move is decidedly undemocratic, but should be seen as a stopgap measure that allows Abbas (and the U.S.) to preserve a nonviolent, negotiations-focused government after his term.

105. Ibid.

Pressuring Abbas to appoint a vice president is an achievable U.S. policy objective. Indeed, Washington only has to add its voice to those of Abbas's own party, Fatah, where members are demanding the appointment of a vice president or deputy at the upcoming leadership conference in November.¹⁰⁶

But Washington must tread carefully. As of August 2015, the figure with the highest chances of winning such an appointment may be Saeb Erekat, the longtime negotiator and No. 2 in the PLO. U.S. policymakers have a long and turbulent history of frustration with Erekat, whose career has been marked more by obstinate posturing than tangible diplomatic achievements.

Once in place, a viable vice president could weaken the absolute power of the presidency, and provide the U.S. with a safety net to begin implementing the real democratic reforms needed in Palestinian society with the assurance that a vacuum will not be created after Abbas's departure.

2. Bolster pro-democratic movements in Palestinian society

The U.S. must begin to encourage a restructuring of power in the West Bank, starting with cutting the Gordian knot tying together the Palestinian Authority, Palestine Liberation Organization, and Fatah. This means working with democratic nongovernmental organizations and protecting them from retaliation by the president or his powerful inner circle. For instance, the head of the PA, PLO, and Fatah should not be able to orchestrate a seizure of funds from a former prime minister running a nongovernmental organization,¹⁰⁷

106. Ahmed al-Abed, "Fatah's Seventh General Conference on Hold as Problems Abound," *Al-Akhbar* (Lebanon), September 9, 2014. (<http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/21440>)

107. "Palestinian Authority Freezes Assets of Salam Fayyad, Former Prime Minister," *Associated Press*, June 22, 2015. (<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jun/22/palestinian-authority-freezes-assets-salam-fayyad/>)

or arrest labor leaders¹⁰⁸ or journalists who criticize the government.¹⁰⁹ All of these happened under Abbas in the past year without serious or credible condemnation from the United States.

On the ground, the U.S. has several options to empower democratic movements in the West Bank. First, it should focus on increasing funding and support for nongovernmental organizations. There are dozens of Palestinian NGOs focused on civic empowerment, employment, and political participation. Washington can and should partner with them. This partnership will bolster American credibility with Palestinian actors outside the corrupt halls of power in Ramallah. Second, the U.S. should encourage American universities to partner with their Palestinian counterparts. Student groups, after all, have long been at the forefront of political expression in Palestinian society. Third, the U.S. should work with Israel to lift restrictions on the Palestinian economy, thus encouraging free-market reforms that could serve as a cornerstone for the other changes to come.

These steps are by no means comprehensive, but they can begin to unravel some of the Abbas-era practices that have hurt Palestinian prospects for democracy.

3. Put the PA on a timeline for elections

After empowering the pro-democratic movements within Palestinian society, U.S. policymakers can begin to help the Palestinians pave the way for national elections. The 2006 legislative elections, while free and fair, did the Palestinians a disservice. Cynically, American policymakers were banking on a victory in which the autocrats would win through the ballot box.

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108. "Abbas Cracks Down on Palestinian Labor Union Following West Bank Strikes," *Haaretz* (Israel), November 10, 2014. (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.625729>)

109. "PA Arrests Palestinians for Facebook Comments," *YNet News* (Israel), September 29, 2014. (<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4575688,00.html>)

To make matters worse, they bet on erroneous polls that indicated that Hamas would lose, rather than working with the Palestinians to ensure that extremist groups had no place in the political area.¹¹⁰

Washington must now empower the Central Elections Commission, the overarching body in charge of observing elections, to develop a legitimate set of criteria that parties must meet in order to run for office. In the past, the presidency has manipulated the CEC, undermining its independence. This is a difficult balancing act, but it will be crucial to the health of a future Palestinian democracy.

The Elections Commission must ban violent organizations from participation in elections. Famously, after the Hamas victory in the 2006 elections, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice lamented that Washington should have insisted that every terror group renounce violence before taking part. According to Rice, Abbas resisted the move because he thought it would appear as a thinly veiled attempt to exclude his political rival.¹¹¹ That was a mistake. Instead of explicitly blacklisting just Hamas—and thereby reducing the legitimacy of the results among Palestinians—the U.S. and its international partners should work with the Palestinians to determine a legitimate set of criteria that parties must meet in order to run for office. Acceptance of the two-state solution, a renunciation of terror and violence, and a pledge to respect the legitimate political decisions of the Palestinian Authority should be among them.

4. Revitalize the Palestinian parliament

National elections will repopulate and rehabilitate the Palestinian parliament, but the U.S. will need to help re-empower the PLC once new elections are held. That

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110. Elliott Abrams, *Tested By Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2013), page 152.

111. Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington*, (NY: Broadway Books, 2012), page 415.

means reaching out to parliamentary officials directly, facilitating staff training, and pressuring the executive to respect and reinforce parliamentary rulings.

Members of the PLC must have an updated mandate and an opportunity to assert the application of Palestinian Basic Law, even if it occasionally means challenging the executive branch. The parliament must enforce presidential term limits (four years), preserve the rule of law in the West Bank and Gaza, and grant legitimacy to any leader seeking to negotiate a final-status agreement with Israel.

A Note on Unity

Even if implemented, these recommendations will only be partially successful if the Palestinian political divide persists. Sustainable political reform—let alone peace between Israel and the Palestinians—is impossible to achieve when the Palestinian Authority president cannot speak for the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem at once. U.S. policymakers must think creatively about what the next Palestinian leader can do to re-incorporate Gaza into the Palestinian Authority.

This problem has received a great deal of attention since the internecine conflict erupted in 2007, however little progress has been made. It remains difficult to imagine a scenario where Hamas allows for elections and then facilitates a peaceful transition to power in Gaza. But without international assurances and efforts to improve domestic legitimacy through elections, the Palestinian Authority will not have the opportunity to re-assert itself in Gaza. Many challenges lie ahead in this regard.

Conclusion

Mahmoud Abbas was once America's great hope for Palestinian democracy. When the Bush administration chose to empower him as prime minister in 2003, it did so in the hope that he would siphon control away from

Arafat, open up Palestinian democratic institutions, and reform the Ramallah kleptocracy. U.S. officials also counted on Abbas to halt terror attacks. On the latter, Abbas's successes are impossible to ignore: in cooperation with Israel, the Palestinian Authority has dramatically reduced West Bank terror attacks.¹¹² On the former issues, however, Abbas has stunted—if not crushed—Palestinian democratic growth.

It is long past time to help put the Palestinians back on a path toward democracy.

The recommendations in this monograph may pose too Herculean a task for the Obama Administration, which has valued Palestinian quiet over Palestinian democracy. But assuming there is still time, the next administration in Washington would do well to head off the succession crisis before it erupts. In the process, it can help the Palestinians actualize their decades-long dream of self-determination.

112. Avi Issacharoff, "Israel Foiled 17 Suicide Attacks so Far this Year, Shin Bet Says," *The Times of Israel*, August 12, 2015. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-thwarted-17-suicide-attacks-so-far-this-year-shin-bet-says/>)

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