



RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES

SPECIAL COMMENTARY BY AMB. MARC OTTE, BIC's PRESIDENT

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Palestinian Elections: A Key to a Return to Negotiations of a Peace with Israel?

BIC President's reflections on the upcoming palestinian elections and the different scenarios that might unfold.

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By Amb. Marc Otte – BIC President

On January 15, President Mahmoud Abbas issued a decree to hold three elections this year: Palestinian Legislative Council on Saturday, 22/05/2021, President of the State of Palestine on Saturday, 31/07/2021, the Palestinian National Council on 31/08/2021

This follows several statements of intention he has expressed in a recent past. The first aim is no doubt to restore the legitimacy of the Palestinian leadership in the eyes of Palestinian and international public opinion. Will this move if successful lead to a revival of negotiations for a peace deal with Israel? Quite a lot of skepticism and obstacles will have to be overcome on the road.

First, will elections happen? Holding PA elections for the approximately 5.2 million Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation in Gaza and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) will be difficult in itself. Don't rely on a lot of Israeli support (even less today than in the past). And be sure that an agreement among all political factions about rules and procedures is not yet guaranteed. It will be even

more challenging to hold PNC elections, which will demand testing the political will and choices of approximately 13 million of Palestinians in refugee camps and the diaspora overall.

Second, will elections bring about more or less national unity? Will they provide a clear mandate to the new leadership and for which purpose? From the dialogue between Hamas, Fatah, and other factions in Cairo, 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.

On the other hand, serious disagreements have surfaced within Fatah with the declared intention of Nasser al-Qudwa to run on a separate slate, which has led to his expulsion from the party. The results of a public poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research last December indicated that, if Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti (who is serving a life sentence in Israeli jails) forms a list outside the official list of Fatah, he would gain 25% of the votes, compared to 19% for the official list of Fatah. Similarly, if Mohammed Dahlan does the same, his list would gain 7% of the votes.

In both cases, the “official” Fatah list will lose to Hamas, which will receive about 33% of the votes. There is even talk of former Prime Minister Fayyad running on a list of its own. Quite a challenge for the current leadership at a time when Abbas’ disapproval ratings near 65% among Palestinians. This comes in the context of protests by civil society organisations denouncing Abbas’ new decree restricting the work of non-profit associations, published on 2 March after it was secretly prepared and approved, shortly ahead of the planned elections.

According to Palestinian NGOs, the decree imposes on civil society organisations to present to the PA ministries an *“annual action plan and estimated budget for the new fiscal year in line with the ministry’s plan. This means that CSOs will be working for the said ministry and not in accordance with their own vision, mission, goals or programs.”* The NGOs announced the formation of an emergency committee to protest until the decree is cancelled and warned they would abstain from monitoring the upcoming elections.

Furthermore, Palestinian NGOs are urging the PA to cancel restrictions on candidates running for PLC elections (e.g. allowing NGO employees to run, lowering minimum age, raising women's quota, etc.). 69% of Palestinians are under the age of 29, while 24% are between the ages of 18 and 29. Many young Palestinians will cast their votes for the first time, after 15 years since the last elections. Polls show the young generation wants the 'old guard' to make place for them and the ideas they represent.

In 2019, prior to the pandemic, 60% of youth in Gaza and 28% in the West Bank were unemployed. In 2020, the rates jumped to 70% in Gaza and 30% in the West Bank, largely due to COVID-19. Not sure that the two-state solution is their overwhelming objective. Better governance and economic opportunities are definitely on top of their agenda, together with the end of occupation. The goal of a two-state solution is under serious challenge today.

The number of settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has exceeded 650,000, putting in major doubt the prospect of a geographically contiguous Palestinian state. In a study released last February, the RAND Corporation presented "alternatives" (status quo; confederation; annexation; one-state solution) and published the results of an investigation of opinions among Palestinians, Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs. Three novel findings emerged from this research.

The first is that is that none of the alternatives are acceptable to a majority of both Israelis and Palestinians. The second is that the two-state solution had the greatest overall breadth of support, but all four populations were highly skeptical of its viability. Indeed, participants were skeptical that any alternative other than the status quo was viable. Third, a blend of economic and security guarantees—for Israelis and Palestinians alike—will be needed to enable a peaceful resolution to the conflict.¹

Third, how will the international community react? Surely the President's decision to hold elections is an appeal to the Biden administration to effectively re-engage with the Palestinians and the PA. But the new administration which has promised to resume aid to the PA and international institutions supporting it is not yet ready to push and support a speedy resumption of negotiations with Israel.

¹ www.rand.org/t/RRA725-1

The EU has welcomed the announcement of the election process and urged Israel to facilitate its smooth conduct. HRVP Borrell has committed full EU support. The PA's request for electoral observation has been accepted. But Israel has been dragging its feet to grant access to an exploratory mission in order to prepare a proper EU observation mission, which is now impossible to deploy in time for the PLC elections. Alternatives are under consideration, such as an expert mission, but that will lower the profile of the EU role as coordinator of Palestinian elections observation.

If the polls mentioned above are correct and Hamas becomes part of a new PLC and Government, how will the Quartet and the US and EU in particular position themselves vis à vis the so-called Quartet Principles issued after the victory of Hamas in the 2006 elections (recognition of Israel, acceptance of previous agreements, renunciation of violence to achieve political goals). Will the 'no-contact policy' be upheld if Hamas refuses to abide by the same principles? What will that mean in terms of Western credibility and EU democracy promotion in Palestine?

This is all the more significant that there has also been a wake-up call from the Abraham accords and the challenge of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Arab states and Israel. The pressing need for a united Palestinian front internationally is magnified by donor pressure. Fatah has lost funding from Saudi Arabia, whom it had relied on for budgetary support. Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates stopped all support to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East in 2020, that provides food, education, and healthcare to nearly 1.4 million people in Gaza. Qatari contributions to Gaza—set at 360 million dollars in 2021—likely come with strings attached following the Gulf state's reconciliation with Saudi Arabia. Qatar, keen to garner favor with the United States, will be pushing for Hamas's cooperation with the elections.

Fourth, what does it say about the chances of resumption of negotiations for a comprehensive peace agreement with Israel? The most optimistic prediction is that it is a necessary but not sufficient condition, provided the elections run smoothly. Because of the current strategic shifts in the region, attention to the Palestinian file, formerly the iconic issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the focus of big powers has

faded². The International Quartet is in a sleepy mood. Even the so-called Munich Quartet (France, Germany, Egypt and Jordan) is moving carefully giving priority to CBM's. After the FM's of the four met in Paris recently, they called for "progressive and mutual confidence-building measures based on a step-by-step approach". But even that approach was rejected by Israel 'out of hand'. Whatever the results of Palestinian (and Israeli) elections, a return to Israeli-Palestinian direct negotiations for a peace deal will require leadership and creativity from both sides and from international sponsors.

² (Ces accords) « enterrent le conflit israélo-arabe comme facteur structurant le Moyen Orient » (Gilles Kepel)

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"



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