

The Appointment of Hussein al-Sheikh as PLO Deputy Chairman and the Reforms in the Palestinian Authority—A Unifying Move or a Source of Division?

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As part of the reforms recently announced by Mahmoud Abbas, the PLO Central Council approved the appointment of Hussein al-Sheikh as deputy chairman of the organization—a position that did not previously exist. This step reflects Abbas’s response to pressure exerted by Arab states, chiefly Saudi Arabia, as well as other countries including the United States, in light of the complex ramifications of the war in the Gaza Strip and Abbas’s own intense anger—shared by Arab governments and Arab media—toward Hamas. This move is also likely driven by Abbas’s desire, as he approaches the age of 90, to prevent chaos in the post-Abbas era. While it is too early to determine whether this appointment effectively designates al-Sheikh as Abbas’s successor, it clearly positions him with an advantage compared to other contenders. At the same time, many senior Fatah officials do not regard al-Sheikh as a suitable candidate for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority or for leading the Palestinian people. Therefore, if the planned reforms in the Palestinian Authority do not succeed in reuniting the Fatah movement or in initiating internal elections, al-Sheikh’s appointment may serve more as a source of contention than as a stabilizing measure. Although al-Sheikh is expected to rely in this context on Saudi, broader Arab, and international support, his perceived status as an “Israeli-backed appointee” due to his ties with Israel may undermine his legitimacy and relevance.

The PLO Central Council approved the appointment of Hussein al-Sheikh as deputy chairman of the PLO during a session held on April 26 in Ramallah, and a few days later, Azzam al-Ahmad was appointed to replace al-Sheikh as secretary-general of the PLO Executive Committee. This was part of a series of reforms announced by Mahmoud Abbas in his speech at the Arab League Summit convened on March 4 in Cairo, which focused on addressing the challenges posed by the war that Hamas initiated against Israel on October 7, 2023. The appointment was preceded by a two-day session of the Central Council, where the issue of the deputy position—previously non-existent—was discussed. Among other reforms announced by Abbas and already partially implemented are the establishment of a mechanism for replacing him as president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in case of incapacitation, and the possibility of granting a “pardon” to those expelled from Fatah, along with an invitation for those who left to return. These steps aim to unify the movement, which has fragmented into numerous factions in recent years, particularly in the lead-up to the elections that had been scheduled for May 2021.

A number of years ago, Abbas had appointed veteran Mahmoud al-Aloul as his deputy within Fatah. However, with al-Sheikh's appointment, Abbas has effectively split the three leadership roles he held—chairman of the PLO, the PA, and Fatah—into three distinct positions. This marks a fundamental departure from the post-Oslo Accords reality, where both Arafat and Abbas concentrated all three titles, thus maintaining full control over the Palestinian political arena. Control of the Palestinian Authority—considered a primary center of power since the Oslo Accords and one that has weakened the PLO as an umbrella organization—remains, for now, in Abbas's hands. Rather than appointing a successor, Abbas established a mechanism that assigns the Palestinian National Council (PNC) chair the responsibility of selecting a replacement within 90 days after his departure, while serving as interim president.

The new deputy chairman of the PLO, Hussein al-Sheikh, 65, is a veteran Fatah member from the generation that came of age during the First Intifada in the West Bank. Over the past two decades, he has grown close to Abbas and has become one of his most trusted confidants. He accompanies Abbas in nearly all activities, which has enabled him to cultivate strong relationships with Israeli and international officials. Seen as Abbas's political heir, al-Sheikh is committed to security coordination with Israel and advocates managing relations through diplomatic channels.

Like many senior Fatah officials, al-Sheikh also has served time in Israeli prison (he was sentenced to 11 years for membership in a terror cell, of which he served two). Despite this, Israeli security officials have not considered him a key instigator of terrorism, and allegations of his involvement during the Second Intifada were never fully substantiated. Over recent decades, he has held numerous prominent roles, including head of the General Authority of Civil Affairs (a minister-level position requiring close coordination with Israel and the international community); member and secretary-general of the PLO Executive Committee, responsible for the negotiations portfolio following the death of Saeb Erekat; member of the Central Committee of Fatah since 2007; and a senior officer in the Preventive Security Service. Nonetheless, al-Sheikh has also faced numerous allegations of corruption, misconduct, and sexual harassment—damaging his public image and raising doubts about his fitness to assume top leadership. The considerable wealth he and his family have accumulated further contributes to a negative perception.

The backdrop to Abbas's reforms and al-Sheikh's appointment includes sustained pressure on the Palestinian Authority to implement reforms, particularly from Saudi Arabia—which has linked these reforms to the advancement of its ties with the Trump administration—as well as other Arab donor states, the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. While Abbas has long resisted these pressures, the devastation by the war in Gaza and the resulting cessation of normalization with Israel has compelled him to act. Abbas's deep anger at Hamas, coupled with widespread Arab criticism of Hamas over the destruction wrought by its October 7 assault, helped free him from previous hesitations. Should Abbas succeed in reuniting Fatah's ranks, he—or his successor—will be better positioned to shift the power balance with Hamas in favor of diplomatic and legal struggle over violent resistance. In Abbas's view, the war has exposed Hamas as out of touch with today's strategic realities and incapable of managing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. His advanced age also likely played a role in his

desire to designate a successor with a deep understanding of the Palestinian political landscape and its regional and international context.

Yet these moves have not been universally accepted within Fatah or the broader Palestinian arena. Criticism has centered less on al-Sheikh's appointment and more on the legitimacy and timing of the Central Council session, which failed to address urgent national issues. Critics from within Fatah and other PLO member factions question how al-Sheikh's appointment contributes to Palestinian unity, or whether it exacerbates intra-Palestinian fragmentation. They also decry the Council's failure—18 months into the war—to discuss a ceasefire or the humanitarian needs of Gazans. Moreover, some view al-Sheikh as "Israel's man" within the PLO, and Abbas's tight control over the Palestinian National Council and the opaque nature of the appointment process have already weakened his legitimacy. Critics also stress that appointing a deputy is only a minor component of the needed reforms. They call for the election of a new National Council and Legislative Council to replace the long-defunct bodies. Hamas also issued a scathing response to Abbas's speech, especially his insult directed at them, condemning al-Sheikh's appointment and accusing Abbas of using the war to deepen internal rifts. Several Palestinian leftist factions walked out in protest before the appointment was finalized.

While some Fatah members and former affiliates welcomed Abbas's reforms, his condemnation of Hamas, and his demand that Hamas release Israeli hostages and end the war, many still believe the central issue remains Abbas's continued grip on the presidency and its extensive powers. His call for "pardoning" expelled or departed members has received little response, largely because returning to Fatah requires individuals to submit personal requests and pledge loyalty—terms many view as humiliating. These individuals do not see themselves as outsiders to Fatah but as former members forced out or who left due to corrupt leadership or deviation from the movement's traditional struggle. Some organized factions, such as Mohammed Dahlan's Democratic Reform Bloc, are interested in returning as a group and not as individuals—leaving the impact of the reforms and al-Sheikh's appointment on Fatah's unity uncertain.

Still, the appointment positions Hussein al-Sheikh with an advantage for a future bid to succeed Abbas. He enjoys strong ties with the Palestinian security apparatus, which, despite the PA's ongoing weakness, remains loyal to Abbas. However, Fatah's tradition since the Oslo Accords has required broad internal consensus to legitimize leadership. Both Arafat and Abbas were elected with full movement support, gaining legal and popular legitimacy. Al-Sheikh, by contrast, faces not only a lack of consensus but a new era shaped by post-Oslo generations competing for leadership—young activists rooted in the West Bank rather than the PLO's historical external leadership. Al-Sheikh's recognition by Saudi Arabia, other Arab states, and the international community reflects Abbas's understanding of the post-October 7 reality, in which the PLO and PA have become increasingly dependent on regional and global actors, including Israel. Although al-Sheikh's acceptance in these circles may provide him with temporary backing, his appointment could also leave behind a fractured Fatah and an open political front. Persistent challenges to his candidacy may deepen internal rifts and embolden extremist factions that reject all agreements with Israel.

Promoting unity within Fatah, holding internal elections, and stabilizing the movement as a partner committed to signed agreements is also in Israel's strategic interest—particularly if its government seeks to manage the conflict while avoiding a political process aimed at a permanent resolution. As such, Israel should cultivate necessary engagement with Hussein al-Sheikh and other Fatah leaders who view cooperation with Israel as essential, in an effort to lay the groundwork for a better future for both peoples.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg