

Palestinian Elections: Abbas Moves to Stamp Out Constructive, Strategic Change within Fatah

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At long last, there is a credible challenge from within to the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority (PA), an increasingly autocratic and unpopular body that has a limited administrative function over enclaves in the Israeli occupied territories.

This challenge constitutes a growing hope. As political analyst Mamdouh al-'Iker [puts it](#),

“These [upcoming Palestinian] elections may hold an opportunity to create, even if a tiny crack, in the wall of our current reality, through which we would embark on a change towards... independence and our right to self-determination and return. Saving our national project requires change on more than one level.”

But Mahmoud Abbas seems determined to stamp out constructive, strategic change even within Fatah itself.

In mid-January 2021, Abbas’s office issued a decree that Palestinian legislative (parliamentary) elections will be held on 22 May and presidential elections on 31 July in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem.

Abbas’s response to an alternative election slate proposed by Nasser al-Qidwa, nephew of Yasser Arafat and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Yasser Arafat Foundation, shows how far he is prepared to go to keep the horrific political status quo.

The slate includes a diverse list of names from inside and outside Fatah and is backed by Hani al-Masri, General Manager of [Masarat Center](#). Al-Qidwa also endorsed imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti for president, should the latter decide to run. Abbas responded with two memos on March 11, 2021, one stripping al-Qidwa from his Fatah membership and another, via the General Manager of the PLO Palestine National Fund, halting funding for the Yasser Arafat Foundation. (See [What is the Fate of Fatah?](#) [Arabic])

The 85-year-old Abbas is trying to nip in the bud this homegrown challenge to Fatah’s autocratic grip on the West Bank, once again demonstrating how averse the PA’s structure is to a true national liberation project.

Abbas's announcement of the elections, the first in 15 years, was widely [seen](#) in the Western press as "an effort to heal long-standing internal divisions... to try and present a united front [among Palestinian factions] since Israel reached diplomatic agreements last year with four Arab countries" and to reset relations with Joe Biden after Trump had cut off all aid, proposing a Mideast plan that would have allowed Israel to annex parts of the occupied West Bank.

Alaa Tartir, fellow of Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, tells us what the above means in plain language:

The decision to hold elections is largely due to external—both international and regional—pressure and conditionality... the Palestinian Authority (PA)—and implicitly the leadership of Hamas—wanted to send a clear message to the new US administration that they are "ready for business", they are ready to return to the "old normal", and they are ready to receive the US financial "aid" ... happy to return to the "negotiation table" ... under strong pressure from the donor community (especially the Europeans) to "renew their democratic mandate."

In other words, as Tartir explains, the legislative and presidential elections announcement is not due to "home-grown, local, people-driven reasons." Furthermore,

donors are only interested in "nominal democracy", and they are interested in seeing "the Palestinians going to the ballot box", as one senior European diplomat told me, adding "we understand this is not real democracy, but it is better than nothing, and we are here to support."

Both the EU and the US are prepared to act against the will of the Palestinian people by holding back vital aid, as they did in 2006 after Hamas won the last parliamentary elections.

But what Abbas is doing now in the way he is responding to an internal Fatah party challenge does not even have that tenuous logic behind it. He appears to be responding to a power struggle within Fatah for the sake of holding on to a strategy that has long failed in achieving its goals.

Yara Hawari, another fellow of Al-Shabaka, [states](#) that

there is much reason to believe the Palestinian elections scheduled for later this year will neither be free nor fair... It is unlikely that any Israeli government would permit Palestinian elections in Jerusalem, as doing so would amount to acknowledging a legitimate Palestinian presence in the city, and therefore challenge the Israeli claim of sovereignty over the entire metropolis. Moreover, the Israeli regime may even try to prevent Palestinian Jerusalemites from taking part in the elections by threatening to revoke their residence permits if they do so.

That prediction is already [playing out](#). Claiming that his activities in Jerusalem undermine its authority, Israel has issued Palestinian Governor of occupied Jerusalem Adnan Ghaith an order banning any communication with President Mahmoud Abbas for seven days, "while renewing the ban on him entering the occupied city for six months."

The PA, with its corruption and insistence on fearful obedience from its subjects without accountability or oversight, stands shoulder to shoulder with the Israeli authorities in attempting to prevent a viable political alternative from emerging in the Palestinian political arena within the occupied territories.

On March 16, Hani al-Masri [blogged](#) about rumors regarding the postponement of the elections, because of the impediments the pandemic poses, because the PA does not have Israel's approval and the lack of agreed-upon mechanism for holding elections in the city of Jerusalem, because Israel is sending signals regarding its displeasure with Hamas's participation, because of the

lack of clarity of the American position on the elections, as the matter is still under examination, with concerns that Hamas, which the US classifies as a "terrorist" organization, will win again [as it did in the legislative elections of 2006]... and because of concerns and uncertainty about the new slates...[and] disagreements within the Fatah and Hamas movements, and widespread popular opposition to the Joint List that could be reflected in the ballot boxes, as they were not based on agreements, nor on ending the division [between the two movements]... The election process is nothing more than an attempt to engineer and ensure certain results in a way that achieves containment and reproduction of the status quo, putting individual interests over the national interest.

Al-Masri's assessment regarding the election process was verified at the meeting (on March 16, 2021) in Cairo of Palestinian factions participating in the upcoming general elections to discuss "key issues linked to the elections." [Al-Masri, who had been part of the delegations invited to the first meeting in Cairo, was [not invited](#) to this one.]

Image on the right: Mustafa Barghouti (March 16, 2021) at the Cairo meeting of Palestinian factions participating in the upcoming general elections



Upon emerging from the meeting in Cairo, Mustafa Barghouti, General Secretary of the Palestinian National Initiative (PNI), [expressed](#) his deep regret that no agreement had been reached to amend the election statute (specifically, lowering the age of candidacy, raising the percentage of representation in the Legislative Council elections for women, and

reducing the fees for participation in the elections). Agreement was blocked, he explained, under the pretext that it is not permissible to introduce amendments after the issuance of a law, “even though, on previous occasions, the law had, in fact, been amended even while the electoral process was taking place.”

The parties did [commit](#) “not to exercise any form of pressure, intimidation, treason, blasphemy, violence, or any form of blackmail against any of the candidates or voters.”

Neither Fatah in the West Bank nor Hamas in Gaza has a popular mandate and both parties are maintaining their limited rule over these two occupied Palestinian territories through authoritarianism and corruption.

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Featured image: Left: Dr. Nasser al-Qidwa, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Yasser Arafat Foundation; Right: Hani Almasri, General Manager of [Masarat Center—](#)

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