



PERSPECTIVES

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Now It's the Turn of the Palestinian Voter

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The decree signed on January 15 by Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas announcing elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council on May 22 and to the PA presidency on July 31 is an attempt to remind the international community, and especially the new US administration, of the continued relevance of the Palestinian problem.

The last time presidential elections were held in the Palestinian Authority (PA) was in 2005, when Mahmoud Abbas was elected. A year later, elections were held for the Palestinian Legislative Council, with Hamas winning by a large majority. Elections for both institutions were supposed to recur in 2010, but they were deferred again and again by Fatah until Abbas issued his recent presidential decree.

The decree announces that elections will be held on May 22 for the Palestinian Legislative Council and on July 31 for the presidency of the PA. It reflects an agreement reached by Hamas and Fatah on September 24, 2020 that was aimed at enabling a national rapprochement between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and possibly a Hamas takeover of the PLO and all PA institutions. Unless the two organizations cooperate, there will be no way to hold the elections on time, or possibly at all.

If Hamas wins the election, it will take a tougher line against Israel, which will include continuing the "armed struggle" (i.e., terror attacks). Fearing an Israeli attempt to disrupt the electoral process and eager to appeal to the Biden administration, Hamas has launched diplomatic talks with several international actors to ensure international support for the process. Those contacts will grow more numerous as the elections approach.

On January 22, 2021, a meeting was held between Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas's political bureau, and Nikolai Mladenov, special UN envoy to the Middle East. At its

conclusion, Hamas declared that it “sees the upcoming elections as a preview for the building of the Palestinian home, the end of the rift as a joint plan of action is formulated, the defense of the national project as it contends with many challenges, and the reincorporation of the ‘outside’ [the Palestinian diaspora] into the key institutions.” Hamas wants greater inclusion of its supporters in the PA’s and the PLO’s government institutions so as to reflect its growing power.

Recent surveys of Palestinian society show that 62% of the respondents think the two-state vision is no longer achievable and 87% believe Israel has not abandoned the aim of annexing 30% of the territory as proposed in the Trump plan. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, 48% of the respondents said they favor renewing the “intifada.” More than two-thirds said Abbas should resign in light of the PA’s resumed security coordination with Israel. More than 70% support holding elections for the Legislative Council and the PA presidency as soon as possible.

Although Hamas has yet to present a candidate, it can reasonably be assumed that it will be Haniyeh, head of the Hamas political bureau and of the Hamas government from 2007 to 2014. An analysis of all Palestinian surveys over the past year indicates that in any contest between Haniyeh and Abbas, Haniyeh wins by at least 8%. The only Fatah figure who could defeat a Hamas representative in democratic elections for the PA presidency is Marwan Barghouti, the former head of the Fatah Tanzim who is serving several life sentences in an Israeli prison. In the Legislative Council elections as well, it appears that despite a slight lead for Fatah, Hamas, together with the other terror organizations comprising the PLO, would win most of the seats.

The issue of whether or not the Arabs of East Jerusalem will be eligible to vote, which is still a matter of dispute between Israel and the PA, will not provide a pretext to cancel the elections. According to Hanna Nasser, head of the committee for the 2021 elections, coronavirus-era Palestinians are prepared for mail-in voting. East Jerusalem Arabs with Israeli residency may be able to vote in booths located in the outskirts of the city.

For a number of reasons, the elections are perceived as a legitimate way out of the current crisis—one that can restore the lost legitimacy of the Palestinian government and afford it greater room to maneuver, perhaps even enabling a united front against Israel. Those reasons include the ascent of a Democratic administration to the White House; domestic political pressures on Abbas to resign; distrust of political institutions, which keeps many young Palestinians out of the political arena; medical and economic crises wrought by COVID-19; and distrust of the Palestinian leadership, primarily because of the renewed security coordination with Israel. The basic idea is that if Hamas is prominently incorporated into PA institutions as a consequence of democratic elections, Israel will have to accept the results and find a way to deal with the elected leadership—particularly as pressure to do so will likely be exerted on Israel by the Biden administration and the European community.

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