

INTRODUCTION

Mahmoud Abbas, 87 years old at the time of this writing, has filled three senior leadership positions for the last 17 years, serving as Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); President of the Palestinian Authority (PA); and Chairman of Fatah.

Abbas succeeded Yasir Arafat, who was Chairman of the PLO's Executive Committee for 35 years, Chairman of Fatah for about four decades, and President of the PA for 10 years. Abbas's succession marked the end of the era of intifadas—the Palestinian popular uprisings led by a uniform-wearing leadership that embraced terrorism as part of its policy.

Abbas's leadership has been characterized by an adherence to the political process and a rejection of violence and terror, although it is also characterized by a confrontational approach toward Israel in the international arena. He has invested efforts toward the establishment of a Palestinian state and its institutions, and the imposition of order in the territory controlled by the PA, in accordance with his vision of “one authority, one law, and one weapon.” On the other hand, he is accountable for the split between the West Bank and Gaza and between the two main Palestinian movements, Fatah and Hamas, and the ongoing stagnation in the political process, which has discouraged the achievement of a two-state solution, i.e., the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the June 4, 1967 lines, with its capital in East Jerusalem.

With Arafat's demise in late 2004, there was widespread consensus among Fatah's leadership institutions that Abbas would be the candidate for PA president. In the presidential elections held in 2005 (and which have not been held since), Abbas won 62 percent of the vote. He emphasized his support for negotiations with Israel, opposition to an armed struggle, and support for an agreement that would create a Palestinian state within the '67 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem, as well as the “right of return” for Palestinian refugees. Many commentators attribute his victory to the fact that he was

not a belligerent figure and advocated the path of negotiations, and as such, did not evoke strong feelings of opposition. Abbas had been part of the PLO leadership since 1968 when Fatah joined the PLO, and during most of that time he was the right-hand man of Arafat, the unchallenged leader. Abbas served for a short time as the head of the PA government alongside Arafat, and therefore upon Arafat's death it was natural that he become the Chairman of the PA and its President. Others who made claims to the leadership believed that at some point they would be able to unseat or succeed him.

Since his early days in Palestinian politics, Abbas clung to the approach that violent opposition to Israel does not help realize the goal of a Palestinian state and that diplomatic efforts in the international arena are preferred. His approach was not accepted for many years and was even marginalized in Palestinian and Arab discourse, since it called for dialogue with Israel and with Israelis even before the historic recognition by the PLO of the State of Israel (within the June 4, 1967 lines) at the conclusion of the 19th Palestinian National Council (PNC) meeting in Algiers in 1988, during the first intifada in the West Bank and Gaza, which began in late 1987. Abbas played a central role in the direct talks with Israeli representatives (though only behind the scenes, in Track II talks), which led to the Oslo Accords. With the signing of the agreements, his approach won recognition and he emerged from the shadows.

The heavy damage sustained by the Palestinians during the second intifada (2000–2005), a campaign of lethal terror against the Jewish population in Israel and the settlements, led to the death of thousands of Palestinians and the widespread destruction of homes and property; the loss of legitimacy for the realization of Palestinian national aspirations from both Israeli and international viewpoints, due to the choice of terror instead of negotiations; the loss of employment; Israel's imposition of heavier restrictions on movement; and damage to the Palestinian economy and quality of life. It subsequently also led to construction of the security barrier, which in Palestinian eyes was

viewed as a wall of separation (B'Tselem, 2017). All these paved the way for the rise of a leader that promised a new approach, and indeed, Abbas was embraced and won international and pan-Arab support.

The beginning of Abbas's rule was characterized by an intensive process led by PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to build a base for the future Palestinian state. Abbas, with his declared policy of fighting terror and aspiration to restore the international legitimacy of the Palestinian people, initiated the security coordination with Israel and made sure to maintain it even in periods of political and military tension, although from time to time he threatened to terminate it. When the security coordination with Israel was discontinued in 2020, following Israel's announcement that it would annex territory according to the framework issued by the Trump administration, known as "the deal of the century" (Trump White House, 2020), in practice it continued counterterror efforts. Overall, Abbas's tenure was characterized by a stated approach that seeking a final status agreement is the only way to resolve the conflict.

Since 2014 and following the last attempt to achieve a final status agreement with Israel, which was mediated by US Secretary of State John Kerry, and the round of conflict between Israel and Hamas during Operation Protective Edge in Gaza, the political process has been in a "deep freeze." In parallel, Hamas, a political rival of both Fatah and the PA, has gained strength at their expense. The erosion of Fatah's status began already with the victory of Hamas in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in 2006 and the takeover by force in Gaza a year later, where Hamas has ruled ever since.

The erosion of the status of the PA as the only legitimate sovereign in the Palestinian arena was accelerated by the ongoing stagnation of the political process and the policy of successive Israeli governments, which prevents or at least rejects any arrangement that leads to the creation of a Palestinian state. To the extent that these governments worked to expand the settlements in the West Bank and established new ones—alongside the tacit approval of illegal settlements and the growing threats of annexation following announcement

of the Trump plan—and the subsequent signing of the Abraham Accords (U.S. Department of State, n.d.), which normalized relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, the legitimacy of Abbas's political approach was undermined and his power diminished. His approach, considered to be conciliatory and viewed as serving the interests of the Israeli occupation, has been subject to strong criticism among the Palestinian public.

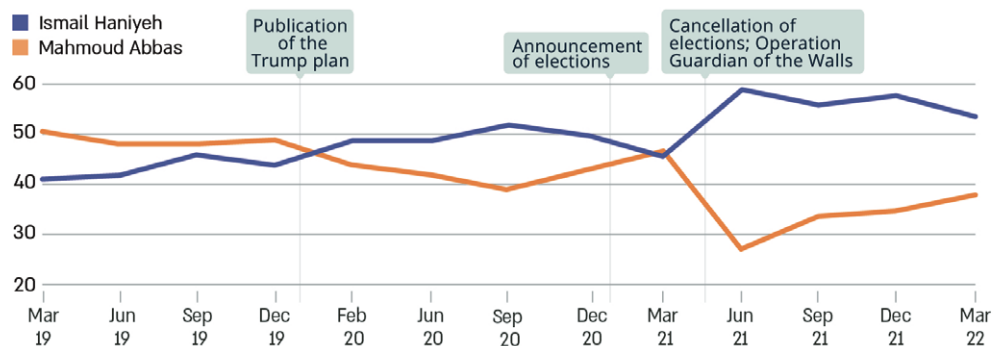
Moreover, during Abbas's rule Fatah and the PLO have lost power to the PA, which currently controls the centers of power in the West Bank, is recognized in the international area as the government representing the future state, and has potential leverage in Gaza. In the eyes of many Palestinians, Hamas, which does not accept Fatah's control of the PLO and the PA, is a legitimate alternative to lead the Palestinian national movement. Fatah is considered a corrupt and anachronistic organization that preserves the traditional centers of power and does not allow the emergence of alternative centers of power, particularly since Abbas took control of the PLO and Fatah and became President of the PA. Hamas takes pride in being a social movement that holds regular elections for its institutions—the external leadership, the leadership in Gaza, and the leadership in the West Bank, as well as the leadership of Hamas prisoners jailed in Israel and the leadership in the refugee camps—and whose institutions are run collectively, notwithstanding the obstacles created by Israel and the PA. Even the PLO, which represents all the Palestinians in the territories and the diaspora and is meant to link all the main Palestinian factions, has over the years become an archaic organization with mainly symbolic power and little influence over decision making.

The PA and its leader therefore face an unprecedented crisis of confidence among the Palestinian public. Abbas, who at the beginning of his rule projected the image of a clear-headed leader who promised to establish democratic state institutions, has in practice undermined those institutions. He did not hold elections; appointed his loyalists to key positions; weakened political opponents and rivals; and suppressed expressions of protest against him.

The public criticism of Abbas intensified after the cancellation of the elections for the PLC, which were scheduled for May 2021. Subsequently, the criticism grew as a result of Hamas's attack on Israel in which it positioned itself as the leader of the Palestinian camp and the defender of Jerusalem. Joining this were the economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the decline in funding to the PA. In contrast, Hamas achieved concessions from Israel: relief in the Gaza closure, work permits for Gazans in Israel, and the launch of reconstruction projects in Gaza.

Opinion polls confirm the lack of legitimacy of Abbas's rule and the PA in general, where the main undermining factor is the political rivalry with Hamas. A survey conducted in June 2021 (about a month after Operation Guardian of the Walls and two months after the cancellation of the elections) by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) headed by Dr. Khalil Shikaki, in collaboration with Konrad Adenaur Stiftung (PCPSR, 2021) found that about two-thirds of the Palestinian public are opposed to the cancellation or deferral of the elections and do not believe Abbas that the deferral was due to Israel's refusal to allow the elections to include East Jerusalem. Many believe that the reason for the deferral lay in Abbas's fear of a possible victory for Hamas. Furthermore, the survey findings show that had the presidential elections been held, Abbas would have lost to Hamas head Ismail Haniyeh (59 percent vs. 27 percent), and in the elections for the legislature, Hamas would have won 41 percent of the votes as opposed to only 30 percent for Fatah. These figures confirm the trends charted in prior surveys, which point to a drop in support for a two-state solution and an increase in support for violent opposition to Israel.

Support for Ismail Haniyeh vs. Mahmoud Abbas as President of the PA



Source: Public opinion polls carried out by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR)

These figures and the trends they reflect paint a worrisome picture for Abbas and his supporters and demonstrate the prestige enjoyed by Hamas as an alternative. Against this background, the PA's security apparatuses are trying to suppress the growing public protest, which accuses Abbas and his underlings of causing the death in June 2021 of incarcerated Nizar Banat, a social activist and vocal critic who had intended to run in the elections for the legislature. The demonstrations in protest of his death were dispersed forcibly and activists were arrested, as well as in demonstrations following the killing of young Palestinians in clashes with IDF forces.

The public criticism was enhanced by the protest against the PA's foreign policy, and in particular, the inability to generate pressure on Israel in various international forums, including the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. The Trump administration represented a challenge for Abbas and made it difficult for him to "internationalize" the conflict, i.e., make it a focus of international rather than only local attention. This effort, which was led by the PA, experienced a serious blow when President Trump closed the Palestinian Consulate in Jerusalem, moved the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to

Jerusalem, and closed the Palestinian diplomatic office in Washington, while cutting off the financing to UNWRA, the transfer of assistance to Palestinian organizations by way of USAID, and the direct transfer of funds to the PA following the Taylor Force Act.¹ The most serious blow was the so-called deal of the century, a plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that ignored most of the Palestinians' historic demands and in theory granted legitimacy to the State of Israel to annex territory in the West Bank (Dekel & Shusterman, 2020). It also laid the groundwork for the Abraham Accords between Israel and several Arab states, thus removing the demand to reach a negotiated solution in the Israel-Palestinian conflict as a precondition for normalization between the Arab states and Israel. These developments deepened the strategic crisis experienced by the PA and highlighted that Abbas's policy was not producing any benefits.

The election of President Joe Biden to the White House breathed new hope into the leadership of the PA regarding its support of a political process with Israel. To those in the leadership, Trump's replacement by Biden took the deal of the century off the table, and the Biden administration resumed the traditional support of a two-state solution. Abbas and senior figures in the PA were encouraged by disagreements between the government of Israel and the Biden administration, and in particular, by the US demand that Israel refrain from steps that preclude the possibility of a two-state solution in the future. Nonetheless, after nearly two years in office in which the Biden administration did not lead to an Israeli change in policy or prompt any significant action, the political stagnation persists and the PA continues weakening. The Palestinian leadership has realized that the Biden administration—in contrast to expectations—does not intend to apply pressure to restart the political

- 1 The Taylor Force Act prohibits the US government from transferring any assistance to the PA until it stops paying salaries to terrorists and condemns terror. The law was approved as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act in 2018. Taylor Force was an American citizen killed in a terrorist attack on the Tel Aviv-Yafo boardwalk in March 2016.

process. Discouragement also increased among Palestinians from the lack of international and regional support and interest in their predicament.

The platform of Israel's government under Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, formed in June 2021, included maintaining the "status quo" in the Palestinian arena, or in other words deferring progress in any political process. At the same time, maintaining the status quo also means deferring steps toward unilateral annexation of the West Bank, though not initiatives for regional economic development. In this context, for the first time in years, Abbas met with Israeli senior officials, chief among them Minister of Defense Benny Gantz, and spoke with Prime Minister Yair Lapid. These talks did not lead to a dramatic change in the PA's status or an improvement in the Palestinian public's attitude toward it, but rather increased criticism on charges of the PA's cooperation with Israel at the expense of the Palestinian public.

As of the time of this writing, the political process remains frozen and the Palestinians are preparing for the "post-Abbas era." Alliances are forming and groups are merging in preparation for a struggle for power. Despite his weakness, Abbas has rejected demands such as the discontinuation of security coordination with Israel and is working to maintain his position—but this is essentially a holding action. The study below reviews and analyzes various scenarios once Abbas departs the political stage, and examines their implications for the Palestinian arena and for Israel. It concludes with policy recommendations for decision makers in Israel that aim to protect and advance Israel's interests.