

The Palestinian Authority after Mahmoud Abbas: Anticipation for the Future

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Abstract

The article discusses the possible scenarios in the event that the position of the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) becomes vacant, in light of the absence of an institutional structure of the PA, legal justifications or political solutions that can be relied on, if Palestinian parties choose to resort to the democratic path, to elect a new president, or even bring a successor to the President of the PA, who enjoys popular and regional acceptance. Due to the difficulty of predicting the post-Mahmoud Abbas era, and the absence of any signs or indicators to anticipate the next stage and considering the persistence of the internal Palestinian division including that of the Fatah movement, and the emergence of new political currents, the author applies the scenario approach by presenting a set of possible scenarios, based on the available data and information discussed in some detail in the article. The article presents a theoretical and descriptive reading of the developments of the history of the PA, focusing on legal mechanisms through which the president of the PA is chosen, analyzing, and linking these mechanisms to the current reality of the PA through discussing the most important challenges facing the succession of Abbas. This is done based on the severe divisions within the Fatah movement, and its declining popularity, as well as the influence of regional and international parties. The article relies on many Arab, English, and Hebrew academic sources. It also includes interviews with a group of experts and specialists in Palestinian affairs. With the analysis of each possible scenario for the future of the PA after Abbas, the author concludes that the fourth scenario is most possible and realistic one, which suggests that Palestinians will be able to reach a consensus on a person to lead the PA after Abbas, especially since the absence of consensus could lead to more disintegration and internal fighting.

Keywords: Palestinian Authority, Abbas, Palestinians, Palestinian Consensus, Fatah.

Introduction

The future of the Palestinian Authority (PA) after Mahmoud Abbas is occupying the minds of most Palestinian elites and intellectuals. On the other hand, the aging Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and the decline in his health is no longer a personal matter linked to the life of an individual or an outgoing president, because the absence of the institutional character of the Palestinian Authority and the concentration of all powers in the hands of President Abbas raises many questions about the future of the Palestinian Authority after Mahmoud Abbas.

The future of the Palestinian Authority does not concern Palestinians alone, but rather receives regional and international attention. Therefore, the absence of President Abbas for any reason, without the availability of a Palestinian figure to assume his many positions, makes future of the PA vague. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze this expected dilemma, depending by presenting different scenarios. Therefore, the scenario method is one of the most crucial methods for future studies that describe a possible future outcome, based on indicators related to the current situation while also highlighting the results of those expected outcomes. In order to analyze the issue of the power vacuum after Palestinian Authority President Abbas through presenting scenarios as a research method, the researcher analyzes the four stages of the scenario-method, starting with identifying the potential power vacuum after Abbas, the causes of this vacuum, collecting data related to it, overseeing the context of its development, and understanding its consequences.¹

First: The Mechanism for Selecting the President of the Palestinian Authority

After the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) arrived in the Palestinian territories as a temporary self-governing authority. Provided that the

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¹ Hussein Bougara (2004), "Foreseeing International Relations: A Methodological Approach," *Journal of Human Sciences*, Vol. 21, pp. 185-198.

negotiations with Israel move forward based on the Oslo declaration of principles, to a permanent agreement or a final treaty in 1999. However, the end of these five years didn't result in a Palestinian state and the interim agreement continued to be in effect. The two parties to the conflict did not reach, after more than a quarter of a century, any significant progress.² The Palestinian Authority was forced to live with the current situation, and in 1996 the PA held the first presidential and legislative elections. The PA then headed towards drafting a constitution or a basic law regulating the work of its emerging institutions. The year 2003 witnessed the first comprehensive constitutional document approved by the PLC which was elected in 1996 for a four-year term. Article 36 of the amended constitution specified the term of the presidency of the Palestinian Authority to four years, providing that the President is entitled to run for a second presidential term, and he is not entitled to hold the position of the presidency of the Palestinian Authority for more than two consecutive terms.³

The relationship between the Palestinian Authority and Israel reached a dead end in 2000 due to the failure of final status negotiations or Camp David II and the outbreak of the Second Palestinian Intifada in the West Bank and Gaza Strip⁴. Meanwhile, Yasser Arafat was accused by Israel of being responsible for the Karen ship incident in the summer of 2001 and the bombing of the Park Hotel in Eilat in March 2002.⁵

Despite Israel's weakening of the Palestinian Authority's institutions, Tel Aviv did not allow it to reach the stage of collapse. However, the constitutional amendments made to the constitution of the Palestinian Authority in 2003 due to external pressures aimed at removing Palestinian President Arafat from the political decision-making and bringing in a government with wide powers headed by Abbas. Despite this, the dispute remained between Arafat and Abbas, and Arafat called Abbas the "Karzai of Palestine." Fatah too rejected Abbas at the time, which explains why his government lasted only a few months.⁶

The weakness of the Oslo project and the emergence of strong local actors on the Palestinian arena outside the PLO, that is Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, made the leadership of the Fatah in a hurry, because it became required to agree on a figure who heads the Palestinian Authority, the PLO and Fatah, without any dispute over them regionally and internationally. That's why, the statement of Fatah Central Committee member Azzam al-Ahmad on April 28, 2021, cannot be ignored, who said: "had it not been for the death of the late President Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian Authority would not have held presidential and legislative elections in 2005 and 2006." This explains why Abbas canceled the legislative and presidential elections in early May 2021.⁷

As for Israel, it played an important role in arranging the internal Palestinian political scene before the 2005 presidential elections, because its removal of Marwan Barghouti from the scene in the West Bank and charging him with leading armed operations against Israel in 2002 made Abbas the most prominent figure after Arafat.⁸ In addition, the Fatah leadership that came from abroad had strong influence within the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, Fatah, and the PLO, and most of those who were around Arafat and are currently surrounding Abbas and most of them are from the Fatah leadership that came from abroad under the Oslo agreements.⁹

Returning to the issue of the vacancy of the position of Palestinian Authority President due to the death of Arafat, it was a crisis that needed a consensual solution between the leadership of Fatah and regional

² Aljazeera (2013), "The price for Oslo," accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/al-jazeera-world/2013/9/18/the-price-of-oslo>.

³ Palestinian Basic Law of the Year 2005 (2005), accessed on December 22, 2021, https://www.elections.ps/Portals/30/pdf/Basic_Law_2005_AR-n.pdf.

⁴ Osama Abu Nahl and Mukhaimer Abu Saada (2012), "The negotiating position of President Yasser Arafat at the Camp David Summit, Gaza," accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://buff.ly/34dsIIB>.

⁵ Anas Abu Arqoub (2017), "Israel reveals the secret of the Karen A ship," *Ultra-Palestine*, accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://buff.ly/33SU3Qb>.

⁶ Michal Bar Zohar and Nissim Mishaal (2021), "Assassination of the Shin Bet - Major Operations Center," accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://hodhodpa.com/post/13724/>.

⁷ Azzam Al-Ahmad (2021), "National liberation movements do not hold elections under occupation," *Sama News Network*, accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3EnB9NE>.

⁸ Naila Khalil (2021), "Marwan Barghouti: the beginning of the twentieth year in captivity for the pioneer of the Palestinian scene," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3EgJ7rT>.

⁹ Khair Allah Khair Allah (2021), "Where is the new generation of Fatah?" *Middle East Online*, accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3ejDP4l>.

and international acceptance. For this reason, Fatah leader and Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) at the time, Rawhi Fattouh assumed the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, followed by the election of Abbas as President of the Palestinian Authority with 63% of the votes, beating Mustafa Barghouti, his most prominent competitor, who won 19.18% of the votes.¹⁰

With Hamas winning 74 seats out of 132 of the PC and taking control of it on January 25, 2006, Hamas MP Aziz Dweik became the Speaker of the Legislative Council, followed by Ahmad Bahar due to the detention of Dweik by Israel.¹¹ There is no doubt that the Hamas control of the legislative authority created a legal crisis for the Palestinian Authority and Fatah because the presidency of the authority in the event of the death of Mahmoud Abbas may fall in the hands of Hamas, and this is what prompted President Abbas, whose presidential term expired in 2009, to dissolve the PLC at the end of 2018.¹²

Mahmoud Abbas's move, although unconstitutional, has become a reality that cannot be ignored. It was suspended after the events of the division of 2007 and became completely absent in 2018. This would cause the Palestinian Authority to fall into a crisis of having the position of president vacant if President Abbas was subjected to any harm, and this is one of the reasons behind regional powers pressuring Abbas to hold elections such as the European Union (the main financier of the Palestinian Authority) demanding him to hold elections and renew the legitimacy of the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, the first of which is the PLC. In the same context, Article 37 of the Basic Law states that "the position of the President of the Palestinian Authority is considered vacant in the event of death, resignation or loss of legal capacity for the President." In this situation, the Speaker of the Legislative Council assumes the position of the President.¹³

However, the absence of the PLC in the current situation makes Abbas forced to appoint a vice president, especially since his cancellation of the elections makes the presence of a vice president almost the only solution to manage the transitional phase that will begin on the first day of the vacancy of the Palestinian Authority presidency for any reason.¹⁴

The Scenario method

The use of the scenario method in the research is within the framework of the methodology of future studies that originated in the United States of America, especially in studies related to the American strategy seeking to confront potential dangers at the international level. Over time and with the development of various political issues and conflicts, many countries and research centres have tended to intensify outlook studies through the scenario methodology, which has contributed to the development of that methodology to be able to draw scenarios for the future of the political phenomenon away from random expectations; rather, it is now able to outweigh one scenario at the expense of another, according to data and the behaviour of the main and subsidiary actors.

Although the future studies in their early stages began with the study of international Relations, where they dealt with various political issues, especially phenomena related to political systems, which is in line with this research paper, which seeks to develop a future vision of what the Palestinian Authority will be after the Mahmoud Abbas leaves. In this research, the scenario method is based on the Delphi technique, which is considered one of the most important achievements of the American School in future studies, as it depends on the gradual exclusion of possibilities related to the phenomenon. But it was developed in the mid-sixties of the last century, by developing several possibilities for the future of the political phenomenon and searching for the most supportive evidence for these possibilities, and accordingly one of those possibilities is preferred at the expense of the others.¹⁵

¹⁰ Wafaa News Agency (2005), "Rawhi Fattouh sworn in as President of the Palestinian National Authority during the transitional period," accessed on December 22, 2021, http://www.wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=wemzRea18120425367awemzRe.

¹¹ Nathan J. Brown (2008), *Palestinian Presidential Elections*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2008/07/15/palestinian-presidential-elections-pub-20298>.

¹² Alaraby 21 (2014), "Israel Arrests the Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council," accessed on December 24, 2021, website <https://arabi21.com/story/755891>.

¹³ Al-Mayadeen TV (2021), "Abbas announces the dissolution of the Legislative Council and Hamas considers the decision unconstitutional (2018)," accessed on December 24, 2021, <https://buff.ly/32RjH7g>.

¹⁴ Ahmed Abu Zuhri (2021), "Abbas is out of the game soon," *Palestine Newspaper*, accessed on December 24, 2021, <https://buff.ly/32ywMk>.

¹⁵ Walid Abdel Hai (2002), *Introduction to Future Studies in Political Science*, Amman: The Scientific Center for Political Studies, p. 74.

In this context, the Delphi technique and the developments that followed relied on the opinion of experts, taking into account the opinion of the majority or the most acceptable by experts. It is a methodology that this study relied on by conducting several interviews with experts and specialists and employing their opinions on the scenarios presented in our research paper, meaning that the scenarios reached are the result of data and developments in the Palestinian arena, and experts' opinion on those developments, and what the Palestinian scene could be like in the near and medium future.

Second: The Dimensions of the Issue of the Abbas Succession

The important transformation that changed the shape of the Palestinian political system represented in Abbas taking the presidency in 2005, as well as Hamas winning the PLC elections in 2006 did not last long, because the split between Hamas and Fatah in 2007 enabled Abbas to return to the presidential system with full powers, bypassing the articles or provisions of the Constitution, and issuing laws and legislations, such as Dissolving the PLC Law, the Elections Law, The Law of NGOs, and others which were issued by the head of the PA.¹⁶ Abbas took advantage of the Palestinian division, bypassing Article 7 of the Basic Law, which obliges him to issue an election decree three months prior to the end of his term. The emergence of Palestinian Gathering Party served as a new phase, which resulted in the return of the Fatah leader, Abu Maher Ghoneim, who left Tunisia to return to Ramallah in 2010.¹⁷

During the first months of Ghoneim's return, expectations revolved around his personality as a suitable alternative to Abbas, but the latter quickly dispelled those expectations and removed Ghoneim from the Fatah decision-making circle. A few months prior to Ghoneim's return, the West Bank witnessed a conflict between Abbas and Muhammad Dahlan. The latter was inciting other leaders such as Nasser Al-Kidwa and Salam Fayyad against Mahmoud Abbas, trying to convince them that they had the right to lead the Palestinian Authority.¹⁸ With the Dahlan Abbas' conflict going public, a committee was formed within the Fatah to investigate Muhammad Dahlan headed by Abu Maher Ghoneim, who had become a supposed opponent of Muhammad Dahlan, Mahmoud Abbas succeeded in creating a conflict between Ghoneim and Dahlan, getting rid of the two men. Ghoneim was kept away from the decision-making circle.

With the arrival of Fatah and Hamas to political understandings and the formation of a national unity government in 2014 headed by the independent president of An-Najah National University, Rami Hamdallah, the constitution of the Palestinian Authority was ignored by the two factions! The Hamdallah Government lacked constitutional legitimacy, nor did it obtain the confidence of the legislative authority. In this sense, Hamas may have helped Abbas to single out the Palestinian political decision-making, unintentionally as a step justified by Hamas on the path to end the political Palestinian division.¹⁹ In the meantime, there was talk of Abbas' succession again, and the latter reinforced what was being reported in the local media on this issue, in other words, there was no intention to run again for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority.

But in general, the issue of Abbas' succession was not raised within Fatah frameworks, and often statements were issued by Fatah leaders denying or responding to claims that close figures to Abbas were to succeed him. Abbas remained the single candidate at the level of the central committee of Fatah, or at least at the level of Fatah leadership surrounding him that did not have the courage to say otherwise. This was indicated by the current PA Prime Minister, Muhammad Shtayyeh, in January 2021, when he denied the existence of candidates competing with Abbas within the party.²⁰

During the 2016 Al-Aqsa events in Jerusalem and the West Bank, the issue of Abbas's succession came to surface again, especially since the internal reconciliation had reached a dead end, and the position of the Palestinian Authority appeared weaker on the security level related to the confrontation between

¹⁶ Mervat Sadiq (2021), "The disruption of the Palestinian elections reinforces fears about the vacancy of the position of the president," *Aljazeera*, accessed on December 25, 2021, <https://buff.ly/32pPiN9>.

¹⁷ Swiss Info (2010), "Ghoneim is the favorite to succeed Abbas if he insists on his resignation," accessed on December 25, 2021, <https://www.swissinfo.ch>.

¹⁸ Aljazeera (2010), "Three cases that sparked the dispute with Abbas Dahln," accessed on December 25, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3zh1Rqj>.

¹⁹ Arabi 21(2014), "Hamas and Fatah agree on Hamdallah's leadership of the government," accessed on December 25, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3mNj06i>. (Last accessed on December 22, 2021).

²⁰ Muhammed Shtayyeh (2021), "President Mahmoud Abbas is the candidate of the Fatah in the upcoming presidential elections," *Palestinian News Agency*, accessed on December 25, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3pHujPa>.

Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem. As well as on the political level, especially since the last months of the former US President Barack Obama had witnessed an American effort that led to the secret summit in the city of Aqaba that brought together the King of Jordan, Netanyahu and US Secretary of State John Kerry, with the exclusion of Mahmoud Abbas. At that time, plans or ideas for the future of Israel's relationship with the Palestinian Authority were put forward without the latter's participation.²¹ The exclusion of Abbas from the Aqaba summit was accompanied by regional isolation, which was understood within the framework of regional and international efforts to replace him with another figure. Therefore, many figures were presented, most notably the head of the Palestinian intelligence service, Majid Faraj, who is close to Israel and the US administration, Salam Fayyad, the former prime minister, and Muhammad Dahlan, who acted regionally at the time and began to hold meetings in the Ain Sukhna resort in the Egyptian city of Suez in coordination with the Egyptian intelligence, which in turn was coordinated for hundreds of Palestinian intellectuals and activists who were invited from Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem and abroad to attend workshops on the future of the Palestinian Authority.²²

Meanwhile, Abbas realized the seriousness of the situation, and held elections at the level of the Fatah's Revolutionary Council and the Central Committee. Leadership positions were distributed among members of the Central Committee to avoid any internal divisions or disputes, especially since the supposed candidates for the presidency of the PA in the future have become closer to Mahmoud Abbas, who in turn appointed Mahmoud Al-Aloul as his deputy of Fatah.²³ The attempt to arrange the Fatah internal house in 2017 did not succeed in diverting attention from the future of the Palestinian Authority presidency. The punitive decisions that were issued brought the internal conflict back to the fore, and the Fatah entered a state of hostility or lack of confidence with its base in Gaza.²⁴ Despite the Palestinian Authority complying with the Israeli-American pressure at the time, the Trump administration moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and announced the deal of the century later.²⁵

This improvement of relations between Egypt and Hamas was one of the factors that prompted the leadership of the Palestinian Authority to resume dialogue with Hamas and other factions.²⁶ As a result, Mahmoud Abbas announced the decree of holding the legislative and presidential elections and the National Council of the PLO, but this step quickly turned into a threat to the President of the Palestinian Authority, because he failed to reach an agreement with Hamas regarding the legislative elections, and also failed to contain the Fatah leadership.

Fatah emerged with three electoral lists, in addition to some lists of independents that came from the right or left of the party. The dispute between Abbas and Marwan Barghouti reached the level of hostility, with the latter being widely accepted within Fatah and among Palestinian circles in general. That is why Abbas's Fatah electoral list did not succeed in exceeding 20%, according to opinion polls at the time, which prompted Abbas to cancel the elections in May 2021 and return to ground zero.²⁷

The leadership of the Palestinian Authority is going through economic crises and looks inactive during security incidents taking place in the West Bank, with its relations with Israel on the decline. The idea of stepping down or even going to elections is not even brought up, but rather Abbas threatens to dissolve the Palestinian Authority in the hope of persuading Israel to resume peace negotiations.²⁸

²¹ Aljazeera (2017), "Details of the secret Aqaba summit," accessed on December 26, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3qImAPU>.

²² Strategic Thinking Group (2016), "Reading in the Ain Sukhna Conference – Signs and Situations," accessed on December 26, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3fk5Aun>.

²³ Anadolu Agency (2017), "The Central Committee of the Fatah elects al-Aloul as deputy head of the party," accessed on December 26, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3HqW2tw>.

²⁴ Amira Hass (2017), "The salary crisis in Gaza: Abbas risks widening the rift between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip," *Haaretz Newspaper*, accessed on December 25, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/premium-1.4022316>.

²⁵ Ibrahim Moqbel et al. (2018), "The Impact of Sanctions Imposed by the Palestinian Authority on the Gaza Strip," *Masarat Center for Strategic Studies and Research*, accessed on December 25, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3FOBQ4d>.

²⁶ Yousef M. Aljamal (2020), "Trump's Decision to Recognize Jerusalem as Israel's Capital: Domestic Motivations and Regional Circumstances," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 119-131.

²⁷ Reuters (2021), "Abbas faces a split in the Fatah before the Palestinian elections," accessed on December 26, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/palestinians-elections-abbas-ye2-idARAKBN2AZ0B6>.

²⁸ Hassan Shawish Maher (2014), "The New Palestinian and Raising Consciousness," *The New Arab*, accessed on December 27, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3Hv5E6f>.

Third: The Challenges Facing Abbas' Succession

There are many challenges facing Abbas' succession at the internal and external levels, and they can be clarified as follows:

The Severe Divisions within the Fatah

The 2005 presidential elections needed an internal Fatah consensus on who would lead the party and the Palestinian Authority, and most importantly, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Therefore, looking at the Fatah discussions at the time one can see they were very different compared to today's discussions, because the understanding between Abbas and Dahlan was at the security level in cooperation with the American intelligence services represented by its General Dayton. The American general worked on building a new security doctrine for the Palestinian Authority based on expanding security coordination between the Israeli side and the Palestinians in order to get rid of Yasser Arafat's legacy and the security incidents that accompanied it, and to try to integrate Hamas into the Palestinian Authority.

While Abbas was hunting the Palestinian resistance factions' weapons in the West Bank, Dahlan was facing Hamas in Gaza. Therefore, the interests of the two wings of Fatah at that time, Abbas and Dahlan, were common.²⁹ On the contrary, the internal Fatah competition between the different wings has now exceeded the boundary of the division between different currents. We are talking about three main currents representing Fatah, Abbas, Dahlan and Barghouti. Fatah represented by Abbas is witnessing internal conflicts that may exceed the level of conflict between the three currents referred to. A few weeks before Abbas canceled the legislative elections in the first half of 2021, a clear movement or an unprecedented competition between the leadership of Fatah was witnessed.

There is no doubt that the Fatah leadership attempts to convince regional and international parties of Mahmoud Abbas as a candidate, which destroyed any democratic horizon in the Palestinian territories.³⁰ Speaking of the weight of Fatah's leadership within the party's circles, the situation is not better, because the observer of the security events resulting from the suppression of freedoms will notice Abbas' willingness to sacrifice Fatah in exchange for continuing to lead the Palestinian Authority.³¹ This is a result of Abbas' success in weakening Fatah in favor of the Palestinian Authority. Therefore, whatever the influence of Fatah leaders that can succeed Abbas, they will not match employees who wait for instructions and salaries from Abbas's office, which is controlled by the shadow lady Intisar Abu Amara, who works as director of the office of Palestinian Authority President Abbas, and who plays an important role in Mahmoud Abbas's relationship with the leadership of Fatah, as was revealed by the former presidential office employee Yasser Jadallah in May 2020.³²

At the level of Fatah, Al-Aloul is considered a person very close to Abbas and is not considered part of the internal conflicts. That is why Abbas chose him to be his vice-president of Fatah in 2018.³³ As for Majed Faraj, the most powerful man after Abbas, he gains his strength from his presence at the head of the security establishment or the intelligence apparatus of the Palestinian Authority, but he lacks a popular base at the level of the Fatah. Rather, he is seen as a collaborator with Israel, and this does not give him internal legitimacy.³⁴ However, despite all the rifts facing Fatah, there is a common interest on and agreement among the party's leadership, including those opposed to Abbas, that is the survival of the Palestinian Authority.

Absence of Popular Support for Fatah Leadership

This problem revolves around the absence of a popular acceptance of the Fatah leadership affiliated with Mahmoud Abbas and others. Not everyone has adopted a political program that contradicts Abbas' program based on security coordination with Israel. The reasons for the conflicts between Abbas and

²⁹ Iyad S. S. Abujaber (2021), *The American Way*, Manchester: Comma Press, pp. 494-456.

³⁰ An exclusive interview with the Palestinian academic Hani Al-Basous at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman, July 30, 2021.

³¹ An interview with journalist Rasheed Shaheen, Bethlehem Palestine, July 29, 2021.

³² Yasser Jadallah (2020), "Confessions of an employee of the office of President Abbas," accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://www.fateh-voice.net/post/128662>.

³³ Times of Israel (2018), "Who is Mahmoud Al-Aloul, one of the candidates to succeed Abbas," accessed on December 23, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/who-is-mahmoud-al-aloul-touted-as-abbass-possible-heir/>.

³⁴ Ynew (2021), "Only Israelis deal with a replacement for Abu Mazen," accessed on December 25, 2021, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/r1Gu5Oswv>.

Dahlan or Abbas and Barghouti were in the context of the struggle for power. If the financial embezzlement and the struggle for influence had led to a sharp division that reached the level of hostility between Mahmoud Abbas and Muhammad Dahlan, then the recent elections canceled by Mahmoud Abbas, revealed a new conflict between Mahmoud Abbas and Marwan Barghouti. That is why the Palestinian public opinion, or even Fatahists, do not find fundamental differences between these leaders.³⁵

This leads us to a very important issue that is completely linked to the relationship of the successor of Mahmoud Abbas with the Palestinian people. Legitimacy here needs popular support that is practically translated into free and fair elections. That is why Fatah was forced to hold presidential and legislative elections in 2005 and 2006 to gain the legitimacy of the Palestinian people. The important note in this context is that despite the cohesion of Fatah in 2005 compared to the present time, it was forced to search for popular and electoral legitimacy for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, and with the ongoing Fatah disintegration, legitimacy has become out of reach, especially since Fatah is no longer a majority in the Palestinian street.³⁶

In another context, this problem opens the door wide to the legal challenges. The presidency of the PA after Abbas needs a legal mechanism that is no longer available in the Palestinian Authority system now. Therefore, some suggest that the Fatah leadership will return to the umbrella of the PLO as an alternative to the PLC which is an illegal option.³⁷

The Approval of Israel and the Regional Powers of the President of the PA

The disagreement in the Palestinian street over Fatah leaders is also clear through Israeli positions, as the Israeli media put forward from time to time the names and personalities of candidate to succeed Mahmoud Abbas without distinguishing one person over another. Since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, none of Fatah's political leadership, except for Marwan Barghouti, has been arrested or criticized by the Israeli media. The relationship between Israel and the Fatah leadership even further, until relations reached the point of almost daily communication and the exchange of official and non-official visits.³⁸

If the relations of the Palestinian Authority with Israel seem complicated since the events of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, this has not been negatively reflected on the level of leadership relations, because the security coordination between the two sides has taken unprecedented steps since 2005, as the security services in the West Bank now control all aspects of life. Since it implements all security coordination with Israel, it is similar to a factional entity that is part of choosing Mahmoud Abbas' successor away from the Fatah decision-making and according to the nature of the relationship with Israel and regional and international parties.³⁹

The weakening of Fatah and its leadership at the expense of the Palestinian Authority and its security establishment pushed Israel and regional forces to encourage names such as Majed Faraj, whose name is proposed in the Israeli politics and media as an alternative after Abbas and this is not in vain. What helps Mahmoud Abbas to hold on to the Fatah leadership and the Palestinian Authority is the Fatah leadership's awareness of the nature of competition and the level of balances between the different wings of the group.⁴⁰

For this reason, Israel has developed different visions for the post-Mahmoud Abbas era, the most prominent of which was the establishment of an alternative Palestinian authority or authorities, where the plan of the seven emirates developed by the Israeli researcher Mordechai Kedar is the most prominent in this context. This situation can be dealt with by the logic of dividing the West Bank into seven emirates, so that these leaders rule in partnership with the tribesmen in their areas of influence

³⁵ An interview with Husam al-Dajni, a Palestinian diplomat and academic, July 28, 2021.

³⁶ An interview with Hani Al-Basous, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman, July 30, 2021.

³⁷ An interview with Sharhabeel Al-Gharib, President of the International Relations Forum for Dialogue and Policies, Gaza, August 3, 2021.

³⁸ An interview with Mazen Al-Jabari, specialist in Palestinian-Israeli affairs and director of the Association for Arab Studies in Jerusalem, July 29, 2021.

³⁹ An Interview with Omar Shaaban, President of the Pal-Think Center for Strategic Studies, Gaza, 29 July 2021.

⁴⁰ Ynew (2021), "Only Israelis deal with a replacement for Abu Mazen."

and in full coordination with Israel.⁴¹ In addition, the leadership of the PLO has relations with different regional forces, and most of the leaders of the PLO are affiliated with regional parties. This reflects negatively on the leadership of Fatah inside, which always finds itself unable to reach out to the Fatah decision-making.⁴²

The American envoy spoke of efforts to pressure Israel and urge it to provide support to the Palestinian Authority, which was achieved in the meeting between Abbas and Israeli Defense Minister Gantz at the end of August 2021, which resulted in the Palestinian Authority obtaining an Israeli loan amounting to 150 million dollars.⁴³ Israel and the American administration realize the importance of the existence of the Palestinian Authority as a security project that has reduced the security, economic, humanitarian and political costs of occupation that Israel could pay in the event of its complete control of the West Bank.⁴⁴

Scenarios for the Post-Abbas Period

With his age, there are speculations over Abbas' health.⁴⁵ Based on the previous considerations, predicting the post Abbas era is not an easy matter, because the data referred to in the text above makes the next stage open to many scenarios that can be summarized as follows:

First Scenario: The Constitutional Option

This scenario assumes that the Fatah leadership will stick to the above-mentioned Article 37 of the Basic Law.

A. Requirements for this scenario to happen:

This scenario requires the existence of a legislative authority that Abbas dissolved in 2018. Nevertheless, the current constitutional vacuum could create a certain level of cooperation or rapprochement between Palestinian factions, whereby Fatah and Hamas would invite the PLC to convene and elect a speaker to be the interim president of the Palestinian Authority.⁴⁶ Although the step of reactivating the PLC seems almost impossible, the possibility of reaching an interim president can be provided through political consensus among the Palestinian factions.

B. The possibility for this scenario to happen:

The relative weight of this scenario is very weak compared to any other scenarios. The internal Palestinian consensus needs regional and international support and an Israeli approval, and without whom the Palestinians would not have been able to go to the 2005 elections.⁴⁷ The cancellation of the elections and the PA's situation regarding the last war on Gaza in 2021 reduce the potentiality of this scenario to happen.

Second Scenario: Return to PLO

This scenario assumes that the Central Council of the Palestine Liberation Organization imposes a personality to run the Palestinian Authority on an interim basis until elections are held.

A. Requirements for this scenario to happen:

The Fatah Central Council meeting is the easiest option for Fatah, because, unlike other PLO councils, the Fatah Central Council meets regularly, and its meeting mechanism is the easiest compared to other councils. Despite the decline in the role of the PLO and Abbas withdrawing some important powers from it, such as the Expatriates profile, and integrating it into the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the meeting of the Central Council does not require much understanding among the PLO factions.

⁴¹ Mordechai Keidar (2020), "Palestinian Emirates Program," accessed on December 24, 2021, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/r1Gu5Oswv>.

⁴² An interview with journalist Rasheed Shaheen, Bethlehem Palestine, July 29, 2021.

⁴³ Anadolu Agency (2021), "Abbas Gantz meeting: timing and goals," accessed on December 26, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3qBPYkJ>.

⁴⁴ Interview with Omar Shaaban, President of the Pal-Think Center for Strategic Studies, Gaza, 29 July 2021.

⁴⁵ Omer Dostri (2018), "The Day After Mahmoud Abbas: An analysis of Israeli options in the Palestinian arena," accessed on December 26, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330441017_The_Day_After_Mahmoud_Abbas_-_An_analysis_of_Israeli_options_in_the_Palestinian_arena.

⁴⁶ Arabi Post (2021), "Washington warns Israel of the collapse of the Palestinian Authority," accessed on December 23, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3sNqjOY>.

⁴⁷ Michael Milstein (2021), "Is the Palestinian Authority on the Verge of Collapse?" *Sama News Agency Al-Hodhud*, accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3mQjqbR>.

B. The possibility for this scenario to happen:

This scenario can be considered practical or compelling to those who view it with favor. Although the relative weight of this scenario is better than the first scenario where it will not be able to provide sufficient legitimacy to the next president as it cannot replace the elections. Given the shallowness of the democratic process within the PLO, this scenario may add further complexity to the Palestinian situation as the transition phase may be prolonged and open the door to further conflict.

Third Scenario: Resolving the Vacuum Situation in a Secure Manner

This scenario assumes that the Palestinian Authority's leadership has more security influence than others, and its weight is more likely compared to the other various Fatah leaders. Therefore, the relative weight of this scenario exceeds the level of previous scenarios, because Israel can intervene forcefully in order to resolve this issue in the interest of specific parties with the aim of filling the vacuum that Mahmoud Abbas will leave through a consensual figure or a collective leadership to which Abbas's positions will be distributed, and this can alleviate the current state of Fatah division.⁴⁸

A. Requirements for this scenario to happen:

This scenario requires a good measure of Israeli regional and international consensus to preserve the Palestinian Authority entity from collapse, while continuing its security performance as it is.⁴⁹ Having Israel and the regional parties agreed on a Fatah security figure could bring difficulties at the level of the Fatah's position. However, it is important to note that Abbas was rejected by Fatah before 2005, and he turned into the only Fatah candidate later. This scenario requires the integration of other Fatah groups which is considered possible,⁵⁰ as the absence of ideological or deep conflicts between the various Fatah groups is an important condition for the realization of this scenario.

B. The possibility for this scenario to happen:

This scenario might be appropriate for Israel and the regional and international parties where it would prevent the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, while at the same time it would waste the opportunity for other political parties to enter this fray.

Fourth scenario: An Agreement on a Person-Based or Group-Based Leadership

This scenario assumes that Fatah leadership will agree on a person who leads the group, the PA, and the PLO, or three people to lead each of the three entities. Currently, Hussien Al-Shiekh has emerged as a potential successor to Mahmoud Abbas. Currently, Al-Shiekh is in conflict with Tawfiq Al-Tirawi and other Fatah leaders, Nasser Al-Qudwa and other figures in the group.

A. Requirements for this scenario to happen:

This scenario requires a good level of consensus among all Fatah leaders regarding who leads the party and the Palestinian Authority, in addition to the agreement of the factions of the PLO and its Executive Committee on who leads the organization.

B. The possibility for this scenario to happen:

An Israeli green light is required, especially in the part related to the leadership of the Palestinian Authority, as it is a security partner for Israel.⁵¹ Arab and regional support for this step is indispensable and can provide pushing for the participation of the largest Palestinian leadership abroad and financial support to ensure that this stage is bypassed.

Fifth Scenario: Infighting

This scenario assumes that the post-Abbas era will witness infighting between the wings representing Fatah in the Palestinian territories. This fighting takes different forms, both between the groups of the Fatah which is currently led by Abbas, or between all other Fatah groups; The Abbas group, Dahlan's group and Barghouti's group, and this fighting may lead to the emergence of other new groups.⁵²

⁴⁸ Hani Habib (2020), "Vice President and incoming President," *Sawa News*, accessed on December 26, 2021, <https://buff.ly/3mJPmhV>.

⁴⁹ An interview with Husam al-Dajni, a Palestinian diplomat and academic, July 28, 2021.

⁵⁰ Hani Al-Masry (2021), *Dissolution of Authority and the Dry Forest*, Palestine: Masarat Center, <https://buff.ly/3qCvdvr>.

⁵¹ An interview with journalist Rasheed Shaheen, Bethlehem Palestine, July 29, 2021.

⁵² An interview with Hani Al-Basous, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman, July 30, 2021.

A. Requirements for this scenario to happen:

The level of polarization continues to escalate among Fatah security leaders; as the entry of the Dahlan and Barghouti groups into infighting is possible.

The support of Israel and regional powers for this infighting is an important factor. Regional powers attempt to support Dahlan to lead the PA, on the contrary, while Marwan Barghouti is the best option for Fatah and other Palestinian parties, including Hamas. This scenario requires a certain level of security vacuum or weakness of the Palestinian Authority's control. This is very clear in recent months, and the demand for weapons in the West Bank has increased dramatically, according to Israeli reports.⁵³

B. The possibility for this scenario to happen:

Given the absence of legal and legislative frameworks within the Palestinian Authority, the possibility of this scenario is highly probable. In addition to the difficulty of the alternatives indicated in the previous scenarios, there are two things that could prevent the realization of this scenario. The first is that a post-Mahmoud Abbas era in the West Bank emerges, and the infighting here may pose a threat to about 750,000 settlers, which makes Israel intervene to protect its interests. The second thing is that the social and political structure in the Gaza Strip gets very different from that of the West Bank, given that many residents of the West Bank have economic interests with the Palestinian Authority and Israel, and this would reduce the intensity of the infighting.

Conclusion

The lack of a constitutional mechanism to choose a president for the Palestinian Authority after Mahmoud Abbas opens the door for the Palestinian leadership to go to other options, such as resorting to the PLO or the Constitutional Court, or consensus between the Fatah leadership and other political factions. Therefore, these steps remain hostage to the balances within Fatah and the role of local, regional and international parties in influencing the Palestinian decision-making.

On the other hand, the legal dilemma that the next Palestinian Authority President will face is accompanied by many challenges whose features are clearly visible in the Palestinian scene, both at the level of divisions within the Fatah groups and its loss of popularity in favor of other Palestinian factions, especially Hamas, and the position of external parties regarding the personality of the next Palestinian Authority president. Accordingly, five main scenarios were put forward, the most prominent of which is the fourth scenario related to the state of consensus on a Fatah personality or the collective leadership of those positions led by Abbas at the levels of the presidency of the PA, Fatah and the PLO.

This scenario, although more likely to happen, remains contingent on consensus among all Fatah leaders, starting with the General Fatah group led by President Abbas, the reformist group led by Muhammad Dahlan, and the Marwan Barghouti's group, keeping in mind the importance of the regional and international role supporting this scenario. If Fatah parties fail to reach a consensus, the fifth scenario, which is the worst case scenario related to infighting, will be very present because the disintegration and Fatah divisions during the past few years. The presidency of the Palestinian Authority is no longer confined to the position of Fatah, because other Palestinian factions have gotten a popularity and influence that bypassed Fatah.

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