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Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Bartosz Wiśniewski • Rafał Tarnogórski

Anna Maria Dyner • Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal  
Justyna Szczudlik • Jolanta Szymańska • Marcin Terlikowski • Tomasz Żornaczuk

## After Abbas: Implications of the Palestinian Authority Succession

**Michał Wojnarowicz**

*President Mahmoud Abbas's position is weakening, which opens the perspective for his succession as leader of the Palestinian Authority (PA). A change will create a chance to break the political stagnation in the Palestinian Territories. The priority of the new authorities will be the consolidation of internal support to reduce the likelihood of a change in the Palestinian position in the conflict with Israel. This scenario could generate tensions in relations with external partners, whose support is crucial for the PA's stability.*

Mahmoud Abbas has been PA president since 2005. He is also the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO, the formal, international representation of Palestinians) and Fatah, the main Palestinian party controlling the PLO. Abbas extended his presidential mandate when faced with the impossibility of holding a nationwide election. Since 2006, the conflict between Fatah and Hamas has resulted in a political split of the Palestinian Territories: Fatah controls the West Bank and Hamas the Gaza Strip.

The debate on Abbas's successor has intensified in recent months. The 83-year-old leader was hospitalised several times in 2018. According to opinion polls, two-thirds of the Palestinian public demands he resigns. His position is also weakened by the lack of progress in strengthening Palestinian statehood and the [ongoing conflicts with Hamas and the U.S.](#)

**Process and Contenders.** Palestinian legislation stipulates that in case of a vacancy or the impossibility of continuing in office, the chairperson of the PA parliament assumes the presidential duties for 60 days. Elections should take place during this transition period. Today, the chairman is Aziz Duwaik, who is aligned with Hamas, it means that the succession process according to the Palestinian legal order would result in Fatah's loss of control of PA. Without a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation, though, this scenario remains unlikely.

Abbas's preferred solution is to use the PLO in succession process, similar to how he extended his presidency. Although PLO structures are dominated by Fatah—and boycotted by Hamas—it provides a certain degree of legitimacy as the formal representation of all Palestinians. The possibility of this scenario is indicated by actions in the PLO parliamentary assembly in April. The decisions made then strengthened Abbas's supporters in the PLO's executive bodies most likely to formally approve his successor. The most realistic variant of the succession process would be the transfer of power within the political elite of the PA. If Abbas does not indicate a particular person, it will be difficult to determine a clear-cut favourite. There is the possibility that the highest positions will be distributed among the strongest contenders to satisfy the interests of the various parties. The outbreak of riots cannot be ruled out in the absence of an agreement between the factions.

Among the strongest candidates are the leaders of Fatah, Mahmoud al-Aloul (Abbas's deputy as party vice-chairman) and Jibril Rajoub, Fatah's Secretary-General. With control over the Palestinian security forces, Majid Faraj, the head of intelligence who is trusted by Abbas, Israel, and the U.S., is another significant

contender. Others from Fatah include Saeb Erekat (chief negotiator in the peace process), Nabil Abu Rudeina (Abbas spokesman and PA deputy prime minister), and Nasser al-Kidwa (diplomat and nephew of Yasser Arafat). Candidates from outside the Fatah elite include technocrats such as PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and his predecessor, Salam Fayyad, as well as former party leader Marwan Barghouti, who enjoys the greatest support in the polls but because of a life sentence to an Israeli prison, he is not a realistic candidate. Another contender (acting from abroad) is Muhammad Dahlan, the former head of the security forces in the Gaza Strip and an Abbas rival. He has the support of countries from the region (in particular, Egypt and the UAE) and is actively working towards reconciliation with Hamas.

**Internal Implications.** The priority for the new leadership will be to achieve the widest possible legitimacy, especially since the majority of the candidates (apart from Barghouti) do not enjoy mass popularity amongst the Palestinians. Therefore, during the PA's leadership consolidation, its current political line in the conflict with Israel will be maintained, although the potential successors present various concepts of the independence strategy. A conciliatory approach could threaten the stability of the new authorities, especially with the scale of public opposition on such matters as security cooperation with Israel. The future PA leadership is unlikely to break relations, but an intensification of diplomatic and protest actions aimed at Israel is certain, as are Palestinian's continuous demands concerning Jerusalem and other issues.

Abbas's resignation could introduce a new dynamic to the reconciliation process between Fatah and Hamas, such as the end of PA sanctions on the Gaza Strip. An agreement between the factions would allow presidential and parliamentary elections to authenticate the new leadership in the eyes of the public. However, Fatah will not allow Hamas to increase its power without concessions, such as giving up control over the Gaza Strip and disarmament. If Hamas does not deradicalise and is successful in the elections, that situation could lead to a repeat of the 2006 events and re-imposition of sanctions. At the same time, the exclusion of Hamas from the political process means permanence in the political split in the Palestinian Territories.

In a different scenario, Fatah, despite conducting any election (polls show 36% support for Fatah, 27% for Hamas), the fear of losing its dominant political position might spur it to decide not to renew its mandate through elections and continue with an undemocratic style of government. That scenario would mean protests in the West Bank, which could destabilise the PA.

**International Aspects.** In addition to internal stability, the key for Abbas's successors will be obtaining international support, in particular from countries in the region (e.g., Egypt, Saudi Arabia). Although they provide the PA with political and financial support, they can simultaneously push for candidates they prefer (e.g., Dahlan) and specific policies. The broader context for regional relations will be determined by the U.S. attitude. The Trump administration will make support for the new government and restoration of financial assistance dependent on PA cooperation under the peace plan. For Israel, the stability of the West Bank remains a priority. Hence, the preferred successors are those responsible for security (Majid Faraj) and economic cooperation (Rami Hamdallah). However, Israel's explicit support for any potential successor would be used politically by his competitors and would therefore be ineffective. The extreme scenario—an escalation of violence and destabilisation of the PA—will force Israel to tighten security measures in the West Bank or conduct other unilateral actions.

**Conclusions.** The departure of Mahmoud Abbas may trigger deep political changes in the PA, including democratisation. The challenge for the new authorities will be to maintain internal stability since succession will become an opportunity for the Palestinians to express their frustration with the ineffective political system, corruption, and lack of prospects for independence. At the same time, pressure from the U.S. will intensify, as a change in leadership means a chance to break the deadlock in the peace process. The new authorities might be forced to balance maintaining internal support and external pressure, especially since U.S. actions could be supported by some countries in the region

It is in the EU's interest to ensure the widest possible range of democratisation and stability in the PA. However, the EU position must also consider that a succession process consistent with the letter of the law is impossible without an agreement between Fatah and Hamas. A possible strategy for the EU is conditional support for the transfer of power planned by Abbas, if it is consensual and would result in the restoration of democratic mechanisms in the PA political system. Ultimately, only Palestinian political forces that accept the principles of peaceful coexistence—recognition of Israel, respect for previous agreements, and renunciation of violence—should participate in the electoral process. Renewing the social mandate of the Palestinian authorities will strengthen their position in the negotiations with Israel without losing credibility with the public.