

After Mahmoud Abbas: Who Does Israel Want to Lead the Palestinians?

Analysts explain who the Israeli government wants to succeed the 81-year-old president of the Palestinian Authority

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The Fatah movement launched its seventh general congress this week, amid heated speculation about the future of its leader, Mahmoud Abbas. He also heads the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinians' effective government-in-waiting in the occupied territories.

Among those watching closely as events unfold over the next few days in Ramallah is the leadership of Israel. The congress – the first since 2009 – will determine the make up of Fatah's main representative bodies and may offer clues as to whom is best placed to succeed the 81-year-old Abbas.

There has been speculation that the Palestinian leader may appoint a deputy, in an effort to encourage a peaceful transition of power.

On Sunday, two days before the congress opened, the head of Israeli military intelligence warned that Abbas' grip on power was weakening and that Israel must prepare for instability and violence during the coming year as successors jostled for position.

According to leaks from a closed forum at Tel Aviv University, Herzl Halevi [said](#): "There will be many factors that undermine Abu Mazen's [Abbas'] leadership, and Hamas wants to make gains." He added that Israel would face "a very challenging reality" in the West Bank during 2017.

The run-up to the congress will have done nothing to allay such fears. The meeting of senior Fatah officials took place only after Abbas largely restricted the 1,400 delegates to his own loyalists.

He barred from attending most of those suspected of supporting his chief rival from within Fatah, Mohammed Dahlan, who is currently living in exile in the United Arab Emirates. In recent weeks, Dahlan supporters have faced a wave of repression, including arrests, expulsions from Fatah and blocked salaries.

Opinion polls have consistently [shown](#) that roughly two-thirds of Palestinians in the occupied territories want Abbas to resign.

Fear of Hamas

But if Abbas is on the way out, what will the West Bank look like the day after he is gone – and which successor will best serve Israel's interests?

Menachem Klein, a politics professor from Bar Ilan University, near Tel Aviv, said that the Israeli leadership only started seriously pondering such questions during the past few months, prompted by [warnings](#) in February from government minister Zeev Elkin of the PA's possible collapse.

Several scenarios could unfold. There may be an orderly transition of power overseen by Abbas; an effective coup organised by Dahlan; the takeover of the West Bank by Hamas; or a drawn-out civil war with no contender able to secure the throne.

The worst-case scenario for Israel, according to analysts contacted by Middle East Eye, is that Hamas seizes power in the West Bank, extending its rule from Gaza. That would bring the two Palestinian territories – separated since Hamas' victory in the 2006 elections – under a unified government.

It could also end the Palestinians' security cooperation with Israel and expose dozens of Jewish settlements, built in violation of international law, to greater threat of attack.

Efraim Inbar, director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, also at Bar Ilan University, said an Israeli army team had been recently established specifically to address this possibility.

"It is in Israel's clear interest to suppress Hamas and arrest its operatives if they look like they can gain the upper hand," he said. "Hamas means terror – any other option is less dangerous for Israel."

Pressure to reoccupy

Yossi Alpher, an adviser to Ehud Barak during his premiership in the late 1990s, said most of the Israeli leadership preferred that Israel not get directly involved in influencing the succession battle. "Experience teaches Israel that it should not interfere in the political affairs of others – if we do, it is almost certain to blow up in our face," he said.

But as well as the danger posed by Hamas, it was also impossible for Israel to ignore the threat to the settlements from a civil war between armed factions in the West Bank. "If there is chaos, there is a huge potential for us to get dragged in, even against our better judgment."

If no clear successor emerges, according to Shlomo Brom, a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, the Israeli army would in the short term have to reoccupy the West Bank's cities.

"That would return us to the situation before the Oslo accords, and no one in Israel wants that. The costs are too high in terms of money, manpower and diplomacy," he said.

Instead, most in the Israeli army and security services prefer a smooth transfer of power by Abbas to ensure that security cooperation with Israel continues. In the past Abbas has called such coordination "sacred".

The favoured candidate with the Israeli army, according to Klein, is Majid Faraj, the current head of the Palestinian security forces. However, he may struggle to unite Fatah behind him or gain popular legitimacy. He upset many Palestinians earlier this year by [boasting](#) of his

security services' success in foiling attacks on Israel.

"Someone like Faraj is not so strong that he can defy Israel or launch a new intifada," said Klein. "Instead he offers more of the same, and that will allow Israel to keep expanding the settlements."

Marwan Barghouti, a popular Fatah leader who is serving multiple life sentences in an Israeli jail, is strongly opposed because he is seen as ready to confront Israel and demand Palestinian statehood, Klein added.

Jibril Rajoub, a former security chief in the West Bank, has also lost support in Israel, especially for his [recent campaign](#) as head of the Palestinian football association to bar from FIFA Israeli clubs based in the settlements.

Knight in shining armour

A further difficulty, observed Klein, was that any heir to Abbas would need to gain a popular mandate and submit to elections – and that would put him on a "collision course" with Israel.

"Israel doesn't want Palestinians conducting elections or anything that provides the impression of statehood and the trappings of sovereignty," he said. "Elections would also renew international interest in the Palestinian issue."

For that reason, there are suspicions that some in the government, including possibly defence minister Avigdor Lieberman, may seek to undermine Abbas or his successor in favour of a strongman like Dahlan, the PA's former security chief in Gaza.

Alpher noted that the pair [met secretly](#) two years ago, and that both are believed to have had business dealings in a [failed casino](#) built in the West Bank city of Jericho.

Brom said Lieberman liked Dahlan "because he is seen as willing to collaborate. But support for him has to be covert. If we are seen to embrace anyone, it is the kiss of death."

According to Alpher, Dahlan may also benefit from the fact that he has the backing of what has come to be known as the Arab Quartet: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

"If there is anarchy in the West Bank, Dahlan may be able to ride in like a knight in shining armour on his horse with the Arab Quartet's support," he said.

Klein, however, said there were also suspicions on the right about Dahlan's reliability. "He will be more dependent on Egypt, the Gulf and Jordan, who back and fund him, than on Israel," he said.

"Remember, he was once an Abbas loyalist, but later turned on him. If he is in power, he could crack down on Hamas or he could cooperate with it. Equally, he could cooperate with Israel, or confront it. He is considered unpredictable."

Chaos 'no bad thing'

If no one emerges triumphant, as most analysts expect, then civil war is inevitable.

Inbar said chaos and instability in the occupied territories might be no bad thing, and would echo developments in Syria, Yemen and Libya. This scenario is believed to be increasingly favoured by parts of the far-right, including settler leader Naftali Bennett, the education minister.

“Abbas cannot deliver on the two-state solution,” said Inbar. “Chaos can bring fresh thinking and allow a new paradigm to develop. It may not offer solutions but it will allow Israel in the meantime to manage things in a better way.”

Israel could then cultivate local “clients” in the West Bank.

Inbar said: “The Palestinian national movement failed to produce a clear national identity. The society is still dominated by families who take care of their own. Israel can exploit that.”

Klein said Bennett and others in prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party liked this scenario because it would get rid of the Palestinian Authority. In its place, Israel could establish regional authorities – funded by Europe and the US – in the third of the West Bank currently under Abbas’ formal control.

“These authorities would manage Palestinian affairs locally, while Israel concentrated on annexing most of the West Bank,” he said. “The problem of Palestinian statehood would dissolve.”

In that vein, he noted that government ministers like Tzipi Hotovely were [currently lobbying](#) for the annexation of Maaleh Adumim, a large settlement close to Jerusalem.

Klein believed Netanyahu might privately support this option too, but could not be seen to publicly back it.

All the analysts concluded that, whatever scenario emerges after Abbas leaves the stage, reviving the peace process will not be on the agenda.

“The two sides are too far apart on the issues of the Temple Mount [sovereignty over the al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem] and the return of refugees,” said Alpher. “Israel’s best hope at the moment is for nothing more than a peaceful transition.”

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