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Proposed Elections in the Palestinian Authority:
Why Now, and How Feasible Are They?
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The idea that has arisen recently of holding elections in the Palestinian Authority appears more serious at this stage than in the past. The main promoter of the idea is Abu Mazen, who advocates separate elections: first for the parliament, and only later for the presidency. Although Hamas has long demanded that the two elections be held simultaneously, a change in Hamas's stance is evident, following its declaration that it is willing to proceed with the elections, while hinting that it might consent to Abu Mazen's plan. Yet despite the positive attitude that the PA and Hamas are currently displaying toward elections, it appears that there are still many other barriers to overcome. As of now, it appears that full elections according to the 2006 model are highly unlikely, certainly regarding elections held simultaneously in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. At the same time, in the past two decades Palestinian politics have already supplied precedents of a dynamic that culminated in developments that neutralized the desires and interests of key groups. From Israel's perspective, as long as elections are held solely on the West Bank and without participation by Hamas (and with no chance that they will develop into full elections), there is no need to prevent them. In any event, Israel would do well not to gamble on the Palestinian political system in the context of full elections, even if such gambles are based on informed assessments or public opinion surveys indicating that Fatah has a lead over Hamas. The lessons of 2006 are still relevant, and show that a speculative political adventure is liable to develop quickly into a negative strategic change for Israel.

The idea that has arisen recently of holding elections in the Palestinian Authority (PA) appears more serious at this stage than in the past. The main promoter of the idea is Abu Mazen, who advocates separate elections: first for the parliament, and only later for the presidency. Discussion in the Palestinian political system of the subject of elections has lagged for a long time, due mainly to strong opposition from Hamas, which demanded that the two elections be held simultaneously. Recently, however, a change in Hamas's stance is evident, following its declaration that it is willing to proceed with the elections, while hinting that it might consent to Abu Mazen's plan. This development has sparked hope among the Palestinians that the idea is viable, in contrast to the many talks between

the PA and Hamas on the subject over the 14 years since the last elections. All of those talks ended in failure.

There are several key motives behind Abu Mazen's efforts to advance elections now:

- a. *A desire to buttress legitimacy in the internal Palestinian theater*: The public has become increasingly alienated from the PA for a number of years, criticizing governmental corruption and the paralysis in the political system under Abu Mazen's centralized administration. This frustration has been aired in public protests, such as the protest against the social insurance law, which saw masses of people taking to the streets. In order to renew the internal legitimacy of his rule, Abu Mazen has promoted displays of purported democratization in recent years that pose no concrete challenge to him. These have included local elections, which were conducted only on the West Bank and with no participation by Hamas, and the convening of the Fatah Central Committee and the selection of the organization's leadership, composed solely of his supporters.
- b. *Obstruction of any penetration of Palestinian society and institutions by the spirit of the Arab Spring*: It appears that the current public protests in Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq, which focus on economic aspects and governmental corruption, are uncomfortable for Ramallah, given the basic resemblance of the situation in those countries to the state of affairs in the PA. The proposal of elections may be designed as a preemptive measure – a demonstration of apparent readiness to take internal corrective measures before broad-based public protest aimed at overthrowing the existing order develops on the West Bank.
- c. *External pressure*: The European Union has long criticized the lack of elections in the PA and the fact that its leadership has not renewed the legitimacy of its governance (in contrast to prior periods, there is no American pressure on Abu Mazen, because of the rift between the Trump administration and Ramallah). In addition, Qatar recently made efforts to persuade the PA and Hamas, accompanied by a proposal that Hamas run in the elections on the format of the Tunisian model, i.e., through individuals identified with the movement, but who are not prominent members in it.
- d. *Preparation for the day after*: Abu Mazen is aware of the growing undercurrents in the Palestinian political system in anticipation of the end of his tenure, and wants to strengthen its foundations for the future. One of the leading such foundations is an elected and functioning parliament, whose chairman is designated under Palestinian law to replace the president, if and when the president leaves office, for the period of time until elections are held. Since 2006, the chairman of parliament has been a Hamas member, and Abu Mazen may be aiming to convene a new parliament, while ensuring that its leader comes from

the ranks of Fatah (especially if Hamas does not take part in the elections, and the elections are held only on the West Bank).

- e. *Obstruction of the "deal of the century"*: The proposed elections may be intended to postpone the announcement of the "deal of the century" by President Trump, in the hope that the idea will gradually fade, until it vanishes completely.

It is possible that the change in Hamas's attitude toward elections, at least on the declaratory level (through its "We are Ready" slogan) is a result of fear that the popular regional uprising will also spread to the Gaza Strip, which is a far more explosive theater than the West Bank (Hamas regards a popular outbreak against it as a threat at least equal to the external challenges it faces, headed by Israel). Following hesitation in Hamas's leadership about whether to allow the elections, it appears that the view formulated by Yahya Sinwar is that they should be held in the Gaza Strip, even if they are only for parliament and without a target date for presidential elections. If real progress is made toward holding elections, conditions for the formation of a unity government that will assume civilian management of the Gaza Strip may emerge, thereby ostensibly absolving Hamas of such management without the organization being required to surrender its military power (it is likely that Hamas will aim behind the scenes to control and influence all spheres of activity, including in the civilian sector).

Despite the positive attitude that the PA and Hamas are currently displaying toward elections, it appears that there are still many other barriers to overcome. The first is a dispute about when the elections for parliament and the presidency should be held. Flexibility by Hamas on this matter is likely to lead to a breakthrough. Once this obstacle is overcome, the past negative relations and suspicion between Fatah and Hamas will remain – reflected in the mutual accusations of insincerity and a lack of seriousness – and will pose a threat to the holding of elections.

Elements in Fatah allege that Hamas is the main obstacle to elections, and that Israel is the second obstacle. They claim that while Hamas has displayed willingness to participate in elections, it is still essential to solve technical questions, such as the party that will supervise the elections in the Gaza Strip. As for Israel, the crucial question whether it will allow residents of East Jerusalem to vote in the elections has resurfaced, as it did in the 1996 and 2006 elections. Senior PA and Hamas leaders have already made it clear that Israeli opposition will prevent the elections, and it appears that some of them would like to use this argument to avoid the issue.

At the present time, four main scenarios are emerging in the context of elections:

- a. Total failure of the effort as a result of the lack of agreement between the PA and Hamas, with each accusing the other of torpedoing the initiative. As of now, this scenario is quite likely.
- b. Insistence by Abu Mazen on holding elections in the West Bank only, following failure of the talks with Hamas. Many Palestinians oppose this idea, arguing that it will aggravate the split between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.
- c. Agreement between the PA and Hamas to hold elections on both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip according to the Tunisian model, i.e., indirect participation by the Islamic movement through representatives and/or lists identified with it.
- d. Full elections according to the 2006 model.

As of now, it appears that the latter scenario is highly unlikely, certainly regarding elections held simultaneously in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. At the same time, in the past two decades Palestinian politics have already supplied precedents of a dynamic that culminated in developments that neutralized the desires and interests of key groups. This includes the 2006 elections, which Abu Mazen opposed but was forced to hold due to the American pressure exerted on him, and Operation Protective Edge, a conflict that neither Hamas nor Israel wanted, but were dragged into when violence escalated beyond their control. The idea of elections may be the result of just such a dynamic, especially in view of the internal and external pressure exerted to go ahead with them.

From Israel's perspective, as long as elections are held solely on the West Bank and without participation by Hamas (and with no chance that they will develop into full elections), there is no need to prevent them. They will not provide Abu Mazen with substantial genuine legitimacy, while on the other hand, they will not involve a concrete risk for Israel, particularly not in the sense of strengthening Hamas in the West Bank and its integration in the governmental establishment, and certainly not in enabling it to gain control over parts of it.

Israel will have to intervene, however, if agreement begins to emerge between the PA and Hamas on general elections according to the Tunisian model, and certainly according to the model of the 2006 elections. First, external pressure on Israel is liable to emerge, specifically from Europe, to allow elections in East Jerusalem. Second, and even more problematic, such a scenario will pose the risk of Hamas making headway on the West Bank, which could serve as a springboard for a takeover of PLO institutions, especially if the movement posts substantial achievements in the elections.

Given such a possibility, Israel must weigh the idea of preventing the elections through absolute opposition to voting in East Jerusalem; the arrest of Hamas leaders and candidates, and prevention of campaigning by the organization or a list representing it on the West Bank; and disruption of the organizational efforts to hold the elections (for example, preventing passage by the election committee from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip). These measures would likely incur international criticism, but the cost of the enhancement of Hamas's influence in Palestinian politics is liable to be much greater for Israel. In any case, it appears that it is better for Israel not to express an official stance on the matter now, and to allow Palestinian politics to take their course.

At this time, Israel would do well not to gamble on the Palestinian political system in the context of full elections, even if such gambles are based on informed assessments or public opinion surveys indicating that Fatah has a lead over Hamas. The lessons of 2006 are still relevant, and show that a speculative political adventure is liable to develop quickly into a negative strategic change for Israel.