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## Critical Policy Brief

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*The Third Palestinian Legislative Elections:*

### **Forces of the "Left" Between the Struggle for Survival and the Search for an Effective Role in Palestinian Politics**

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Strategic Analysis Unit  
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## **The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR)**

PSR is an independent nonprofit institution and think tank of policy analysis and academic research. It was founded in 2000 with the goal of advancing scholarship and knowledge on immediate issues of concern to Palestinians in three areas: domestic politics and government, strategic analysis and foreign policy, and public opinion polls and survey research. PSR conducts policy analysis and empirical surveys and public opinion research and organizes task forces, study groups, meetings and conferences. Its work focuses on current public policy issues with a special reliance on empirical evidence as a tool to advance scholarship and understanding.

PSR is dedicated to promoting objective and nonpartisan research and analysis and to encouraging a better understanding of Palestinian domestic and international environment in an atmosphere of free debate and exchange of ideas. PSR is registered as a nonprofit institution in the Palestinian Ministry of Justice.

This brief is the third in PSR series of Critical Policy Briefs for 2021. These briefs address important domestic and foreign policy-oriented issues confronting Palestinian society today.

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# Critical Policy Brief

*The Third Palestinian Legislative Elections:*

## **Forces of the "Left" Between the Struggle for Survival and the Search for an Effective Role in Palestinian Politics**

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The presidential decree issued in mid-January is the first practical step for holding general elections, starting with elections for the Legislative Council of the Palestinian Authority on May 22. Regardless of the seriousness and possibility of holding the third Palestinian legislative elections, which were delayed or caused to be delayed for more than ten years, the forces of the left must prepare for these elections and decide what they want: is it merely survival, or working, despite their relatively small size, to be a third, effective force in the Palestinian political system?

**This paper aims to discuss the left's current options in dealing with the issue of legislative elections. It covers three such options: for the left-wing forces to contest the upcoming elections within a joint national list entailing components of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), with or without Hamas, or as a unified left list, or with individual left lists. This paper highlights some of the advantages and drawbacks of these options. It ends with a proposal for a comprehensive, unified mobilization of the forces of the Palestinian left.**

### **Background**

If new legislative elections are held next May, they will be the third elections in 27 years since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority apparatus, after the elections of 1996 and 2006. These elections will be held through a different system from the previous ones, a full proportional representation system. The results of Public Opinion Poll [No. 77](#) of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research indicate that, if new legislative elections are held with the participation of all political forces, 61% say that they will participate in them. The Hamas Change and Reform List will gain 34%, Fatah, 38%, and all other lists that had participated in the 2006 elections will gain 8% in total, while 20% have not yet decided who they will vote for. The findings indicate that 3 blocs (including two electoral lists, representing 4 parties/factions) who have passed the electoral threshold in the 2006 legislative elections, will not be able to do so if legislative elections are held today, taking into account a margin of error of +/- 3% and the transformation of the electoral system into one of full proportional representation.

As evidenced by the results of the aforementioned poll, the parties and fronts of the so-called Palestinian left may lose half their seats that they had collectively gained in the 2006 legislative elections, which were only 9 out of 132 seats. This expected loss is the result of the failure of these parties and fronts to maintain their principles and goals and implement their programs. Despite their awareness of this and their attempt to form a body that expresses minimum unity as a third force, such as the [National Democratic Union](#) that came into existence between September 2018 and January 2019, the calculations, based on narrow interests of the leaders of these parties and fronts, have caused them to lose another opportunity to protect themselves from extinction and prevent their exit from the Palestinian political scene. The experience of the Alternative List

in the 2006 elections, which consisted of the Democratic Front coalition, the People's Party, and the Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA), was not a successful experiment in terms of persuading the masses to vote for it, because it was a temporary coalition that ended with the announcement of results, winning only two seats in those elections.

The forces of the left must realize that the Hamas-Fatah rapprochement and agreement express the depth of the crisis that the two movements have reached in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and do not express the alleged unity required to face the challenges witnessed by the Palestinians. This may be an opportunity for third or new forces to present themselves as alternatives. The depth of the Hamas crisis can be evidenced by its approval of the Fatah movement's project based on the solution of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, at a time when many leaders of the Fatah movement themselves believe that this solution has become impossible and long dead. Likewise, the Hamas slogan of armed resistance has retreated from being a strategy to a mere tactic. This is evident in Hamas' support, and then control, of the Return Marches that began in March 2018, as well as the fact that the last real armed confrontation with Israel was in 2014, and the various disputes between Hamas and Islamic Jihad about controlling and timing the use of arms.

On the other hand, the Fatah movement's crisis appears to be deeper and more complex, leading it to the verge of fragmentation after its resounding failure, for more than a quarter of a century, to achieve its program based on the two-state solution, as well as its failure to build institutions capable of forming the nucleus of the state project. The slogans of "internationalization" and "changing the PA mandate" have not merely fallen, but brought the opposite results, ushering in Arab-Israeli normalization that has placed Fatah and its leadership in a spot of limited maneuver and submission, or a revolution for which it is no longer qualified. The call for a popular resistance strategy-- which was adopted by all PLO factions, as well as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, in the meeting of the general secretaries on September 3, 2020, which was held, allegedly, to confront the Deal of the Century and the wave of Arab-Israeli normalization-- has proven to be mere lip service. It has been more than six months since the first statement of the so-called Popular Resistance leadership, without the issuance of a second statement. This is evidence of a deficiency in describing the era, the program, and the appropriate tools. As a result, the call for popular resistance did not receive any response from the public. It should be noted that, according to the [Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research](#), Palestinian support for the two-state solution has declined from 55% in 2011 to 39% in 2020 despite the support it has from all Palestinian parties and movements (including Hamas, and with no objection from Islamic Jihad). Moreover, [62%](#) of the public believe that this solution is no longer practical due to Israeli settlement expansion, Support for the one-state solution in historic Palestine, with equal rights for all its citizens, has risen from 27% in 2011 to 37% in 2020, despite the fact that no Palestinian party or movement has adopted this solution.

The Hamas-Fatah dyad, based on partisan quotas and interests, which has forgotten or ignored their roles as national liberation movements, is not a true division, one based on the beliefs of the masses that support them. But it will remain as such in the absence of a real, third force. Palestinians today are thirsty for a party or a movement capable of mobilizing their energies and hopes, one that addresses their minds and present a revolutionary and a realistic vision and program.

### **Options and a window of opportunity**

According to the results of the aforementioned poll, and after adding the percentage of those who will not participate in the elections (39%) and those who have not yet decided whom they will vote for (20% of the 61% who said they will participate), the total comes to 51% of all Palestinians who are entitled to vote. Thus, there is a real chance for a new party, faction or movement to convince the 39% to participate. It is believed that the main reason for the unwillingness to participate, among a large proportion of these, is their lack of confidence in the existing parties and movements, and also, perhaps, because they are not convinced of their

programs. There is also a chance to reach out to the 20% of those who plan to participate in the elections, but have not yet decided to whom they will vote (12% of the total number eligible to vote). There is even an opportunity to compete for the votes of those who have already decided whom they will vote for, if the new party or movement is able to present a new, different, and perhaps revolutionary program, in terms of its nature and tools. Thus, the percentage of those who can be persuaded may reach more than 50% of all Palestinians who are entitled to vote. In other words, if a new party or movement is able to convince only 25% of all Palestinians who are entitled to vote, this party will outperform Fatah and Hamas and become the largest force in the Legislative Council.

**The Palestinian left has three options. The first is to maintain a symbolic presence in the political system, as in the first option below. The second is to seek to exercise an influential role, by creating a unified left. This option however is dependent on the failure of Fatah and Hamas to create a joint list of their own. Finally, there is an option in which the left risks increasing its weakness, and possibly eradicating it completely from the political scene, in the form of individual lists of left parties.**

### **(1) Joint National List**

With reference to the outcomes of the dialogue between Hamas and Fatah, in particular, and other factions, in general, the last of which was held at Cairo on February 8 and 9, it appears that the idea of running in the next legislative elections with a joint list that includes Hamas, Fatah and the remaining PLO factions is under serious consideration by the official bodies of Fatah and Hamas.

Fatah may wish, through this joint list, to protect the movement from the almost certain fragmentation in its ranks, by restricting the ability of its prominent leaders to form electoral lists outside the official list of Fatah (the President's list). The results of a public poll by the [Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research last December](#) indicated that, if Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti forms a list outside the official list of Fatah, his list would gain 25% of the votes, compared to 19% for the official list of Fatah. Similarly, if Mohammed Dahlan forms a list outside the official list of Fatah, his list would gain 7% of the votes, compared to 27% for the official list of Fatah. In both cases, the "official" Fatah list will lose to Hamas, which will receive about 33% of the votes. As for Hamas, it may have submitted to the idea of power-sharing and quotas, as it was not faithful to the votes cast by the majority in the last legislative elections. Perhaps Hamas sees the joint list as an opportunity for the beginning of its accession to and effective representation in PLO institutions, and an opportunity to be rid of the burdens of governance in Gaza, as well as an opportunity for its recognition by the international community, which has boycotted the government formed by Hamas after it won the majority of seats in the Legislative Council in 2006.

As for the forces of the left (Popular Front, Democratic Front, National Initiative, People's Party and the Democratic Union – FIDA), they seem to be powerless, seeing in the joint national list a lifeline for their symbolic survival on the political scene, after the accumulated failure of their performance and the dissolution of most of their cadres and popular bases. There is a risk that most of them will not be able to reach the threshold, and thus may fall out of the political scene, if they run the upcoming legislative elections individually. If the forces of the Palestinian left want to preserve their current symbolic existence and dispense with the ambition of an alternative or influential force, they must join the joint list with Fatah and Hamas if such a list is agreed upon, or enter a joint list with Fatah and all the PLO factions. One of the advantages of this option is that it is easy to market as a unification option required by the current conditions, to keep the forces of the left in the political scene and give them an opportunity to try to reform their situation. It is also expected that the Fatah and Hamas movements will contribute to the bulk of the cost of the electoral campaign for this joint list, thus relieving the left of much-needed financial costs. However, among the drawbacks of this option is that it keeps these forces ineffective and under the influence of the two major parties, as it is not expected that Hamas and Fatah will agree to give these forces a weight (number of



seats) greater than what they had jointly gained in the 2006 elections. Their presence and influence in the likely national unity government after the elections will be limited, as the Hamas-Fatah collusion may eliminate Fatah's need to appease these factions by giving them ministerial portfolios, as was the case in the past. This option also denies the left the distinction (if any) in its programs.

## **(2) United Left List**

There is a great opportunity for existing third forces or for new powers, especially if they are based on a new, young leadership that has not been tainted by the corruption of the Authority and the factions that constitute it. This should be seen as a call to all young men and women of the Palestinian left, in particular, and to all young men and women of Palestine, in general (who, in the 18-39 years age group, account for more than 60% of those with the right to vote, and, for more than half of the voters, it will be the first time in their lives that they are entitled to vote, being in the 18-32 years age group) to trust themselves and not to hesitate to present new, emancipatory visions and programs of struggle that address the minds of the masses, not in the defeatist "pragmatism" or the destructive militarism way, but in the belief that the will and unity of the masses, which trust their leadership, is capable of working miracles.

The forces of the left must realize that their audience no longer accepts any excuse for the continued existence of this number of ineffective left-wing parties and fronts, especially that the key reasons for failure of all attempts to unify the left forces are considered by many as due to reasons and interests of particular leaders of those parties and fronts. Further, there is no programmatic or ideological reason that hinders this unity. Thus, one of the advantages of the option of a united left list is that it may restore some lost confidence in the parties and fronts of the Palestinian left. Several attempts have been made to accomplish this outcome. One should build on these efforts in order to achieve it in a short period of time (before the end of the candidacy period on March 31). Also, this option doubles the chances for this list to gain a number of seats that enable it to build an alliance with Fatah or Hamas, if the two parties run in the elections separately and neither gains a majority in the Legislative Council. However, one of the drawbacks of this option is that, if Hamas and Fatah are allied before or after the elections, these forces will remain weak. Even if these forces double their number of seats compared to the 2006 elections, they will not be able to rise to the level of an effective force if they do not properly appraise the conditions of the country and offer programs that treat the malaise in our political system while addressing the reasons for their own previous failures, including the inability to bring forth new leaders. The leftist forces will do better if they ally themselves with social forces and independent figures that are close to their ideology while having a presence at the grassroots level, such as the "[Wa'ad](#)" (promise) movement for homeland, justice and democracy, which announced its formation at a press conference on February 27, 2021, in Ramallah. The movement has declared that it is not "an electoral bloc", but will support the lists seen as close to the issues and principles that the movement upholds. It is clear that most of the initiators of this movement are members and cadres with leftist backgrounds. We should keep in mind that the left today is not engaged with the needs and concerns of citizens, and, thus, its ability to properly decipher the public scene is hampered. It should remember the popular movement to bring down the Social Security law in 2018/2019, which was one of the most important reasons leading to overthrow of the previous government. Most of the leftist forces either supported or did not oppose the aforementioned law. Rather, the leadership pushed leftist leaders to the forefront to defend that law and try to convince the masses of its value. [Eventually, the movement forced the PA president to abandon the law and stop its implementation.](#)

## **(3) Individual Left Lists**

In the event of failure to achieve the previous options, and given the fact that there has been no change in most or all of the top decision-makers in the forces of the left since the 2006 elections, these forces may choose to run in the next elections through separate lists or in coalitions similar to Badil (alternative) that ran in the previous election. one of the advantages of this option is that it gives the forces of the left the opportunity to present their own pure programs and visions, without having to compromise. It also gives

them a greater margin of freedom and maneuver for potential coalitions after the elections. One or more of these forces may gain a number of seats that would force Fatah or Hamas to seek their participation in the next government, as neither Fatah nor Hamas are likely to obtain a majority that would enable it to form a government on its own. A drawback of this option is that some forces would risk failing to meet the threshold condition, thus increasing their weakness, potentially fading out, with the exception of the “Popular Front” which probably believes that it retains its presence and base of popularity to enable it to pass the threshold. Yet, this will not suffice to make it an influential force. Likewise, individual electoral campaigns for each list will multiply the demands on and deplete the financial resources of those forces that are in dire need of them. The left’s lack of financial resources has been the price it paid for submitting to the dictates of the PLO leadership which denied it the right to its legitimate share in the National Fund, allowing Fatah and its president to monopolize these resources and blackmail them on more than one occasion. Under this option, leftist factions will be forced to compromise further on their principles after the elections.

## What to do?

To be an effective third force, the factions of the left must double their efforts, today, not only to maintain a presence in the Palestinian political scene, as in the first and second options, but to contribute to determining the next Palestinian domestic direction and the future direction of the relationship with Israel. The left and other third party fronts in the PLO, along with newly emerging parties wishing to be an alternative or influential third force, must review and study the causes of the “national project’s” crisis and the reality and the future of the PLO and its liberation program. The parties and fronts of the third force must also study the causes of failure of the aforementioned strategies and reconsider the reading and characterization of the status quo to be able to provide real programs and tools, removed from slogans. This requires a review of the pillars of the status quo and how to deal with them. For example, many leaders of these parties and fronts describe the situation that exists between the river and the sea as a reality of one state, ruled by Israel as “an apartheid system.” This is true, but how can this reality be marketed to the world to end it, given the continued existence of the PA apparatus? Here, it must be recalled that the majority of the Palestinian public (55%) sees the continued existence of the PA as a burden on it and on its cause.

The forces of the left that wish to become an alternative influential third force must instate a dramatic change that restores the confidence of their cadres and popular bases in them. They must take quick, practical steps, for example by electing or selecting a committee for unity and elections, from outside the governing bodies of each front/party, because these bodies have proved that they are part of the problem and cannot to be part of the solution. The public is eager to see new, young faces. The members of these committees may all be candidates for the upcoming legislative elections on a united left list. These committees should convene for several days to elect a leadership committee of 21 members from among them (it should be named the Higher Committee of Unity), with one representative, at least, of each party/front. This committee should make its decisions by an absolute majority (50%+1), in order to prepare the election program and everything related to the election campaign, and its decisions should be binding for the participating parties and fronts.

Among the disadvantages of this proposal is the lack of time (before the end of the candidacy period on March 31). Also, there does not seem to be real will among the leaders of the target forces to waive the privileges that they currently enjoy; rather, they will probably seek to uphold them. On the other hand, one of the advantages of this proposal is that it may be able to restore the confidence and energies of all the cadres and bases of the left forces, and may even represent a breakthrough, capable of attracting broad groups of society, as mentioned previously. This proposal, if adopted, make it more likely that the left will be better prepared to understand the nature of the status quo and present a political program that bypasses the challenges that led to the failure of previous strategies and slogans. If this happens, the leftist forces, with this new reality, will have a strong and influential presence in the political system, whether they are part of the government or the opposition.

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