



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Will Violence Erupt If Abbas Cancels the Palestinian Elections?

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,012, April 30, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Hamas and others are threatening violence if Mahmoud Abbas cancels the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council scheduled for May 22. However, Google Trends data on the declining popularity of both Hamas and Fatah suggest that an eruption of violence is unlikely.

At a recent meeting in Gaza, leaders of many of the 36 lists contesting the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council scheduled for May 22 warned Mahmoud Abbas, head of the Palestinian Authority, that violence is likely to erupt should he cancel the elections on the pretext of an Israeli refusal to allow them to be held in Jerusalem.

Fatah supporters will have to choose among three lists: an official Fatah slate loyal to Abbas; an opposing list headed by Fatah renegade Muhammad Dahlan from Gaza, who resides in and is supported by the UAE; and a list formed by Nasser al-Qidwa, the son-in-law of Yasser Arafat, but headed (at least nominally) by Marwan Barghouti, the former leader of the Fatah Tanzim who has been jailed since 2002 for his involvement in the murders of Israelis. Hamas is united behind one list: Jerusalem Our Rendezvous.

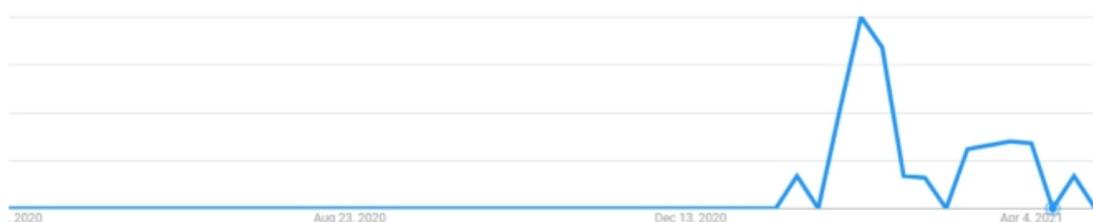
Abbas is well aware that these same divisions (not including the internal Fatah violence at the time) led to an overwhelming victory for Hamas in the 2006 elections and culminated in the loss of Gaza to that group in the summer of 2007. If he allows the upcoming elections to proceed, history is likely to repeat itself.

Abbas thus seems trapped between a rock and a hard place—damned if he cancels the elections and damned if he doesn't. But if he does, would he really face the possibility of an internal intifada?

Judging from data generated by Google Trends based on search terms related to the elections, such an intifada does not appear to be likely.

We began by typing in the phrase “Palestinian elections 2021” in Arabic. The results reveal initial excitement followed by fast-declining interest, probably because Palestinians understand that given the inimical relations between the two biggest factions, Fatah and Hamas, and the respective governments they control, the election process, rather than healing the rift, will likely exacerbate it (see Figure 1).

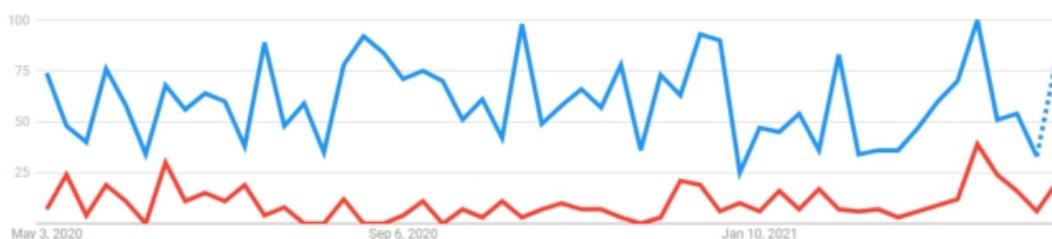
Figure 1: Searches for “Palestinian Elections 2021” in Arabic in the past year (Google Trends)



In fact, there was so little interest that the searches did not generate sufficient data to provide a geographical breakdown, which would have enabled a comparison between the PA and Gaza or between the northern West Bank (Nablus-Jenin-Tulkarem), where Fatah is presumably stronger, and Hebron in the south.

Nor did the election process generate increased interest among the two most important protagonists, Fatah and Hamas. The search curves generated were much the same before the issue of elections to the Legislative Council arose as they were in the far briefer period after which the elections were announced (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Comparison between searches for Fatah (blue) and Hamas (red), May 3, 2020-April 28, 2021 (Google Trends)

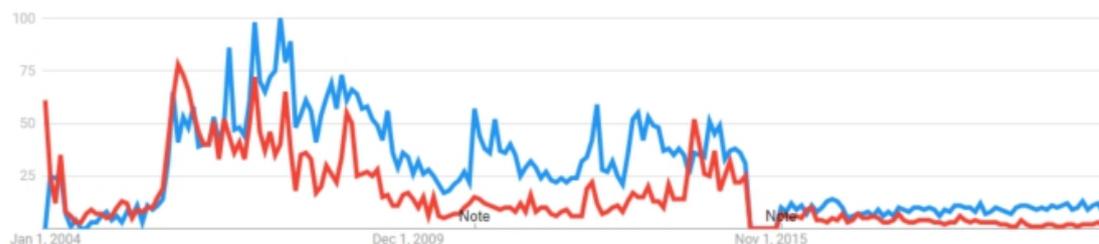


At first glance, it appears that divisions in Fatah did not affect the relative importance of, and likely identification with, the organization over Hamas and that Fatah would likely prevail in the elections.

But such an analysis disregards the fact that half the seats to the Legislative Council are contested in multi-member districts in which those who secure the most votes win. Thus, if a district is represented by four members, the four candidates who secured the most votes in the district become its representatives. As there are over seven candidates contesting each seat, small differences can mean victory or defeat. Hamas supporters in a given district will overwhelmingly support their candidates in that district compared to the divided Fatah constituency, leading, as it did in 2006, to an overwhelming Hamas victory.

Even if Fatah were to prevail over Hamas in the elections, it could be severely weakened compared to the other lists. Comparing searches for Fatah and Hamas since 2004 reveals a steep decline of interest in both factions since 2015, probably stemming from fatigue with the warring parties' failure to come to some kind of political arrangement that would end the rift (*inqisam*).

Figure 3: Comparison of searches for Fatah (blue) and Hamas (red) since 2004 (Google Trends)



There is no doubt that Hamas will do everything in its power to agitate for an intifada in Abbas-held territory if the decision is made to call off the elections. Abbas continues to arrest and harass Hamas leaders and supporters, Israel-PA security coordination has been fully restored, and promises made by Abbas to reemploy or compensate employees—purportedly Hamas supporters—who joined government service before Hamas took control of Gaza have not been met.

Yet while the antipathy of Hamas toward Abbas is at its highest, it lacks the credibility and resources to ignite an intifada in the area he controls. The recent surge in COVID-19 in Gaza and its relative decline in the PA has damaged the credibility Hamas enjoyed before it began ruling territory, and security coordination between Israel and the PA has heavily dented Hamas's ability to mobilize Palestinians in Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah, and Hebron.

Abbas, then, would do himself a favor by canceling the elections. Secretly, Hamas probably agrees with Abbas, given the declining support for Hamas over recent years.

Fortunately for both, there is always Israel to blame for the failure of both the Palestinians' democratic experiment over a quarter of a century and their century-long national movement.

Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.