

## BICOM Strategic Assessment

# Palestinian politics after Abbas: the next Palestinian strategic direction

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## Key Points:

- Those who assume leadership of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) after Mahmoud Abbas will be forced to contend with a constituency that has grown disillusioned with the promises of the Oslo process. Abbas's successor is likely to reject the bilateral negotiation track towards establishing two states as represented by the Camp David summit in 2000, Annapolis process in 2007-2009 and Kerry talks in 2013-2014. In its stead may come the continuation of the internationalisation agenda, a sustained campaign of nonviolent resistance, or the emergence of a one-state option.
- Israel, Jordan and Egypt remain wary of the looming succession crisis and are concerned that a leadership vacuum and a prolonged succession battle could undermine stability in the West Bank and cripple the already weak PA, if not result in its collapse.
- Given how unpopular security coordination with Israel is for many Palestinians, those vying to succeed Abbas may feel compelled to suspend it. Moreover, whoever succeeds Abbas may move toward a more rejectionist platform regarding final-status issues in order to compensate for his potential legitimacy deficit.
- The Israeli government is weighing the implementation of a series of recommendations proposed by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), to prevent the collapse of the PA. Included among the proposed measures are steps to bolster the Palestinian economy.
- Short of advocating for national unity, the international community has limited options at its disposal, though there are measures it can implement toward revitalising Palestinian civil society. Doing so will assist the Palestinians with resuming a broader national dialogue aimed at reviving the focus on governance reform and putting the Palestinians on a path towards more representative leadership.

This paper is the second in a two-part series analysing Palestinian politics in the post-Abbas era. Part one explored institutional and constitutional challenges related to Palestinian succession. Part two will focus on different strategic options for the Palestinians in the post-Abbas period, including the long term viability of the PA and future security coordination with Israel.

## The fear that the PA will collapse

The PA, established in 1994 following the Oslo Accords, was intended to serve as an *interim* government, allowing for Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and parts of the West Bank. The Accords were supposed to have expired after five years, during which the negotiators would conclude a final-status agreement. Yet over 20 years later, the PA is still there, and the prospect of resuming negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians has grown increasingly remote.

The Israeli Prime Minister's Office is reportedly developing contingency plans for four possible scenarios for the day after Abbas leaves the Palestinian political scene. These scenarios range from the least likely option – an orderly succession of power – to the more likely scenario, a prolonged competition for succession amongst Fatah elite (although in both instances, the PA security forces would continue to exist.) However, of increasing concern to the Israelis should be the prospect of fragmentation, which to a degree is already occurring on the ground in the West Bank.

In early January 2016, amid growing speculation that the PA was on the [brink of collapse](#), the Israeli security cabinet held two meetings to discuss the issue. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [instructed](#) the cabinet to take necessary steps to prevent the dissolution of the PA, while at the same time preparing for the worst case scenario – the collapse of the PA and [destabilisation](#) of the West Bank. The [assessment](#) of the Israeli security establishment is that the collapse of the PA would place instantaneous and fiscally strenuous demands on Israel, requiring the government to reassert control over both security and civilian affairs in areas of the West Bank which, pursuant to the Oslo II agreement of September 1995, are currently under PA control. Israel would also incur additional financial costs and responsibilities associated with development-related assistance, as US Secretary of State John Kerry [warned](#) in December 2015.

[Israel, Jordan and Egypt remain wary of the looming succession crisis and its potential ramifications](#): Both Israel and Jordan are worried that in the wake of Abbas's departure, a leadership vacuum and a prolonged succession battle could undermine stability in the West Bank and cripple the already weak PA, if not result in its collapse. Jordan is frustrated that Abbas has [poorly coordinated](#) with the Jordanian government,

especially on matters related to his diplomatic strategy. Already grappling with the burden of Syrian refugees, the threat of ISIS and ongoing instability in neighbouring Iraq, Jordan fears a drawn-out succession battle will destabilise the West Bank, and is concerned the ensuing chaos could spill over into Jordan.

Egypt meanwhile has since 2007 worked to broker a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas, though these efforts have failed to achieve unity. Egypt's primary concern is ensuring a robust PA that can curb the Hamas and jihadist threat in Gaza – which Mohammad Dahlan has [reportedly pledged](#) to both the Egyptian government and Israel he will manage were he to replace Abbas. Though President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government has been reluctant to become mired in the succession crisis, with Abbas and Dahlan unable to reconcile despite the latest round of Egyptian-brokered mediation efforts in 2015, Egypt has maintained close contact with Dahlan, and rumours persist that it considers Dahlan the preferred candidate to succeed Abbas.

## [The future of Israeli-PA security coordination](#)

Ensuring the survival of the PA and continuing cooperation with Palestinian security services is of immediate concern to the Israeli security establishment in the post-Abbas era. Since the latest wave of violence began in September 2015, intelligence and security coordination between the PA and Israel has continued. The Israeli security establishment has [corroborated reports](#) that Abbas and the PA security forces have increased their efforts since the outbreak of violence, including stepping up efforts to arrest Hamas operatives in the West Bank.

In March 2015, the PLO Central Committee resolved to [end security coordination with Israel](#). This was followed by an announcement by the PLO's Executive Committee in May 2016 to immediately [begin implementation](#) of that ruling. Thus far, despite staunch domestic pressure, the PA has not complied. Abbas relies on the robust PA security apparatus to maintain his own authority and prevent a Hamas take-over in the West Bank. As the security situation continues to deteriorate, both he and Netanyahu are [concerned](#) that mounting frustrations in the West Bank may lead Palestinians to take to the streets – against the PA.

Abbas has often threatened to suspend security coordination with Israel (according to one journalist, as of 2015 he made this pronouncement on [58 separate occasions](#)), though he has also referred to it as “[sacred](#)”. A formal (or even informal) move to end security cooperation could have a serious impact on the stability of the West Bank. In an [interview with Israeli TV](#) in April 2016, Abbas warned that continuing security coordination was the only thing preventing the outbreak of a third intifada.

However, as peace talks remain at a standstill, and as Israeli incursions into Area A in order to thwart Palestinian violence have continued, the [debate within the PA](#) regarding continuing security cooperation with Israel has increased. Many Palestinians view the PA as acting as a collaborator or subcontractor for Israel and are opposed to the government making further concessions. Hamas continues to oppose the PA's security cooperation with Israel, arguing that it is [harming Palestinian interests](#).

As Palestinians prepare for the post-Abbas era, given how unpopular security coordination with Israel is for many of them, whoever replaces Abbas may ultimately suspend security coordination as a means of bolstering his hardliner credentials.

## [The end of the bilateral negotiations track](#)

Even before the failure of the Kerry peace talks in 2014, Abbas had chosen to de-emphasise the bilateral negotiations paradigm and any successor is unlikely to return to it in the short term. Since 2011, Abbas has placed tremendous effort on his internationalisation strategy, known as “[Palestine 194](#)”, the PA's diplomatic campaign to gain entry for the State of Palestine at the UN (as the 194th member state), amongst other things. Thus far, this campaign has proven a diplomatic challenge for Israel, though for Palestinians it has resulted in little more than symbolic victories.

For the Israeli government, Abbas's diplomatic strategy is problematic, particularly in light of the Palestinians' campaign to accede to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which they did in April 2015. Israel maintains that the road to a two-state solution lies with resuming bilateral negotiations. If Abbas's successor were to continue this diplomatic strategy, it could lead to greater problems for Israel diplomatically, especially as the strategy is now focused on a new objective – convening an international conference

that would result in a timetable for negotiations and a set of parameters that would bind Israel. The June 2016 [summit in Paris](#) is but one example of the incremental progress this strategy of “internationalising” the conflict has had thus far.

### The next Palestinian long-term strategy

A moderate who embraced peace talks and eschewed violence, Abbas was welcomed by many in the international community when he first came to power in 2005. Given the results of the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections which brought Hamas to power, many in the international community, who at one time advocated for transparency and democratic governance in Palestinian politics, are now disinclined to push for reconciliation, and have largely looked the other way with respect to Abbas’s increasing autocratic tendencies. Abbas’s meagre returns on his approach may mean his successor will likely be subject to considerable domestic pressure to abandon the Oslo framework – or at the very least the ever-unpopular security cooperation with Israel. While predicting the next Palestinian long-term strategy is as fraught with complications as predicting Abbas’s successor, a number of strategies have been proposed, including:

*[Doubling down on Abbas’s internationalisation strategy](#)*: Despite having had only marginal success thus far, Abbas’s successor may continue this approach, by seeking to shift international intervention away from pressing for renewed bilateral negotiations toward a [multilateral forum](#), with an international conference modelled loosely on the P5+1 negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program. This approach, which was called for in 2015 by Abbas and [recommended](#) by the Palestine Strategy Group, would in turn de-emphasise the role of the US as the primary mediator, while drawing up a firm timetable for the conclusion of negotiations and the establishment of a state, and holding the parties accountable to their prior commitments in the interim.

While some in the international community, particularly in Europe, may support this approach, Abbas’s successor will still be subject to the Palestinian public, who have expressed frustration with Abbas’s diplomatic approach for years. A recent public opinion poll showed that while [50 per cent](#) of Palestinians supported the recent French initiative, only 29 per cent were optimistic it would succeed (59 per cent expected it would fail).

*[A non-violent “intifada”](#)*: Marwan Barghouti, one of the relatively younger members of Fatah, [offers a strategic approach](#) to the pursuit of an independent Palestinian state that is radically different from that of Abbas and other members of the so-called “old guard”. From his prison cell, Barghouti advocates for a “[pan-Palestinian](#)” action plan predicated on nonviolent resistance. His [plan](#) calls for a series of steps beginning with a public declaration ending Palestinians’ adherence to the Oslo framework and security coordination with Israel, and culminating with a mass march to Jerusalem to be led by the new PLO chairman. The plan calls for utilising nonviolent resistance to disrupt the lives of Israeli settlers and soldiers in the West Bank, aimed at forcing Israel to withdraw to the [1967 lines](#).

Barghouti does not shun further negotiations with Israel outright, but considers their prospects moot with Israel’s current right-wing leadership. Resuming negotiations would necessitate a [short timetable](#) for ending the negotiations and establishing a Palestinian state. In a recent interview outlining his plan, Barghouti [clarified his vision](#) for the future of the PA, stating: “I still unequivocally support the idea of two states for two nations. The PA can proceed in one of two directions today: to serve as an instrument of liberation from the occupation, or to be an instrument that validates the occupation. My task is to restore the PA to its role as an instrument of national liberation.”

*[The “National Alternative Strategy”](#)*: In June 2016, the Palestinian National Initiative, led by Mustafa Barghouti, proposed the [National Alternative Strategy](#). The strategy is based on five pillars, with the aim of changing the balance of power on behalf of the Palestinians, thereby cancelling the asymmetry in the negotiations. The first pillar calls for peaceful, nonviolent protests and a local boycott, followed by a second pillar that calls for a campaign similar to the international boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign. The third pillar of the proposed strategy urges “national resilience”, and includes calls for changing the current economic policies, allowing the Palestinians to develop and thrive. The fourth pillar mandates national unity and a unified national leadership, while the fifth pillar of the proposed strategy calls for the integration of all Palestinians – including those residing in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, as well as those in the diaspora.

According to a recent interview with its author, the strategy will be presented to the PLO factions as

well as members of the PLO Executive Committee in the near future. Yet, as a number of Palestinian [political analysts](#) have noted, the strategy – which represents a significant change in the political strategy embodied by the Palestinian leadership – is unlikely to be adopted absent a change in PLO leadership.

*The one-state option:* A divided and dysfunctional Palestinian leadership, whose constituents question its very legitimacy, is not in a position to negotiate and ultimately implement a final-status agreement with Israel. In the absence of progress towards statehood, incoming Palestinian leaders and the Israeli government will have to contend with those Palestinians advocating a “one-state solution”– demanding civil rights in Israel rather than independence. With negotiations at a stalemate, support for a one-state option is increasing, particularly among [younger generations](#) of Palestinians.

While some members of the Israeli right-wing have [proposed](#) varying forms of a one-state solution, their proposals fall [far short](#) of the Palestinians’ demand for an [inclusive single state](#) in lieu of independent statehood. A widespread campaign for a one-state solution would effectively end efforts to reach a two-state solution and would force Israel to choose between existing as a binational state or face the erosion of its credibility as a democracy, while further subjecting Israelis to increasing international isolation.

## Conclusion

Within Palestinian domestic political circles, the end of the Abbas era likely marks the end of the rule of the formerly Tunis-based “old guard” political leadership. Those who assume leadership of the PA and of the PLO after Abbas will be forced to contend with a domestic constituency that has grown disillusioned with the promises of the Oslo process. Many of the contenders to fill the leadership vacuum espouse policies at odds with Israeli interests and with those in the international community calling for Israelis and Palestinians to reach a negotiated final-status agreement establishing two states. In the post-Abbas era, Israel and the international community stand to lose a [moderate interlocutor](#).

Among the different plans proposed for the next Palestinian strategic direction in the post-Abbas era, one aspect found in each plan is the call for changing the Palestinian position vis-à-vis Israel,

thus removing as best as possible the current asymmetry in negotiations between the two sides. The challenge for the next PA president will be managing the expectations and investment of the international community in continuing security cooperation and negotiations with Israel with the demands of Palestinians, especially those of the young guard, to change course. Amid strong public pressure, the emergence of a weak leader may compel whoever succeeds Abbas toward a more rejectionist platform in order to compensate for his legitimacy deficit. There is a growing concern that if Fatah fails to integrate its younger activists and take steps to address their grievances, it may lose its role as the [vanguard](#) of the Palestinian national movement. Moreover, a weakened Fatah allows for an opening for Hamas to step in and fulfil a key goal of the organisation since its founding – assuming leadership of the Palestinian national movement.

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