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The Riddle of Succession in the Palestinian Authority

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A cloud of uncertainty hangs over the road to Palestinian succession, and potential candidates will likely have to form ad hoc alliances that result in significant policy compromises on peacemaking and other issues.

In private conversations with U.S. officials and other individuals, seventy-nine-year-old Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas has increasingly spoken of his growing "exhaustion," his family's desire for him to abdicate, and his "decision" to step down in the near future or refrain from running in the next Palestinian elections. According to the recent Fatah-Hamas reconciliation agreement, those elections are scheduled for a still-unspecified date early next year, and they will still be held in the PA-controlled West Bank even if reconciliation is once again aborted. The urgency of the succession issue is thus growing rapidly -- as the 2015 Fatah congress approaches, the pressure on Abbas and others to chart the transition and perhaps nominate the next in line for the presidency will likely reach a boiling point.

POTENTIAL CANDIDATES

The question of who might succeed Abbas in the case of deteriorating health or retirement has become the topic of much lively -- albeit mostly quiet -- debate in Palestinian circles. Of course, Abbas could very well allow himself to be "convinced" to stay in power for another term once the moment of decision arrives; he has already served for several years past his original term, which legally expired in 2010. If he is incapacitated, however, the PA Basic Law indicates that his successor should be the speaker of the defunct Palestinian Legislative Council -- currently Aziz Duwaik, a Hamas veteran from the West Bank. That, of course, would be totally unacceptable to Fatah.

At various junctures, the twenty-strong Fatah Central Committee has urged Abbas to introduce the new post of vice president, but he has refused to contemplate that

suggestion for fear of jeopardizing his executive control over the PA, since the official in question could be viewed as his de facto heir apparent. He even rejected a proposal by former intelligence chief Tawfiq al-Tirawi to appoint Marwan Barghouti (age 55) to the position -- a move that would likely have been purely symbolic given that Barghouti is currently serving five life sentences in an Israeli jail and is unlikely to be released in the foreseeable future.

If Barghouti were freed, his prospects would be uncertain. Polls continue to show him as the most popular Fatah leader by far after Abbas himself, but that advantage might not persist if he were no longer in jail, where he has often met with Israeli left-wing politicians such as former Meretz Party leader Chaim Oron. Although he issues frequent statements through his lawyers and family visitors, he has avoided any criticism of Abbas. On one hand, his fellow Fatah inmates do not regard him as their spokesman and did not elect him to represent them in dealings with Israel's Prison Service. On the other hand, he was elected in absentia to the Central Committee during Fatah's 2008 congress in Bethlehem. Today, his outside supporters are busy promoting his image as the would-be next leader and mobilizing his support base, mainly in the Ramallah area.

Meanwhile, certain natural candidates to replace Abbas have already dropped from the race. Ahmed Qurei (a.k.a. Abu Ala), the top negotiator of the 1993 Oslo Accord and later the PA's prime minister, is no longer actively involved in political struggles. At age seventy-seven, he suffers from health issues and has completely backed down from his past advocacy of a two-state solution to the conflict with Israel, preferring a one-state formula instead. It is very difficult to imagine him regaining a position of prominence within Fatah, since he is no longer a member of the senior leadership and has failed to establish a solid constituency.

Another ex-prime minister, Salam Fayyad (age 62), has kept his distance from the political scene since being forced out of office by Abbas in April 2013. Most Fatah leaders consistently objected to his presence and policies while he was in office, as he was never a party member and chose to run in the 2006 elections with his own faction -- the "Third Way," a party that won only two seats in the Legislative Council that year. Fayyad could have been a senior aspirant for succession if he had mended fences with his Fatah critics, but he failed to pursue that course and is still perceived by the party's rank and file as someone "imposed" on Abbas by the United States and other donors. Even so, he may be biding his time in the wings, waiting for a comeback opportunity to present itself. He has a clear vision to offer, embodied in his 2009 governance plan titled "Ending the Occupation, Establishing the State." And no one denies his managerial skills or his record of fostering accountability and transparency in PA ministries. He would clearly be the candidate preferred by the West, and possibly Israel too.

The third dropout is Nasser al-Qidwa (61), Yasser Arafat's nephew, who had a strong appetite to become the next president. But while serving as foreign minister, he had a falling out with Abbas, irritated many other top Fatah players, and was sacked from his job as deputy to the UN special envoy to Syria.

The one potential candidate who is openly challenging Abbas is Muhammad Dahlan (53), who was expelled from Fatah in 2011 due to confrontation with the president. They have since traded charges of corruption and embezzlement, with Abbas even insinuating that Dahlan had a hand in Arafat's alleged "assassination." Dahlan is on record saying that he does not intend to run in the next presidential election, but such statements are probably

tactical posturing and do not reflect the true extent of his ambitions. A former interior minister and Central Committee member, he has moved to luxurious exile in the United Arab Emirates under Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed's sponsorship, from where he has been cultivating close ties with the new Egyptian leadership under Field Marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. Prior to the latest Palestinian reconciliation deal, he also attempted to open a dialogue with Hamas despite being a bitter foe of the group. For its part, Hamas allowed Dahlan's wife, Jalila, to visit the Gaza Strip and meet with his old supporters for the first time since June 2007, when he lost the region to a Hamas military takeover while serving as head of Preventive Security. In addition, Dahlan and his close colleague Muhammad Rashid (a.k.a. Khaled Salam) -- a Kurd who joined Fatah as a young journalist and rose to become Arafat's trusted money man -- have been waging a ferocious online defamation campaign against Abbas over the past three years. In short, Dahlan seems to have the funding and appeal to command a significant following among Fatah activists in both Gaza (where the Abbas-appointed leadership committee is split and paralyzed) and the West Bank.

Another interesting feature of the Abbas-Dahlan clash is the latter's proven ability to obtain highly classified information from PA headquarters, including from Abbas's own office. Among these items have been sensitive details concerning recent negotiations with Israel under the auspices of Secretary of State John Kerry. This indicates that Dahlan has silent allies within Abbas's inner circle.

Dahlan's strategy at present is to position himself as a desirable partner to other contenders, thereby winning cessation of judicial measures against him and ultimately resuming his role on the Central Committee. The most promising -- though difficult to achieve -- alliance would be with his old committee rival Jibril Rajoub (62). Many in Fatah have said off-the-record that such a combination could offer the best chance for relatively smooth succession. Rajoub enjoys fairly strong support among Fatah grassroots activists and has a reputation as a charismatic, straightforward, capable operator. This reputation has been enhanced during his current tenure as chairman of the Palestinian Football Association, though that post was initially intended to signal his demotion.

Rajoub and Dahlan's long history of bitter enmity dates back to the pre-Oslo days in Tunis, when they served as head of the West Bank Committee and Gaza Strip Committee, respectively. Rajoub, who spent seventeen years in Israeli jails, and Dahlan, whose founded the "Fatah Hawks" militant squads in Gaza, both suffered major public criticism while serving as Preventive Security commanders: Dahlan for losing Gaza to Hamas without offering resistance, and Rajoub for allegedly allowing Israeli forces to capture his headquarters in Bitunia. If the two forged an alliance today, however, they would probably become the most formidable duo on the Palestinian stage.

Other Central Committee members who regard themselves as worthy of succession include Muhammad Shtayeh (56), an economist who resigned from the Palestinian team negotiating with Israel; the previously mentioned Tawfiq al-Tirawi (66), who has recently adopted a negative attitude toward further peace talks; and former security official Mahmoud al-Aloul (67), who was long involved in terrorist operations by Fatah's "Western Sector" unit prior to Oslo. None of them seems to have the necessary stature or power base to defeat other contenders, but their support will be sought. Some suspect that their shared interests might guide all three to promote the candidacy of an old guard Central Committee member as a weak replacement for Abbas. Two Fatah veterans are mentioned in this context: Muhammad Ghneim (a.k.a. Abu Maher, age 77) and Sultan Abu al-Ainain

(73). Both opposed the Oslo Accords and stayed behind when Arafat moved to the PA in July 1994: Ghneim as head of Fatah's Organization Department and Ainain as commander of al-Fatah in Lebanon. Both finally moved to the West Bank with Israel's permission during Fatah's 2008 congress.

Amid the succession maneuvering, a crucial behind-the-scenes role will be played by the PA's current security chiefs: Nidal Abu Dohan of the National Security Forces, police chief Hazem Atallah, Preventive Security chief Ziad Hab al-Rih, and -- most important -- Maj. Gen. Majid Faraj (52), the powerful general intelligence chief who is steadily expanding his influence and has already become Abbas's right-hand man on many sensitive portfolios. For example, he was chosen to replace Shtayeh as the primary negotiator with the U.S. and Israeli teams during the latest peace talks. Previously a favorite subordinate of Rajoub's, Faraj is viewed by others as slowly cultivating a taste for politics. He is certain to play a role as one of the key kingmakers and could even become a candidate himself under exceptional circumstances.

CONCLUSION

A cloud of uncertainty hangs over the road to Palestinian succession -- in a race yet to begin in earnest, none of the potential candidates enjoys majority support in Fatah's Central Committee or broader Revolutionary Council. The coalition of leaders that will need to be formed around a single contender is bound to involve many compromises. Any new president will be greatly indebted to these ad hoc allies, and that fact is bound to have an enormous impact on policy formulation, especially with regard to Israel.

To be sure, de facto authority over the Palestinian territories will most likely remain split even if reconciliation proceeds as planned and a national unity government is formed, with Hamas retaining control over Gaza. Yet the central question for Abbas's successor will remain the same: does he intend to keep pursuing a two-state solution while rejecting "armed struggle"? Toward that end, the United States, other donor countries, and Israel have numerous discreet options for helping the Fatah leadership realize the importance of keeping the struggling peace process alive as they decide how their internal transition will unfold.

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