



Who Will Inherit Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas?

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The Fatah movement and the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Movement) leadership are experiencing a deep internal crisis. In 1969, Fatah leader Yassir Arafat took control of PLO institutions and imposed a political containment policy, combined with a heavy hand, against his opponents. Since then, the Palestinian national liberation movement has been characterized by a highly centralized authority structure. Mahmoud Abbas, an absolute ruler, inherited three 'hats' from his predecessor Arafat: In addition to serving as Chairman of the PLO's Executive Committee and President of the Palestinian Authority, Abbas also serves as Chairman of the Fatah movement. Fatah is the ruling party in PLO institutions, and constitutes the political backbone of the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian justification for the establishment of such centralized rule was the complexity of the negotiations that were held with Israel in the 1990s.

Abbas, who is now in the final stretch of his term of office, has three goals: he wants to leave behind a legacy, put in place policy guidelines for the future, and select his political heir. The burning issue of succession is likely to generate internal war in Fatah. This is because although Fatah has a strong grip over numerous sectors constituting Palestinian society, it does not wisely unite these sectors to establish itself as the ruling party. However, despite internal disputes, the movement's members are united in their desire to do everything possible to make sure that the Palestinian presidency does not fall into the hands of the Hamas movement, whether through democratic or non-democratic processes.¹ Stability in the West Bank, and the Palestinian institution-building process, are achievements attributed to Abbas. However, with regard to choosing a successor for the three positions he holds, it seems that Abbas has failed.

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¹ Grant Rumley, "[The Race to Replace Mahmoud Abbas - Understanding and Shaping Palestinian Politics](#)," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 3, 2015.

The main contenders in the succession race

Mohammad Ghanayim (Abu Maher) is the one who actually serves as Abbas' deputy in Fatah. However, Ghanayim's role is merely symbolic, based on his historic contributions to Fatah. He has no aspirations to be Abbas' political heir.

The politician who is viewed as being a crony of Abbas, and one whom the Palestinian president would logically favor, is **Saeb Erekat**. Abbas even granted Erekat the prestigious appointment of secretary-general of the PLO Executive Committee, at the expense of Yassir Abed Rabbo, on July 26, 2015. But Erekat is viewed as not having grassroots support among the Palestinian public. Many Fatah members view him as the president's mouthpiece, lacking independent policy positions and the halo of struggle and self-sacrifice in the fight against Israel.

Abbas' main opponent in the Fatah movement is **Mohammad Dahlan** (Abu Fadi), whom Abbas expelled from Fatah's Central Committee in June 2011, and currently lives outside the Palestinian territories. In recent years, mainly when he dwelled outside the West Bank, Dahlan (son of a refugee family from Khan Yunis) made his great leap into the inter-Arab and international political systems.

Dahlan was appointed security advisor by the United Arab Emirates, and is viewed as a favorite of the Egyptian regime. He has also created a dense web of connections around the world. Dahlan's excellent connections with the Egyptian leadership has raised his stature even among Israeli politicians. Recently, Dahlan even won honorary Serbian citizenship as a token of honor from the authorities there, for the foreign capital he raised for the country.

With the help of philanthropic financial support from the United Arab Emirates, Dahlan initiated social-works projects in the refugee camps in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. By supporting poverty-stricken families and students, Dahlan is creating pockets of support in the West Bank. However, the fact that he comes from a family of Gaza Strip refugees, serves as an obstacle in his race for seniority in Fatah. In order to make a comeback as a relevant political player and acquire an influential nationalist stature for the Day After Abbas, Dahlan would need to create far more extensive alliances, including within his own generation, the Fatah's intermediate generation.

Dahlan already proved his political prowess in the Sixth General Conference of the Fatah movement that was held in Bethlehem in the summer of 2009. Despite the fact that he is closely associated with the Fatah loss of the Gaza Strip to Hamas, Dahlan was able to distance himself from the failure. He then created a series of political alliances that allowed him to be voted into the movement's Central Committee. But on his way to advancing his candidacy as Abbas' successor, Dahlan would have to tackle a far more difficult political mission: to unite the ranks in the Gaza Strip. The differences between him and Abbas in the Gaza Strip are taking on the form of a real struggle. And this struggle does not allow Fatah to operate properly and complete the steps it had taken toward internal elections in the various regions controlled by the

movement in the Strip.² The split between Fatah's factions in the Gaza Strip serves the interests of the Hamas movement.

Dahlan's rivals, against whom he will have to compete for political offices or with whom he will have to create joint coalitions, are the following: Number One is **Marwan Barghouti**, who is imprisoned in Israel and viewed as the most popular figure among Fatah higher-ups as well as rank and file Palestinians. Number Two is **Jibril Rajoub**, Deputy-Secretary of the Fatah Central Committee, Chairman of the Palestinian Olympic Committee, Chairman of the Palestinian Football Association, and Head of the Supreme Council for Sport and Youth Affairs.

Marwan Barghouti is the Fatah candidate who consistently receives the highest support in all the public-opinion polls that attempt to predict which of the various candidates from Fatah and Hamas will succeed Abbas. Barghouti is viewed as a prominent ideological milestone in Fatah and one of the symbols of the al-Aqsa intifada. The extensive support he receives, testifies to the deep crisis affecting a movement which is not able to create a candidate with broad grassroots support who is not behind prison walls. Barghouti's imprisonment limits the relevance of his candidacy and serves his rivals, who will be happy to use him in every election campaign with a nationalist bent – so long as he remains behind bars and does not threaten their statures in the public space.

The third flank in Fatah's aging middle generation is **Jibril Rajoub**, whose public role in the sports world, mainly in developing the soccer branch in Palestine, have earned him much public support. This support serves to heighten the esteem in which the public holds him due to the terror acts he carried out, directed and initiated against the State of Israel before the signing of the Oslo Accords. Rajoub now serves as Deputy-Secretary of the Fatah Central Committee; in other words, he is the third most important person in the movement. Rajoub has direct control of the security apparatuses in the West Bank; many of his men still hold key positions within these apparatuses, and remain loyal to him.

Behind the veteran triumvirate of Dahlan, Barghouti and Rajoub are additional key players who jockey to try and improve their positions in the movement's hierarchy and in the Palestinian national political space. One of the more prominent of these is **Nassir al-Qudwa**, Arafat's nephew, who enjoys much esteem among Fatah's field workers and among diplomatic agents in the Arab world. Al-Qudwa filled a series of diplomatic, representative positions in the ranks of the PLO and the Arab League.³ Aside from his pedigree, his broad education and his international visibility, al-Qudwa is also well-liked by the Fatah apparatuses. In the post-Abbas era, al-Qudwa may be able to shore up his position and re-invent himself as a legitimate candidate for the presidency.

² ["Isaba 4 Filastiniyyon fi Ishtibakat bayn Ansar Abu Mazen we-Dahlan fi Gaza,"](#) *Sada al-Bilad*, August 1, 2016 (Four people are wounded in a brawl between Abu Mazen and Dahlan supporters in Gaza).

³ Adam Ragson, ["Arafat's Nephew Makes His Move to Succeed Abbas,"](#) *Jerusalem Post*, July 14, 2016.

Additional figures who are expected to use their influence behind the scenes on the succession struggles, are: **Tawfik Tirawi**, former head of Palestinian General Intelligence and Abbas' national security advisor; and **Majid Faraj**, who replaced Tirawi as Head of Palestinian General Intelligence. Earlier, Faraj had managed to command additional security apparatuses such as the Preventive Security Service and military intelligence. He is viewed as Abbas' confidante, and has a good reputation among American security services. Nonetheless, Tirawi and Faraj lack the political experience and broad base of grassroots support that is enjoyed by Dahlan, Barghouti and Rajoub.

The 'political structure' question

Although there is much uncertainty regarding the identity of Abbas' successor, it is assumed that the Palestinian Authority political structure will, indeed, undergo change. There is a consensus that the centralistic model, in which three important positions in the Palestinian national movement are in the hands of one person, caused damage. Thus, it should not be continued in the post-Abbas period. Some kind of division of powers, with checks and balances, will create a healthier structure.

It is still unclear, however, what will be the extent of the splits between the various positions. Will the person who heads Fatah also continue to serve as PLO chairman? Or perhaps the PLO chairman, tasked with representing the Palestinian issue in all its broad aspects, will also serve as president of the Palestinian Authority which is tasked with the responsibility for managing daily life in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Thus, for example, the appointment of Barghouti as PLO chairman would allow the Palestinians to inflict strong international pressure to release him from the Israeli prison. He is currently serving five life sentences for his direct involvement in terror acts that caused the deaths of five Israeli citizens.⁴ By contrast, in case Barghouti is elected as president of the Palestinian Authority it is expected to be pointless so long as he remains incarcerated in the Israeli prison system. It would only lead to continued internal struggles between his rivals in Fatah.

In this context we must also recall that Hamas still attempts to challenge and usurp Fatah, and this is also expressed in the preparations for the local, which were planned elections for October 2016. The Hamas movement wants to assimilate into the PLO, and its ultimate goal is to wrest the political upper hand in the organization, then receive international legitimacy. The chances for reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, and for conducting agreed-upon elections for the presidency and the parliament, are declining – so long as the succession issue in Fatah and the internal struggles in the PLO remain unresolved.

⁴ The State of Israel vs. Marwan Barghouti, *Tel Aviv District Court*, 1158/3, pp, 19-36.

We can assume that Abbas will do everything he can to wield influence over the identity of his successor. Abbas has proved his strength thus far, and he has no qualms about opposing his fellow members in Fatah's Central Committee. Abbas even made decisions that were antithetical to Palestinian public opinion. One example: maintaining, and even tightening, the security coordination with Israel, even during tense periods when violence between Israel and the Palestinians was on the rise.

The decision regarding an agreed-upon candidate for head of Fatah and president of the Palestinian Authority is supposed to be made by a narrow group of decision-making elites in Fatah's Central Committee. Historical experience tells us that the succession issue will not be brought to the Palestinian public for democratic vote.

In addition to the continued attempts of the various candidates to jockey for better positions in the succession race, we are also likely to see them strengthening the coalitions amongst them. This is because the main concern of Fatah leadership members is not losing their positions of power within the movement. Instead, they are worried lest the movement itself absorb a major blow in the upcoming Palestinian Authority elections, causing them to lose their historical birthright as leaders of the Palestinian nation – to Hamas.