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The challenges that forced the Fatah movement to postpone the general elections

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On April 20, 2021, President Mahmoud Abbas issued a decree to postpone the legislative elections that were scheduled to be held in on May 22, 2021 in accordance with a previous decree issued on January 15, 2021. The decree to postpone the elections shocked the majority of the Palestinian public who wanted the elections to be held in order to bring about a change in Palestinian governance and to restore unity and end the West Bank-Gaza Strip split. It also surprised the international community that had hoped that these elections would result in a legitimate government that would represent all Palestinians. What prompted the Palestinian president to overlook all the wishes of the various factions, electoral blocs, the large majority of the Palestinian people, and the wishes of the international community? This paper aims to know the challenges that forced President Abbas and the Fatah movement to postpone the elections and how they can overcome these challenges.

The president's stated justifications for postponing the elections:

The Palestinian President announced that the postponement of the elections came, "in light of the decision of the expanded Palestinian leadership meeting, which included the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Central Committee of Fatah Movement, the leaders of the Palestinian national action factions, and national figures." He justified the postponement decision by stating that the Israeli occupation prevented the holding of elections in the city of Jerusalem, asserting that "there is no abandonment of Jerusalem, and there is no abandonment of the people's exercise of their democratic right in Jerusalem." The president added that "Israel has decided to kill the Arabs in Jerusalem, and we will not allow that."

However, these justifications were not sufficient to satisfy the various parties; Sixty-five percent of the Palestinians expressed their opposition to President Abbas' decision to postpone the general elections, and two-thirds said that the postponement came out of fear of the results, and not for the sake of Jerusalem, according to a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and

Survey Research (PSR) in June 2021.¹ In a statement, the European Union described the decision to postpone the Palestinian elections as "disappointing."² The head of the political bureau of "Hamas", Ismail Haniyeh, considered the reasons for postponing the elections "unconvincing at all." He stressed in a speech that his movement is not in disagreement with Fatah or with any party on the necessity of holding elections in Jerusalem, "but the disagreement with brother Abu Mazen is on making our decision and the will of our people subordinate to the Israeli occupation, or on submitting to the will of the occupier, or on responding to the desire of this party or that."³ Hamas also described Abbas's decision as "a coup against the path of partnership and national consensus, and it is not permissible to subordinate the entire national situation and our popular and national consensus to the agenda of a particular faction."⁴

The challenges that prompted the president and the Fatah movement to postpone the elections:

There is no doubt that the justifications provided by the president and the Fatah movement were not the real reasons behind postponing the elections. Undoubtedly, the president and the Fatah movement knew that postponing the elections would bring them into direct conflict with the majority of the public and other parties. However, the president postponed the elections; an action that reveals that the extent of the difficulties that the president and the Fatah movement would have faced if elections were held, and the results that would ensue. These difficulties, it seems, were greater, in their view, than the cost of clashing with the people and violating the demands to hold elections. What are the challenges that might have prompted the president and Fatah movement to postpone the elections?

First challenge: Fragmentation and lack of discipline within the movement itself

The Fatah movement faced great challenges during its journey in the Palestinian Authority in the 1996 and 2006 general elections, and in the various local elections during the past years. Perhaps the most important problems facing the Fatah movement in all the previous rounds of elections is the division in the movement's ranks and the defection of some of its leaders and cadres to run for the elections independently. After the issuance of a decree to hold the general elections, the leadership of the Fatah movement represented by President Abbas took a decision to prevent the

1 See: Results of Public Opinion Poll No. 80 conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. [Public Opinion Poll No \(80\) | PCPSR](#)

2 See: <https://al-ain.com/article/1619769757>

3 https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab_world/202104301048859402-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A7/

4 *Ibid.*

members of the Central Committee, the Revolutionary Council, the secretaries of the regions, members of parliament and former ministers, in addition to the security and military leaders from running for elections and to give the young generation the opportunity to run in an attempt to renew the movement's energies and to exhibit a new image capable of attracting voters. The movement's leadership established a set of organizational and professional criteria for those running for elections. This decision did not satisfy many of the movement's leaders, who were waiting for this opportunity to consolidate their leadership positions by running for the upcoming legislative elections.

In the last days of March, and before Fatah submitted its official list, restlessness and anger emerged from some Fatah cadres in some areas as a result of their exclusion from the official list or as a result of their placement in unguaranteed positions within the official list. This anger was manifested in regional and factional statements that announced their boycott of the elections and that they would not vote for the movement's list. Then came the talk, which gained credibility at the time, about the inclusion in the electoral list of a selected number of the members of the Central Committee of Fatah, in great contravention of the decision made by the movement's leader, thus weakening the chances of the movement's youth to assume leadership positions.

Moreover, the article in the election law, that stipulated that presidential candidates must be part of existing electoral lists or political parties, posed a critical threat to Marwan Barghouti's candidacy for the presidency. Consequently, the election law itself formed a strong motivation for him and his supporters to form a separate electoral list that would compete with the official movement's list in order to guarantee that Barghouti can run for the presidential elections, even if the official movement list refused to allow him to do so.⁵

These events led to the formation of two electoral lists representing defectors from the Fatah movement, in addition to the Fatah's formal list. Marwan Barghouti (Member of Fatah's Central Committee) and Dr. Nasser Al-Qidwa (also a Central Committee member, dismissed for intending to run for elections outside Fatah's formal list), formed, together, a list in the name of "The Freedom List." Former leader in Fatah, Mohammad Dahlan, a former Central Committee member expelled from the movement some 10 years earlier, formed "The Future Bloc."

The results of a poll conducted by PSR in mid-March showed that Fatah (formal and defectors) has the largest electoral base among the Palestinian forces and factions. In a question about voting in new parliamentary elections with the participation of all the political forces that participated in the 2006 elections, the results showed that an all Fatah's list would receive the vote of 43% of the participants, while the Change and Reform List, affiliated with Hamas, gets 30%, and all other lists combined at 8%, and 18% said they have not yet decided who they will vote for.

However, concerns emerged when respondents were asked about other options that might occur in the elections, such as the intention of Al-Kidwa or Dahlan to form lists to compete in the legislative elections, while the position of the prisoner Barghouti was still ambiguous about his

⁵ The Palestinian Gazette published a notice on March 18, 2021, about an error in Law No. (1) of 2021 amending Law No. (1) of 2007 regarding general elections. The content of this notice is that a candidate for the presidential elections is not required to be nominated by a political party or electoral list.

intention to form an electoral list at that time. But one of the options offered to the public was related to Marwan Barghouti's formation of an independent list. The results showed that in this case, the formal Fatah's list would receive only 24% of the vote, and Barghouti's list would receive 20%, Dahlan's list 7%, and Hamas' list would receive 27%. In another question about Al-Kidwa forming a separate list, Fatah's formal list would receive 32%, Hamas' list would receive 28%, Dahlan's list would receive 6%, and Al-Kidwa's list would receive 4%. The point of all this is that there are legitimate fears that Hamas would have gotten a plurality of the parliamentary seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). However, this would certainly not give it the majority or even the ability to form a coalition government, unless the official Fatah movement led by President Abbas refused to establish a coalition government with Barghouti, Al-Kidwa and Dahlan.

Second challenge: The decline in President Mahmoud Abbas' popularity

The recent years, especially since 2014, have witnessed a decline in the popularity of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. President Abbas was elected to the presidency of the Palestinian Authority in January 2005 and was elected as the head of the Fatah movement at the sixth General Conference of the Fatah movement in 2009 and was re-elected at the seventh conference in 2016.

The year 2014 marked a turning point in President Abbas' popularity, as public opinion polls showed a decline in his popularity in favor of Hamas candidate Ismail Haniyeh as a possible candidate for the presidential elections; not to mention the great challenge posed by the high popularity of the Marwan Barghouti. The decline in President Abbas' popularity is due to a number of reasons, the most important of which are the following:

- *The political horizon of the peace process is closed:* President Abbas has always been a proponent of a peaceful solution and negotiations and is not in favor of violent means of resistance. But with the dominance of the Israeli right headed by Benjamin Netanyahu since 2009, the peace process reached a dead end. With the continuation of the Israeli settlement expansion that disrupts the geographic contiguity of the promised Palestinian state and continuation to Judaize the city of Jerusalem, the Palestinians refused to return to negotiations unless settlement expansion stops, and thus the issue remained between ebb and flow throughout the first term of President Obama. Despite the efforts and success of US Secretary of State John Kerry in conducting negotiations between the two parties in 2013-14, these efforts met the same fate of failure. After that, the negotiations entered a state of clinical death. Nonetheless, President Abbas remained committed to the option of negotiations as the only option. Despite his advocacy of peaceful popular resistance, the Palestinian leadership did not succeed in promoting or supporting this option in a manner that would have made it an effective weapon.

Public opinion polls show a decline among Palestinians in support of the two-state solution in recent years, from about 48 % in March 2019 to 39% in June 2021, according to opinion polls conducted by PSR during this period. This decline is probably the result of public

perception that diplomacy has reaching a dead end. In addition, polls showed that negotiations are no longer considered by the Palestinians the most effective way to establish a Palestinian state.

- *Public dissatisfaction, especially in the Gaza Strip, with President Abbas' policy towards the Strip:* Recent years have witnessed a sharp decline in the President Abbas' popularity in the Gaza Strip. Public opinion polls showed that the president's popularity declined dramatically after the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2014, when it dropped from 53% in June⁶ 2014 before the war to 38% in September 2014⁷ after the war. These findings reflected the decline of Abbas' popularity and the rise of Hamas' Ismail Haniyeh in hypothetical presidential elections, according to two opinion polls conducted by PSR during that period. Gazans felt that they were alone in their battle with the occupation, and that the PA leadership was contributing to the siege imposed by Israel and Egypt. The decline in President Abbas' popularity in the Gaza Strip continued after a series of measures taken by the PA leadership that reduced the delivery of basic services, such as electricity and health services, followed by measures against a large number of public employees in the Gaza Strip, including early and compulsory retirement and a suspension of salaries. Gazans saw these measures as punitive, targeting citizens in the Gaza Strip, which suffers from the scourge of the continuous and tight blockade since 2006.⁸
- *The transformation of the Palestinian political system under his rule into an authoritarian regime that lacks accountability:* The Hamas movement's control of the Gaza Strip led to the split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in June 2007, which in turn led to the absence of the PLC, and the transfer of all the legislative and oversight responsibilities to the executive authority, in particular to the head of the authority, Mahmoud Abbas. Within a few years, President Abbas issued about 300 laws by decrees, the vast majority of which are ordinary, not urgent or emergency laws. The number of these decrees far exceeds the number of laws that the PLC issued during its entire tenure (1996-2007). Without a parliament, there was no longer any accountability for the executive authority, with the exception of the little exercised occasionally by the judiciary, the press, and civil society. In recent years, there has also been a major seizure of power, represented by the dissolution of the PLC in December 2018 after more than 11 years of disruption. The judiciary was also weakened by the executive authority's failure to implement the decisions issued by the courts, in addition to interfering in the affairs of the judiciary authority, which culminated in the Decree Law No. (40) of 2020 amending the Judicial Authority Law, which strengthened the executive authority's dominance over the judiciary. This period also witnessed the targeting of civil society's institutions through a set of measures against non-profit companies and civil organizations, leading to the enforcement of various new

6 Results of Public Opinion Poll No.-52 | PCPSR

7 Results of Public Opinion Poll No.-53 | PCPSR

8 In December 2017, 70% demanded the resignation of President Abbas: Results of Public Opinion Poll No. 66 | PCPSR

restrictions on these institutions, recently represented in Decree Law No. (7) of 2021 amending the Law of Charitable Societies and Civil Organizations.⁹

The damage caused by postponing the elections:

There is no doubt that the decision to postpone the elections and the subsequent events related to Jerusalem and then the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip were the worst and most unprecedented on their effect on the popularity of the president and the popularity of Fatah. At a time when the majority of the public (about 70%) wanted the elections to be held, the president indefinitely postponed the elections. At a time when the president said that the postponement was for the sake of Jerusalem, the majority of the Palestinians (about 65%) saw the postponement not for the sake of Jerusalem, but rather for fear of the election outcome. This was followed by the events in Jerusalem, for which the elections were supposed to have been postponed. However, the president, the Palestinian Authority, and the Fatah movement did not show the public that it is doing what was expected from them in defense of Jerusalem, as only 8% of the public described the president's performance in defending Jerusalem as strong, 11% went to the PA, and 13% went to Fatah's, while 75% of the public described the performance of Hamas as strong.¹⁰

All of this was reflected in a resounding decline in the President Abbas' popularity and a drop in the popularity of Fatah. President Abbas' ability to compete in legislative elections against Haniyeh fell to its lowest level since his election in 2005, as Haniyeh outperformed Abbas by a wide margin (59% to 27% respectively), according to the results of public opinion poll No. (80) conducted by PSR in June 2021, compared to the results of public opinion poll No. (79) conducted by PSR in March 2021, where the results indicated at that time that Abbas had received 47%, compared to 46% for Ismail Haniyeh.

In June, the popularity of Fatah against Hamas also fell. If the legislative elections were held, the latter would outperform the former by 11 points in its favor, as Hamas won 41% of the vote compared to 30% for Fatah, according to the results of the above-mentioned poll. Fatah had outperformed Hamas three months earlier, obtaining 43% compared to 30% for Hamas in a poll conducted by PSR in March 2021.¹¹ The majority (53%) in June also considered Hamas as more qualified to represent and lead the Palestinian people, compared to only 14% who believed that Fatah, led by President Abbas, is better qualified.

Recommendations:

This paper proposes three recommendations to the Fatah movement and its leaders: (1) reverse the decision to postpone the elections, (2) declare Fatah's readiness to build a governmental coalition with other (defected) Fatah lists, and (3) announce the movement's

⁹ This decision was suspended by law following local and external pressure.

¹⁰ See: Results of Public Opinion Poll No. 80 conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. <http://pcpsr.org/ar/node/844>

¹¹ Press release: Results of Public Opinion Poll No. (79) | PCPSR

intention to compete in the presidential elections with a candidate other than President Abbas.

1) Conducting elections immediately, including Jerusalem, and challenging occupation measures

Holding elections has become an urgent Palestinian demand supported by the majority, just as holding them inside the city of Jerusalem is the demand of all Palestinians. However, if the Israeli government insists on its refusal to hold elections in Jerusalem, the Central Elections Committee must announce alternative solutions to hold the elections inside the city, and to have these solutions supported by the Palestinian forces and factions, led by the Fatah movement. The Election Committee, with the support of the Palestinian leadership, can place ballot boxes in front of Israeli post offices, address the European Consulates General accredited to Palestine to place the ballot boxes in their missions, place the ballot boxes in the courtyards of Al-Aqsa Mosque, and address the various churches to place the ballot boxes in their premises. It can also build the capacity to hold elections electronically.

Of course, the Israeli government will work to thwart the election process and will arrest those responsible for it and prevent citizens from going to the polls to exercise their basic rights to vote and choose their representatives. This will happen in front of the eyes of the world and the international media and Israel will be shown in opposition to Palestinian democracy. The PA should let the election day be a day of popular and peaceful resistance that President Abbas has always called for, and the Fatah movement has taken a lead in the city of Jerusalem. This would be the opposite of what Fatah and other factions have done in the past and would provide an opportunity to demonstrate support for the city and its residents to compensate for past failures. Holding elections in Jerusalem is a form of defiance of the occupation and is the best electoral propaganda for Fatah in its upcoming electoral campaign.

2) Unity in the PLC

In light of the dispersion of Fatah's electoral base among three blocs, it must use the election results in a way that enables it to become the largest electoral bloc by uniting its elements within the new PLC, especially if it wants to form a government away from Hamas. It is almost certain that the Freedom List (Barghouti and Al-Kidwa) and the Future List (Dahlan) will not make an alliance with Hamas, especially since the Future List's regional allies (Egypt and the United Arab Emirates) will not allow it to do so in light of their conflict with the parent group (the Muslim Brotherhood) and in light of the tense relations with Hamas' allies in the region. (Qatar, Turkey, and Iran).

3) Run in the presidential elections with a new candidate.

It seems that President Abbas has become a source of weakness for Fatah's popularity. His long stay in power without elections and without achievements that can be presented to the people, at the level of the peace process or at the internal level, in addition to the deterioration of economic conditions, civil liberties, separation of power, have led to a majority demand for his resignation. It is certain that President Abbas is unable to win the presidential elections that will take place in

the Palestinian territories any time soon. Moreover, the Fatah movement would be much stronger if it were under other leaders, such as Marwan Barghouti, who would take the movement in terms of the masses to great strides forward, as he would outperform his rival Ismail Haniyeh by a wide margin in any presidential election. President Abbas had previously announced several times during television interviews that he did not want to run in the presidential elections, and thus this statement opens the way for the Fatah movement to contest the upcoming presidential elections with a new presidential candidate from its own ranks. On the other hand, the Central Committee member Marwan Barghouti¹², who enjoys great popularity among the Palestinian public, announced his intention to run in any presidential elections. Public opinion polls over the past years have shown that Barghouti is the strongest candidate from within Fatah who can win any presidential elections with ease. The polls showed that Barghouti can compete with the Hamas candidate and beat him by a wide margin ranging between 20 and 30 points. On the other hand, polls showed that current Hamas leader has over the past years surpassed President Mahmoud Abbas on many occasions.¹³

The reason for Barghouti's superiority in opinion polls is that his electoral base includes the various components of Palestinian society, including Fatah's base, Islamists, leftists, independents, and others. On the other hand, president Abbas's electoral base includes Fatah only and perhaps some minor PLO factions. A Hamas candidate's base is mainly among Hamas supporters and Islamist independents. The latest poll conducted by PSR in June 2021, during the peak of the popularity of Hamas and its candidate Ismail Haniyeh, showed that in the event of new presidential elections in which only two candidates, Mahmoud Abbas and Ismail Haniyeh ran, the first would receive 27% of the votes and the second would receive 59%, but if the competition is between Marwan Barghouti and Haniyeh, then Barghouti would receive 51% and Haniyeh would receive 41%.¹⁴

12 In the 2005 presidential elections, the prisoner Marwan Barghouti ran for the presidential elections, but later withdrew in favor of Fatah candidate Mahmoud Abbas.

13 The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, the center's polls during 2014-2021.
<http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/602>

14 Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Poll No. (80), June 2021.
<http://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Poll-79-Arabic%20Full%20Text.pdf>

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