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Study



Forecasting the Post-Abbas Palestinian Authority Future

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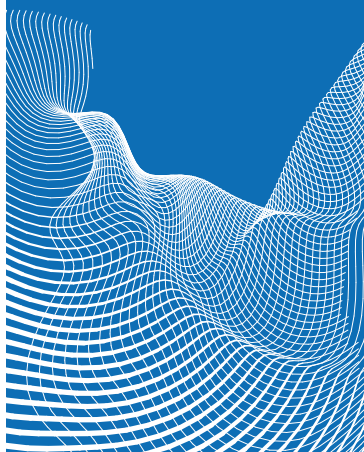
Introduction

Undoubtedly, the future of the Palestinian Authority after President Mahmoud Abbas is fraught with many uncertainties: especially in light of the sensitivity of the current Palestinian situation as Mahmoud Abbas is aging and his health declining. That is in addition to the weak Authority's institutions due to the concentration of all powers in the hands of the President and due to the absence of a legislative authority, as well as the internal divisions either among the Palestinian factions or at the level of Fatah movement.

In fact, it is undeniable that this issue does not concern the Palestinians alone, but rather receives regional and international attention; because the existence of the Palestinian Authority resulted in many political and economic projects not only in the Arab region but also in the whole world. However; despite of its failure as a lasting peace project between Israelis and Palestinians, it achieved a certain amount of relative calm. Therefore, the absence of President Mahmoud Abbas for any reason, without the presence of a substitute Palestinian figure to assume these powers, can leave the future of the Palestinian Authority in a state of uncertainty; because it is still unclear how things would be on the first day after Mahmoud Abbas' departure, or the way the Palestinians will be guided in order to hand over power to another person, as all these matters are not constitutionally defined; instead, it is bound by the balances of that era.

This study will attempt to resolve such a complicated puzzle through building and forecasting multiple scenarios, given that the crisis of the successor of Mahmoud Abbas has not yet occurred, but is still in the process of possibilities. Therefore, the approach of building scenarios is one of the most important methods followed to set up future perspectives that can help imagine a possible future situation, based on the status quo indicators, with clarifications on the results of those expected scenarios.

In order to analyze the phenomenon of the Palestinian Authority's vacuum after Mahmoud Abbas depending on the strategy of scenario building, four stages of the scenario were defined, starting with identifying the possible phenomenon represented in the vacuum of the Palestinian Authority after Mahmoud Abbas, the causes that lead to such a situation, collecting data related to that issue, and accurately observing the contexts of its development in order to conclude the consequences thereof.





First: How could the president, in accordance with the regulations of the Palestinian Authority be selected?

After the signing the Oslo II Accord in 1993, the leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) arrived in the Palestinian territories as an interim self-governing authority in 1994, provided that under negotiations with Israel, the Accord had to move from a mere declaration of principles to a permanent agreement or a final treaty in 1999, but Oslo's -5year validity ended, and after more than a quarter of a century, the two sides of the conflict have not reached any significant progress.¹

For its part, the Palestinian Authority coexisted with the status quo, and in 1996 it held the first presidential and legislative elections, and launched the process of drafting a constitution or a basic law regulating the work of its emerging institutions.

In this regard, in 2003, the first comprehensive constitutional document was approved by the elected Legislative Council in 1996, where some provisions of this document were amended and it was also approved in 2005. Article 36 of the amended constitution in 2005 specified the term of the presidency of the Palestinian Authority at four years, provided that the president has the right to run for a second presidential term, and is not entitled to hold the presidency of the Palestinian Authority for more than two consecutive periods.²

However, while the relationship between the Palestinian Authority and Israel was deteriorating and reaching a dead end in 2000 due to the failure of final-status negotiations or "Camp David II", and because of the outbreak of a second Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Authority's security institutions were subjected to great destruction due to the Israeli attacks,

(1) Terje Roed-Larsen, price for Oslo . 2013: <https://bit.ly/3sXecgv>

(2) Basic Law of the year 2005/8/13 .2005: <https://bit.ly/3gJTiMW>



which deliberately weakened them, turning the rounds of negotiations and the diplomatic efforts into an open confrontation between Israeli governments and Yasser Arafat, who had been always accused by Israelis of being behind the Palestinian attacks. Also, the two incidents of the Karine A vessel in the summer of 2001 and the bombing of the “Park Hotel” in Eilat in March 2002 seriously ended negotiations between Israel and Yasser Arafat, who was trapped in his Ramallah headquarters until he died in mysterious circumstances at the end of 2004.³

Meanwhile, Israel and the US administration did not allow the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, because Mahmoud Abbas was a good choice, despite his disagreement with Yasser Arafat and despite he was excluded from the Palestinian Authority at that time. However, the constitutional amendments that were made to the Palestinian Authority’s constitution in 2003 due to external pressures were aimed at preventing President Arafat from taking political decisions and bringing in a government with wide powers headed by Mahmoud Abbas in 2003, however, the dispute between Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas had remained unresolved, and Arafat called Mahmoud Abbas "Palestine Karzai", who was also dismissed from Fatah, so his government only lasted a few months.⁴

In fact, the absence of Yasser Arafat from the Palestinian political scene caused an extreme shock to the movement of Fatah and put it in hard conditions because the position of the presidency in the PLO, which began in 1964, was never vacant, where Yasser Arafat held it throughout that period of time. Moreover, the weakness of the Oslo project and the emergence of local actors in the Palestinian arena, not from the PLO, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, made the leadership of Fatah in a hurry to assign new president. They looked for a person, who headed the Palestinian Authority, the Liberation Organization as well the Fatah movement and could be accepted regionally and internationally.

(3) Anas Abu Arqoub, Israel reveals the secret of the Karene A ship, Palestine Ultra,2017/10/2: <https://bit.ly/3jqCFHS>

(4) Michal Bar Zohar and Nissim Mishaal, Focused Assassination (Shin Bet - Major Operations), Translated by Al Hodhud 2021, p. 15.



Here, the statements of a member of the Central Committee of the movement “Azzam al-Ahmad” cannot be ignored on April 2021 ,28, in which he said: “Were it not for the death of the late president Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian Authority would not have held presidential and legislative elections in 2005 and 2006.” This explains why Mahmoud Abbas cancelled the legislative and presidential elections in early May 2021.

On the other hand, Israel played a key role in making some arrangements in the Palestinian political scene before the 2005 presidential election, as it managed to keep Marwan Barghouti away from the political scene in the West Bank as Israel accused him of leading the armed operations against it in 2002, which made Mahmoud Abbas the most prominent figure after Yasser Arafat, especially since the former is considered -historically - the most prominent leader in Fatah who supported the idea of launching negotiations with Israel, as he is called the architect of the Oslo Accords, and this in fact makes him the preferred individual as for both US and Israel and he also becomes the most appropriate man at the level of the bureaucratic apparatus that the Palestinian Authority has built since its arrival in the Palestinian territories. Of course, the leading figures of Fatah those returned to Palestine have the greatest influence within the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, Fatah Movement and the Liberation Organization, and most of those who were surrounding Yasser Arafat and right now are surrounding Mahmoud Abbas and have leading roles in the leadership of Fatah are from persons who returned to Palestine under the Oslo Accords.⁵

Furthermore, if the Palestinian Authority President's post being vacant due to the death of Yasser Arafat represented a serious crisis that needed a consensual approach to be approved by the leadership of Fatah movement and regional and international actors, then the Constitution of the Palestinian Authority of 2002 and the amendments thereto in 2005 ⁶ gave the Speaker of the Legislative Council the power to act as president of the Palestinian Authority for a period of 60 days, followed by general presidential election,

(5) Khairallah Khairallah, Where is the new generation in Fatah? Middle East Online, 2021/5/2: <https://bit.ly/3zv0NhS>

(6) Rawhi Fattouh takes the legal oath as president of the Palestinian National Authority during the transitional period, Wafa Agency, 2004/11/11: <https://bit.ly/3Bp1hqG>



which took place when the Fatah leader and Speaker of the Legislative Council at the time, Rawhi Fattouh, took the position of the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, followed by the election of Mahmoud Abbas as President of the Palestinian Authority by %63, beating the most prominent competitor, Mustafa Barghouti, who achieved %19.18 in 2005. This, in fact, prompted the movement of Fatah to hold legislative elections, especially since Mahmoud Abbas had announced that he would work hard for getting rid of corruption and transforming the Palestinian Authority into an entity based on institutions, in addition to the external pressures exerted on him to conduct legislative elections.⁷

With Hamas gaining 74 seats out of 132 and after it had almost semi control over the Palestinian Legislative Council in January 2006, Hamas MP Aziz Dweik became Speaker of the Legislative Council, followed by Ahmed Baher due to the conditions of detention that Dweik was subjected to.

This reality created a legal crisis for the Fatah movement because the presidency of the Palestinian Authority in the event of the death of Mahmoud Abbas could be taken by Hamas, which prompted the constitutionally outgoing President Mahmoud Abbas in 2009 to dissolve the Legislative Council at the end of 2018, which plunged the Palestinian Authority into a crisis of having no president if Abbas was subjected to any harm. After all, that is why the European Union, the main funder of the Palestinian Authority and regional powers put pressure on the President of the Authority and request to hold elections and renew the legitimacy of the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, the first of which is the Legislative Council, because Abbas's sudden end will inevitably complicate the entire Palestinian political scene.

In this context, Article 37 of the Basic Law states that “the position of the President of the Palestinian Authority is considered vacant in the event of death, resignation, or loss of legal capacity for the President.” Here, the President of the Legislative Council assumes the presidency.

(7) Nathan J. Brown, Palestinian Presidential Elections, Carnegie Endowment, July 2008, p. 5.

However, the absence of a Legislative Council in the current situation makes Abbas is required to appoint a deputy for him, especially since his cancellation of the elections makes the presence of a deputy for him almost the only solution to manage the transitional phase that will begin on the first day of the presidency position of the Palestinian Authority with no president. ⁸ That is why reports have been leaked recently about an American, European, and regional request from the President of the Palestinian Authority that he should appoint a deputy for him, for fear of a sudden vacuum.



President Abbas issues a presidential decree that sets the dates for holding parliamentary elections - Al Jazeera Center for Studies

(8) Ahmed Abu Zuhri, Abbas is out of the game soon, Palestine Online, 2021/17/7:<https://bit.ly/3gDQe4M>



Second: The dimensions of succeeding Abbas

A few years before the Palestinian political disunity occurred, and during the last years of former President Yasser Arafat; regional and international pressures made great impacts, both at the legislative authority level, and on shaping up the political system. However, the extensive powers, that the late president had, were curtailed by the constitutional amendments that made the Palestinian Authority's political system move towards a pluralistic parliamentary democratic system based on the separation of powers. On such bases, Mahmoud Abbas reached the presidency in 2005, as well as Hamas, which won the majority of votes at the level of Legislative Council in 2006.

That major transformation, which changed the shape of the Palestinian system, did not last long; because the split between Hamas and Fatah in 2007 made Mahmoud Abbas return to the presidential system with full powers, bypassing the articles and provisions of the constitution; as laws and regulations of dissolving the Legislative Council, the elections law, the law of NGOs and others are now issued by the head of the authority without taking into account the legal texts, nor the legislative or judicial institutions; simply, because, all the powers are centred in the hands of the president without any legal bases.⁹

Actually, Mahmoud Abbas has capitalized on the Palestinian disunity, bypassing Article 7 of the Basic Law, which obliges him to issue an election decree three months before the end of his term. Since 2009, the Palestinian political system has entered a new phase overshadowed by the events of the political division; and the implementation of laws has become contingent on any political consensus between Fatah and Hamas.

(9) Mervat Sadiq, The disruption of the Palestinian elections raises fears about the vacuum of the presidency, Al Jazeera Net, 2021/5/3:<https://bit.ly/3DkGFkW>

Therefore, the blurry image of the Palestinian Authority regime has opened the way for many expectations for the future presidency of the Authority. Perhaps the first reports issued in this regard were in January 2010, because they were linked to the return of Fatah leader Abu Maher Ghoneim, who left Tunisia to return to Ramallah.

In the period of Ghoneim's return, and few months on, some expected that he could be a reasonable alternative that might replace Mahmoud Abbas; but the latter quickly dispelled those expectations and removed Ghoneim from the Fatah decision-making circle. The few months before Ghoneim's return had witnessed a conflict between Mahmoud Abbas and Muhammad Dahlan; as the latter was pushing other leaders such as Nasser Al-Kidwa and Salam Fayyad to clash with Mahmoud Abbas, trying to convince them that they deserve to have the Palestinian Authority's presidential post more than Abbas.¹⁰

When the Dahlan-Abbas conflict came out to the open, a committee, headed by Abu Maher Ghoneim, was formed within the Fatah movement to interrogate Muhammad Dahlan; who had become a potential opponent of the latter.

As such, Mahmoud Abbas succeeded in creating a conflict between Ghoneim and Dahlan, to be able either to remove the two men or get rid of them; because the former was removed from the decision-making circle; and it was said that Abbas deliberately insulted or ridiculed him in many occasions during Fatah meetings, while the latter left Ramallah and ran away.

However, when Fatah and Hamas movements reached political understandings and agreed on forming a national unity government in 2014 headed by the independent President of An-Najah National University, Rami Hamdallah, the constitution of the Palestinian Authority was ignored by the two factions. With that, the government of Hamdallah did not enjoy constitutional legitimacy, nor did it get the confidence of the legislative authority.

(10) 3 cases that triggered a dispute with Abbas Dahlan, Al Jazeera Net, 2010/21/11:
<https://bit.ly/3mEpJjD>

and here Hamas may have helped Mahmoud Abbas to be the only one single man who can make decisions in terms of the Palestinian political affairs either unintentionally, or as a step on the road to ending the disunity state.¹¹

In the meantime, there was talk about Abbas' succession again, and the latter reinforced what was being reported in the local media outlets on this issue, because he was confirming that he had no intention to run again for the position of the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, but in general the issue of Abbas' succession was not raised within Fatah frameworks, and Fatah leaders often made statements denying or responding to the reports that expected or referred to some names of figures who might come after Abbas.

But Abu Mazen, however, remained a single candidate at the level of the central committee of the Fatah movement, or at least the leadership of Fatah, surrounding Abbas did not have the courage to say otherwise, and this was indicated by the current Prime Minister, Muhammad Shtayyeh, in January 2021, when he denied the existence of rival candidates to Abbas within the movement.

Once again, during the 2016 Al-Aqsa Intifada, Abbas's succession came back to light, especially since internal reconciliation had reached a dead end, and the position of the Palestinian Authority appeared weaker on the security level related to the confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem, as well as on the political level, especially that the last months of the former US Democratic President, Barack Obama had witnessed an American move that led to the secret summit of the city of Aqaba, which brought together King Abdullah II of Jordan, former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and US Secretary of State John Kerry, with the exception of Mahmoud Abbas, as plans or ideas for the future were presented at the time about Israel's relationship with the Palestinian Authority.¹²

(5) Hamas and Fatah agree on Hamdallah's leadership of the government, Arabi 2014/5/27 ,21:

<https://bit.ly/3sUm5D8>

(6) Details of the secret summit of Aqaba, Al Jazeera Net, 20217/2/20:

<https://bit.ly/3yspvhN>



The exclusion of Mahmoud Abbas from the Aqaba summit imposed regional isolation, or was understood within the framework of regional and international efforts to replace him with another figure. Therefore, many figures were proposed, most notably the head of the Palestinian intelligence service, Majed Faraj, who is close to Israel and the American administration, Salam Fayyad, the former prime minister, and Muhammad Dahlan, who got regional moves at that time, he began to hold meetings in the resort of "Ain al-Sukhna" in the Egyptian city of Suez, in coordination with the Egyptian intelligence, which in turn coordinated hundreds of Palestinian intellectuals and activists who were invited from Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem and other places outside Palestine to attend workshops on the future of the Palestinian Authority.¹³

Immediately, Mahmoud Abbas realized the seriousness of the situation, and held elections at the level of the Fatah movement in its two revolutionary councils and the Central Committee, and leadership positions were distributed among the members of the Central Committee to avoid any splits or internal disagreements, especially since the supposed candidates for the presidency of the Authority in the future have become closer to Mahmoud Abbas. Who, in turn, appointed Mahmoud Al-Aloul as his deputy at the level of the Fatah movement.¹⁴

So, the attempt to make arrangements inside Fatah in 2017 did not work in diverting attention from the future of the Palestinian Authority's presidency, because the severe austerity decisions against Gaza in March of the same year, which came under pressure from Israel and Trump administration, which included the salaries of employees and forcing many of them to retire, and reducing the provisions of service ministries in the Gaza Strip, and tightening grip over civil societies, and then resolved the Legislative Council, all those decisions restored the internal conflict to the front, and pushed Fatah to be in an open confrontation with its members in Gaza.¹⁵

(13) About the Ain Sukhna Conference - Signs and Situations, Strategic Thinking Group, 2016/1/12:<https://bit.ly/3Dvqh0Y>

(14) The Central Committee of the Fatah Movement elects al-Aloul as a deputy head of the movement, Anadolu Agency, 2016/2/26:<https://bit.ly/3zmxCO5>.

(15) עמירה הס , משבר המשכורות בעזה: עבאס מסתכן בהרחבת הקרע בין הגדה לרצועה , הארץ . 2017/4/13. <https://bit.ly/2UUvbTQ>



Despite the decisions taken by the Palestinian Authority against Gaza under American pressure, the Trump administration moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and later announced the Deal of the Century, and the improvement of Hamas' relations with the Egyptian side was also one of the factors that prompted the leadership of the Palestinian Authority to resume dialogue with Hamas and other factions, starting with the secretaries-general meeting in Beirut in September 2020, then the Istanbul meeting, and ending with the Cairo meeting in January 2021.¹⁶

As a result of those meetings, Mahmoud Abbas announced the decree of the legislative and presidential elections and the National Council of the PLO, but this step quickly turned into a threat to the President of the Palestinian Authority, because he failed to reach an agreement with Hamas regarding the legislative elections, and also failed to deal with Fatah's leadership, so Fatah movement emerged with three electoral lists, not to mention lists of independents that emerged from the right and left of the movement. After all, the dispute between Mahmoud Abbas and Marwan Barghouti also reached the level of hostility, and while the latter enjoyed great acceptance within Fatah circles and the Palestinians in general, Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah electoral list did not succeed in exceeding %20 according to opinion polls at the time, which prompted Mahmoud Abbas to cancel Elections in May 2021 and a return to ground zero.¹⁷

Despite the cancellation of the elections, the position of President of the Palestinian Authority remained the main issue that the Palestinians concern much more, especially since Mahmoud Abbas is over the age of 85 and suffers from chronic diseases, and he is always transferred to hospitals in Jordan or Germany, so that each of Fatah, Israeli, regional and international actors increasingly fear about the future of the Authority as time goes by,

(16) Ibrahim Moqbel and others, The Impact of Sanctions Imposed by the Palestinian Authority on the Gaza Strip, in the book Strategic Thinking and Policy Preparation p. 2018 ,279, Masarat Centre for Strategic Studies and Research: <https://bit.ly/3Dm4klb>

(17) Abbas faces split in Fatah movement ahead of Palestinian elections, Reuters, 2021/7/3: <https://reut.rs/3BkPVUr>



because the potential vacuum situation after Abbas's departure prompts Israeli analysts to repeat the phrase that "Abbas is the last president of the Palestinian Authority" in reference to the possibility of its collapse after his absence.

Generally speaking, what reinforces this is that the leadership of the Palestinian Authority at a time of economic crises it is facing, or during the recent security events in the West Bank, or at the level of the decline in its relations with Israel, the idea of stepping down or even going to elections is not raised, instead, Mahmoud Abbas usually threatens to dissolve the Palestinian Authority and handing over its weapons to Israel. In this respect, he threatened, in 2012, to dissolve the authority; Hoping to persuade Israel to resume peace negotiations, and the same threat was used in 2020 in response to the Deal of the Century, and this is due to the absence of a member from Fatah that could receive Fatah, popular, Israeli, regional and international acceptance, as well as the failure of the Palestinian Authority project politically and its transformation into a burden on the Palestinian people. This burden was evident during the last Gaza war in 2021, because it has lost more popular sympathy, which reduces the legitimacy of its existence.



Third: The problems facing the issue of Abbas succession

There are many problems facing Abbas' succession at the internal and external levels, and they can be clarified as follows:

1. The severe divisions within Fatah

If the year 2005 witnessed the arrival of Mahmoud Abbas to the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, the presidential elections at that time needed an internal Fatah consensus on the personality of the leader of the movement and the Palestinian Authority as a whole, also it initially needed the Palestine Liberation Organization acceptance.

Therefore, considering the interactions inside Fatah at the time and comparing them with the current reality seems very different as reaching a understanding between Mahmoud Abbas and Muhammad Dahlan was moving towards rebuilding the Palestinian Authority on the security level in cooperation with the American intelligence services represented by Lt. Gen. Dayton, who began building a new security doctrine for the Palestinian Authority based on expanding security coordination between the Israeli side and the Palestinians with the aim of getting rid of the era of Yasser Arafat, and what it was caused by security incidents and as an attempt to integrate Hamas into the Palestinian Authority.

While Mahmoud Abbas was disposing of the weapons of the Palestinian factions in the West Bank, Muhammad Dahlan was confronting the Hamas movement in Gaza, so the two poles of the Fatah movement at the time, "Abbas and Dahlan", had had common interests.¹⁸

(18) lyad, s.s abujaber, The american way, Manchester: Comma press, 2021.



On the contrary, the internal Fatah rivalry between the different poles has exceeded the boundary of the division between different currents within one political movement, and if we are talking about three main currents that represent the Fatah movement now "Abbas - Dahlan - Barghouti," then the general Fatah movement represented by Mahmoud Abbas is witnessing internal conflicts that may exceed the level of conflict between the three aforementioned currents. In recent months, there has been a clear movement or unprecedented competition between the leading members of Fatah. Accordingly, Jibril Rajoub, who represents the southern West Bank, played an important role in rapprochement with Hamas, while the northern West Bank wing represented by Majid Faraj and Hussein al-Sheikh, who is the closest person to Mahmoud Abbas and the most influential figure in the Fatah decision-making circle, made the election move thwarted.

In contrast to Jibril Rajoub's move, the actions of the first security man, Majed Faraj, emerged at the regional and international levels with the aim of improving the political and economic position of the Palestinian Authority, as the recent security events that followed the cancellation of the elections revealed an unprecedented level of weakness and security and economic slackness of the Authority, and there is no doubt that the movement of the Fatah leadership comes in the context of presenting credentials to regional and international parties.¹⁹

On the other hand, and concerning the weight of the leaders of Fatah within the movement's circles, it is clear that the situation is not better because any observer of the security events resulting from the crackdown in the West Bank will notice Mahmoud Abbas' willingness to sacrifice the Fatah movement in exchange for continuing to lead the Authority, and this is a natural result of his success in weakening the Fatah for the benefit of the Palestinian Authority.²⁰

(19) An exclusive interview with the Palestinian academic Hani Al-Basous at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman, 2021/30/7.

(20) An exclusive interview with journalist Rasheed Shaheen, Bethlehem, Palestine, 2021/29/7.

Accordingly, no matter the size of the influence of the Fatah leaders that could succeed Mahmoud Abbas, they will not exceed the level of employees who are waiting for receiving instructions and salaries from Abbas's office, which is run by the "shadow lady", Intisar Abu Amara, and this was revealed by the presidential office employee, Yasser Jadallah in May, 2020, talking about her own major role alongside Mahmoud Salameh in dealing with the leadership of the Fatah movement, and the movement's leaders constant visit to her office to improve their financial conditions and allocations because she has a great influence on Mahmoud Abbas and the financial decisions of the Palestinian Authority.²¹

There is no doubt that the weakness of the Fatah movement's leaders in the West Bank and Gaza Strip brings a crisis to the movement that could lead to further disintegration in the absence of Mahmoud Abbas. The entire leading members surrounding Mahmoud Abbas cannot be compared to those who surround Marwan Barghouti or Mohammed Dahlan. Mahmoud Al-Aloul, the deputy of Mahmoud Abbas at the level of the Fatah movement, is also considered a very close person to Abbas and is not considered part of the conflicts. That is why Mahmoud Abbas chose him to be his deputy within the movement in 2018.²²

(21) From the corruption files of President Abbas's office: Intisar Abu Amara under the microscope, Fatah News Voice, 2020/1/9:<https://bit.ly/3zuagGa>

(22) Who is Mahmoud Al-Aloul, one of the candidates to succeed Abbas, The Times of 2018/5/8: Israel <https://bit.ly/3kvS9JQ>

As for Majed Faraj, the most powerful man after Mahmoud Abbas, he gains his strength from his presence at the head of the security establishment or the intelligence apparatus within the Palestinian Authority, but he lacks a popular base either at the level of Palestinians or the movement of Fatah. Rather, he is seen as a collaborator with Israel, and this does not give him legitimacy, internally at least.²³

But despite all the difficulties facing the Fatah movement, there is a common interest on which the majority of the movement's leadership, including those opposed to Mahmoud Abbas's group, such as Barghouti and Dahlan, as all of them unanimously agree with the survival of the Palestinian Authority despite of the disputes between the leaders within Fatah. But, on the other hand, considering a politician Fatah-run programme that contradicts Mahmoud Abbas' program is not possible, as the differences have turned to be personal or there are contradict interests overshadow the scene. This is why Mahmoud Abbas fears appointing a deputy to him at the level of the Palestinian Authority, because he is afraid of provoking unnecessary problems.

(23) רק הישראליים עוסקים במחליף לאבו מאזן (23) , Ynet, 2020/10/20: <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/r1Gu5Oswv>



2. The Lack of popular support for the leadership of the Fatah movement

This problem revolves around the absence of popular acceptance by the leadership of the Fatah movement, whether affiliated with Mahmoud Abbas's stream or others, as none of them has adopted a political program that contradicts Mahmoud Abbas' programme based on security coordination with Israel, regardless of the level of the Palestinian issue.

Also, the reasons for the conflicts between Abbas and Dahlan or Abbas and Barghouti were just struggles for power. If the financial embezzlement and the struggle for influence led to a sharp division that reached the level of hostility between Mahmoud Abbas and Muhammad Dahlan, the recent elections cancelled by Mahmoud Abbas's decision uncovered a new conflict between Mahmoud Abbas and Marwan Barghouti. That is why Palestinian public opinion or even the Fatah movement does not find fundamental differences between these leaders, even if Marwan Barghouti's sway weighted on the downside after his formation of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades during the second Palestinian uprising in 2000, and this stage no longer exists now because the signs of a new uprising in the West Bank are not clear, or are no longer linked to the Fatah movement, to say the least.²⁴

After all, this leads us to a very important issue that is completely linked to the relationship of the successor of Mahmoud Abbas with the Palestinian people, whether from a legal or popular point of view.

(24) An exclusive interview with Husam Al-Dajni, Palestinian diplomat and academic, 2021/28/7.



Legitimacy here needs popular support that is practically translated into free and fair elections, because the next president does not represent only Fatah or part of the Palestinian national fabric, rather, it is supposed to represent the majority at the level of the Palestinian people and its various factions. For this reason, the Fatah movement was forced to hold presidential and legislative elections in 2005 and 2006 to gain popular legitimacy. The important note in this context is that despite the cohesion of the Fatah movement in 2005 compared to the present time, it was forced to look forward popular electoral legitimacy for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, but with the disunity within Fatah itself, the electoral legitimacy has become out of reach, especially since the Fatah movement no longer represents a majority in the Palestinian street.²⁵

In another context, this problem opens the door wide to the legal problem, because disrupting the legislative authority excludes any talk of legitimacy. The presidency of the Authority after Abbas needs a legal mechanism that is no longer available in the Palestinian Authority system now, so some suggest the return of the Fatah leadership to the umbrella of the Liberation Organization as an alternative than the Legislative Council, and this illegal option is no better off, because the struggle for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority will deepen in light of the decline in Fatah's relations with the forces of the left and the absence of the legitimacy of the Liberation Organization, which is no longer able to represent all the Palestinian people in the absence of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.²⁶

(25) An exclusive interview with Hani Al-Basous, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman, 2021/30/7.

(26) An exclusive interview with Sharhabeel Al-Gharib, President of the International Relations Forum for Dialogue and Policies, Gaza, 2021/8/3.



3. The approval of Israel and the regional powers on the PA president as a person

The obvious differences taking place among the Palestinian political factions regarding Fatah leaders is also evident in the Israeli position. The Israeli media usually puts forward names of persons nominated to succeed Mahmoud Abbas without distinguishing a specific person, especially since the Palestinian Authority was established in 1994, none of the Political leaders of Fatah has been, with the exception of Marwan Barghouti, arrested or criticized by the Israeli media outlets, in addition to the development of the level of the relationship between Israel and the Fatah leadership even further, reaching the level of almost daily communication and the exchange of official and unofficial visits.²⁷

However, if the relations of the Palestinian Authority with Israel seem abnormal since the events of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, this did not reflect negatively on the level of leadership relations, because the security coordination between the two sides has taken on unprecedented dimensions and details since 2005. Consequently, the security services in the West Bank now control every single detail, and implement all the requirements of security coordination with Israel, and thus it is similar to a factional entity that is not excluded from choosing Mahmoud Abbas's successor away from Fatah's decision-making circle and it might be in accordance with the relationship that brings the Palestinian security services together with Israel and the regional and international parties.²⁸

Consequently, in this context we can note that the weakening of the Fatah movement and its leadership on behalf of the Palestinian Authority and its security establishment made the attention of Israel and the regional powers turn to the Fatah leadership that leads the Palestinian Authority and its security services at the expense of the Fatah political leaders.

(27) An exclusive interview with Mazen Al-Jabari, specialist in Palestinian-Israeli affairs and director of the Arab Studies Association in Jerusalem, 2021/29/7.

(28) An exclusive interview with Omar Shaaban, President of the Pal-Think Center for Strategic Studies, Gaza, 2021/29/7.

Therefore, the name of Majed Faraj is not put forward as the most important contenders in vain in Israeli politics and media. What helps Mahmoud Abbas to hold on to the Fatah position within the Palestinian Authority is the Fatah leadership's awareness of the nature of competition and the level of balances between the different wings.²⁹

Hence, Israel developed different visions for the post-Mahmoud Abbas era, the most prominent of which was the establishment of an alternative Palestinian authority or many entities. The "Seven Emirates" plan developed by the Israeli researcher Mordechai Kedar is the most prominent, because it assumes that the Palestinian Authority has reached the stage of complete collapse with the presence of a group of leaders, and these can be dealt with by the logic of dividing the West Bank into seven emirates, so that these leaders rule in partnership with the tribesmen in their areas of influence and in full coordination with Israel.³⁰

Moreover, there are regional relations for the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and most of the leaders of the organization are affiliated with regional parties, and this reflects negatively on the leadership of the new Fatah movement or the leadership of the internal branch of the organization, which always finds itself unable to reach the decisions made by Fatah, due to not having any regional support. This is why the frantic competition between the leadership of Fatah to gain Israel's support or the regional and international powers that play a major role in the future of the Palestinian Authority appears at the present time.³¹

In a related context, Israel and the US administration will not allow the collapse of the Palestinian Authority after Mahmoud Abbas because they are fully aware of the importance of the existence of the Authority as a security project that reduced the security, economic, political and humanitarian costs that Israel could pay in the event of its complete monopoly on the West Bank.

(29) רק הישראליים עוסקים במחליף לאבו מאזן , Ynet, 2020/10/20:
<https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/r1Gu5Oswv>

(30) מרדכי קידר. תכנית האמירויות הפלסטיניות, 2020/10/13:
<https://www.palestinian-emirates.com/>

(31) An exclusive interview with journalist Rasheed Shaheen, Bethlehem Palestine, 2021/29/7./



So that, the existence of the Palestinian Authority matters Israel, and this was clearly demonstrated in the statements of Hadi Amr, the current US envoy for Palestinian and Israeli affairs, when he called in mid-July 2021 to strengthen the role of the Palestinian Authority and save it economically and warn Israel of the issue of its collapse.³²

In sum, the Fatah movement is an essential pillar for the survival of the Palestinian Authority after Mahmoud Abbas, but it needs Fatah consensus, popular support, and regional and international approval for the person of Abbas' successor, and this is what all parties obviously realize, as the effects of Mahmoud Abbas' cancellation of the elections were not great, and the relationship of regional and international parties was not affected by Mahmoud Abbas, and this is because they realized that the elections would pave the way for other Palestinian parties outside the Fatah movement or far from the Oslo's leadership.

(32) An exclusive interview with Omar Shaaban, President of the Pal-Think Centre for Strategic Studies, Gaza, 2021/29/7.



Fourth: scenarios of Abbas succession

Based on the foregoing considerations, predicting the post-President Mahmoud Abbas phase is not an easy matter. Because the data we have referred to make the next stage open to many scenarios that can be summarized as follows:

1. Scenario One: Reactivating the Constitutional Option

This scenario assumes that the Fatah leadership will consider Article 37 of the Basic Law of the Palestinian Authority, which states that in the event of a vacuum occurred in the position of the President of the Palestinian Authority for any reason, the President of the Palestinian Legislative Council assumes the duties of the presidency of the Authority temporarily for a period not exceeding sixty days, during which free and direct elections will be held to choose a new president in accordance with the Palestinian election law.

Conditions for Achieving this Scenario

- This scenario requires the existence of a legislative authority that Mahmoud Abbas dissolved in 2018.
- However, the current constitutional vacuum could create a certain level of cooperation or rapprochement between Palestinian factions, so that the Fatah and Hamas movements invite the Legislative Council to convene and elect a Speaker of the Legislative Council who will be the interim president of the Palestinian Authority. However, the current constitutional vacuum could create a certain level of cooperation or rapprochement between Palestinian factions, so that the Fatah and Hamas movements invite the Legislative Council to convene and elect a Speaker of the Legislative Council who will be the interim president of the Palestinian Authority.



- However, if the step of returning the Legislative Council seems not likely to happen only with an interim president and through a kind of political consensus among the Palestinian factions. Therefore, the head of the Constitutional Court can be resorted to as an alternative step to take over the task temporarily until a date for elections is set.
- This option remains available, even if it is illegal, because the political consensus is what will make that stage, and this was achieved previously during the Fatah and Hamas agreement in 2014 to form the Rami Hamdallah government.

The Scenario Probability

- This scenario relatively very weak to be fulfilled, compared to any other scenarios, because if Fatah brings the other factions closer, it will somehow lose the full control over the Palestinian Authority.
- The internal Palestinian consensus also needs regional and international support and Israeli approval, and without the agreement of those regional and international parties and the approval of Israel, the Palestinians would not have been able to go to the 2005 elections.³³
- The relationship between Fatah and Hamas has reached an unprecedented level of disunity after the cancellation of the elections and as a result of the position of the Palestinian Authority regarding the recent war on Gaza in 2021, and this reduces the chances of this scenario to come true.

2. Scenario Two: Returning to the PLO

This scenario assumes that the Central Council of the Palestine Liberation Organization meets and delegates a figure to run the Palestinian Authority temporarily until elections are held.

(33) Washington warns Israel of the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, Arabi Post, 2021/16/7:
<https://bit.ly/3sWI8KL>



Conditions for Achieving this Scenario

- The Central Council meeting is the easiest option for Fatah, because the mechanism of its meeting is the easiest compared to other councils, as the Central Council meets regularly, unlike other councils of the Liberation Organization.
- Despite the decline in the role of the PLO and Mahmoud Abbas' withdrawal of some important files, such as the expatriate file, and its integration into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Palestinian Authority, the meeting of the Council does not require much understanding between the PLO factions.

The Scenario Probability

- This scenario is considered feasible, or those looking forward to it face less obstacles. If this scenario is more likely to occur more than the first one, it will be unable to provide sufficient legitimacy for the next president, because it will not be a safer alternative for elections.
- The meeting of the Central Council may add more constitutional vacuum and chaos, or in other words, the results of the meeting may be counterproductive, because the differences within the Fatah movement make it difficult to agree on an interim president for the Palestinian Authority, and here the differences can deepen.
- This scenario may further complicate the Palestinian situation, given the shallowness of the democratic level within the PLO, then the transitional phase could be prolonged and open the door to more conflicts.

3. Scenario Three: Resolving the Security Vacuum Situation

This scenario assumes that the leadership of the Palestinian Authority enjoys more security influence than others, and its balance is more likely compared to the case of competing with the various other Fatah leaders, whether within the general Fatah movement led by Mahmoud Abbas currently or other Fatah currents represented in Muhammad Dahlan and Marwan Barghouti, so the potential of this scenario exceeds the level of previous ones,



because Israel can intervene forcefully in order to resolve this issue for the benefit of certain parties, with the aim of filling the vacuum that Mahmoud Abbas will leave through a consensual figure or a collective leadership to which Abbas's positions are distributed, and this alleviates the current Fatah division.³⁴

Conditions for Achieving this Scenario

- This scenario requires a good measure of Israeli regional and international consensus so as to preserve the Palestinian Authority entity from collapse, while continuing its security performance in its current state.³⁵
- Israel and the regional parties agree on a Fatah security figure such as Majed Faraj, Hussein al-Sheikh or Jibril Rajoub, who may face difficulties within Fatah movement, given that Mahmoud Abbas, himself was rejected before 2005 and he turned into the only Fatah candidate later.
- This scenario requires the integration of other Fatah currents, such as the Dahlan or Barghouti's, and this is possible, because since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, no groups from Fatah movement have emerged that opposes the Oslo Accords, and this enhances the possibility of integrating Fatah currents into the general orientation in support of the next president.³⁶
- The absence of ideologically-based or deep conflicts between the various Fatah currents is an important condition for the materialization of such a scenario, because the basis of all existing conflicts is personal and over positions and influence.

(34) Michael Milstein, Is the Palestinian Authority on the Verge of Collapse, Sama News Agency, translated by Al-Hodhud, 2021/7/24:<https://bit.ly/3sXABtW>

(35) Hani Habib, Vice President and Next President, Sawa News, 2020/27/4:
<https://bit.ly/2WysV5o>

(36) An exclusive interview conducted by the researcher with Husam Al-Dajni, a Palestinian diplomat and academic, 2021/28/7.



The Scenario Probability

- Achieving this scenario may be appropriate for Israel and the regional and international parties, because it is very similar to the scenario of Mahmoud Abbas's arrival after the death of Yasser Arafat, although Abbas arrived through elections, but the Fatah and regional consensus made him the only Fatah candidate.
- The current level of Fatah division, however, stands as an obstacle to this scenario, and this is what Israel and the regional and international parties may work on by trying to reconcile the Fatah parties with the aim of merging them into one stream that will enable them to bypass the transitional phase that will follow the stage of Mahmoud Abbas, and this is acceptable for Muhammad Dahlan and others within Fatah parties. In this respect, some reports were uncovered, talking about the formation of Muhammad Dahlan for a political party, but Dahlan was keen to deny such reports and emphasized his continuation as part of the Fatah movement, so the end of Mahmoud Abbas means the end of Dahlan's feud with Fatah in general.
- This scenario would prevent the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, and at the same time prevent the other factions to enter this political fray, because the survival of the Palestinian Authority as it is and the survival of the division serves Israel.
- This is a temporary scenario, because the security leadership, whether individual or groups, did not last long, and it is likely that the Fatah leadership would agree to that interim stage in order to reach the elections.

4. Scenario Four: Accepting an Individual or Collective Leadership

This scenario assumes that the Fatah leadership will agree on a person who leads the movement, the PA, and the PLO, or three people who each lead one of the three entities.

Conditions for Achieving this Scenario

- This scenario requires a good level of consensus among all Fatah leaders and frameworks regarding who leads the movement and the Palestinian Authority, in addition to the agreement of the PLO factions and its Executive Committee on who leads the organization.
- If Fatah goes to this scenario, it cannot ignore the other factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, because consensus on a person leading the organization needs the meetings of the PLO councils, such as the National and Central Council, and these councils need to be reformed, and they cannot give legitimacy under the current circumstances, and the participation of the largest number of factions and leaders abroad will give them the ability to move.
- To reach this scenario, an Israeli green light is necessary, especially in the part related to the leadership of the Palestinian Authority, as it is a security partner of Israel.³⁷ It also needs Arab and regional support, especially since this support can provide two things, the first: pushing for the participation of the largest number of the Palestinian leadership abroad, and the second: providing financial support to ensure that this stage is overcome



The Palestinian factions meet & sign "honor code" in Cairo on all issues related to the conduct of the elections

(37) Hani Al-Masry, Dissolving the Authority and the Dry Forest, Arab 2021/20/7 ,48:<https://bit.ly/2WtKWBH>



5. Scenario Five: Infighting

This scenario assumes that the post-Mahmoud Abbas era will witness internal fighting between the major leaders, representing the movement in the Palestinian territories, and this may take different forms, whether between the poles of the general Fatah movement led by Mahmoud Abbas currently, or between all Fatah currents represented by the general current and the two Dahlan parties and Barghouti, and this kind of internal clash may lead to the emergence of new currents.³⁸

Conditions for Achieving this Scenario

- The level of political polarization continues to escalate towards the Fatah security leaders who are currently leading the Palestinian Authority.
- The widening level of division within the Fatah movement, because the level of providing support by Fatah for these leaders is much lower than their security balance within the Palestinian Authority.
- The entry of the Dahlan and Barghouti groups into the line of internal fighting, because both of them have a large Fatah balance in the West Bank, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, especially that Dahlan has the ability to pump money, at the same time there is an undeclared alliance between Barghouti and Dahlan that appeared clearly during the elections that Mahmoud Abbas cancelled.
- The support of Israel and the regional powers for this fighting, because Israel is interested in supporting figures such as Majed Faraj, and attempts to support Dahlan's presence at the helm of the authority are clear in regional positions. On the contrary, Marwan Barghouti is considered the best option for Fatah movement and other Palestinian parties, including Hamas.

(38) An exclusive interview conducted by the researcher with journalist and writer Rashid Shaheen, Bethlehem Palestine, 2021/29/7.



This scenario requires a certain level of security vacuum or weakness of the Palestinian Authority's control, and this has become very clear during 2021, and the demand for arms purchases in the West Bank is increasing dramatically, according to Israeli reports.³⁹

The Scenario Probability

- This scenario is highly probable, due to the absence of legal and legislative frameworks within the Palestinian Authority, in addition to the difficulty of the alternatives referred to in the previous scenarios.
- Throughout the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel has never prevented any Palestinian-Palestinian conflict, and on the contrary, it has always sought to fuel and support conflicts, and it was a direct cause of the split between Fatah and Hamas in 2007 and stood as an obstacle to reconciliation or elections steps. Diplomatic efforts between the Palestinian parties will need an Israeli and regional green light, while the internal fighting does not need it because it makes Israel very happy.⁴⁰
- There are two things that could prevent the realization of this scenario. The first is that the events after Mahmoud Abbas will be in the West Bank, and the fighting here may pose a threat to about 750,000 settlers, and this may force Israel to intervene to protect its interests.

Second: The social and political context in the Gaza Strip is very different from that in the West Bank. Given that many residents of the West Bank have economic interests with the Palestinian Authority and Israel, this would ease the fighting.

(39) An exclusive interview conducted by the researcher with Hani Al-Basous, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman, 2021/30/7.

(40) An exclusive interview conducted by the researcher with Mazen Al-Jabari, a specialist in Palestinian-Israeli affairs and director of the Arab Studies Association in Jerusalem, 2021/29/7.



Conclusion:

Apparently, the absence of a constitutional mechanism to choose a president for the Palestinian Authority after Mahmoud Abbas opens the door for the Palestinian leadership to seek other options, such as resorting to the PLO or the Constitutional Court or reaching a kind of consensus between the Fatah movement leadership and other factions, but these steps remain hostage to balances within the Fatah movement and the role of local, regional and international parties influencing the Palestinian decision.

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On the other hand, the legal dilemma facing the next Palestinian Authority President is accompanied by many problems whose features are clearly visible in the Palestinian scene, whether at the level of divisions within the Fatah movement and its loss of the popular balance in favour of other Palestinian factions, especially Hamas, or at the level of the positions of the external parties towards the next Palestinian Authority President, whoever he is.

Based on all this, five main scenarios were put forward, the most prominent of which is the fourth one related to the state of reaching consensus on the person nominated by Fatah or the collective leadership of those positions occupied by Mahmoud Abbas at the levels of the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, Fatah movement and the Palestine Liberation Organization.



This scenario remains subject to consensus among all Fatah leaders, starting with the general Fatah movement led by President Abbas, passing by the current led by Muhammad Dahlan, and reaching the Marwan Barghouti movement, with the importance of the regional and international role supporting this scenario. In the event that the Fatah parties fail in the consensus process, the fifth scenario, which is the worst related to the internal fighting, will be very present, because the disintegration and Fatah divisions overshadowed the scene during the past few years, and the presidency of the Palestinian Authority is no longer confined to the position of the Fatah movement, because other Palestinian factions have become popular and influential not only in the movement itself, but also in many levels.



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