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# Internal Palestinian conflicts complicate the chances of an Israeli-Saudi deal



Power struggles within the Palestinian institutions may prove to be a significant burden for implementing an Israeli-Saudi agreement. A part of this agreement should be the attitude towards Palestinian autonomy.

The long-term leadership of Mahmoud Abbas, without clear procedures for the period after him, has been fuelling intra-Palestinian conflicts whose potential escalation would not be favourable for the advocates of the agreement, primarily the US.

The recent gunfight between Palestinian security forces and militants in the West Bank Tulkarem refugee camp, when a 25-year-old man was killed, is just one of a series of intra-Palestinian incidents that have become more frequent in recent weeks.

The prolonged leadership of Abbas and his Fatah has outraged many Palestinians, and their discontent has been fuelled by numerous pro-Iranian groups, which raises the possibility of continued conflict following Abbas' tenure as president.

His failing health at the age of 88 has long kept interest in what the transition of power within the Palestinian authority will look like. However, neither Abbas nor the institutions he leads have ever had a clear plan for the period after.

## A long-term crisis of legitimacy

Abbas, who has occupied all three positions of authority in the Palestinian camp for 19 years, merits part of the responsibility for this vacuum. He serves as the president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), secretary general of the PLO and head of Fatah, its main faction.

Despite being acknowledged as the leader of the Palestinians by the world community, Mr Abbas lacks internal legitimacy because he prolonged the original 4-year term of the PA president to (so far) to 19 years without seeking the consent of the Palestinian people in the meantime.

He cancelled parliamentary elections in 2021, which would have been the first Palestinian vote in 15 years, on the grounds that Palestinians in East Jerusalem would not be able to vote.

However, there were prevailing forecasts that in those elections, Abbas's Fatah would lose to the rival Hamas, which has governed the Gaza Strip since 2007.

## There are no mechanisms for a peaceful transition of power

Near the end of his rule, there was a strong sense that Abbas' political legacy lacked legitimacy and that his administration was corrupt.

Mechanisms for the transfer of power within Palestinian institutions do not exist, which creates potential for intra-systemic confrontations between political clans, ideological groupings and business circles.

Mr Abbas's attempt to work out an intra-Palestinian trust agreement between Fatah and Hamas at an urgently convened meeting in Egypt at the end of last July failed, and thus perhaps the last chance for the Palestinians to enter a period of transition of power without turbulence.

There are fewer realistic options for the transfer of power in one of the peaceful scenarios - the appointment of a successor by Abbas himself, the division of 3 principal responsibilities among 3 persons who would have legitimacy or elections for the PA presidency.

Since none of these options is on the Palestinian Authority's agenda, the fear remains that the post-Abbas period could easily slide into even stronger factional confrontations, followed by Hamas' attempts to dominate the PA and the total collapse of the Palestinian Authority and its institutions.

## Israel-Saudi agreement in a race against time

This kind of escalation would not suit the protagonists of the Israeli-Saudi deal, particularly the US, which has been working on it intensively.

The chaotic events in the post-Abbas period would no doubt make it difficult to reach an agreement, which has all the potential to be a game-changer in the Middle East, with significant political and security benefits for all its participants.

Mahmoud Abbas showed that he was aware of the enormous potential of this agreement when he previously sent Saudi Arabia a rather pragmatic list of demands that he expected Riyadh to fulfil during the negotiations.

Among them are the PA's taking greater control over Israel in some parts of the West Bank, the opening of a US consulate in Jerusalem and a Palestinian office in Washington.

In contrast to Abbas' earlier explicit opposition to the thawing of the relations of Arab countries in the region with Israel, his demands towards Saudi Arabia are a positive shift, and show the willingness of the Palestinians to support the Middle East deal.

In this light, Abbas is a factor working in favour of the agreement and, no doubt, expects in return the support of powerful external actors for his own benefit and the benefit of his faction in the internal Palestinian conflicts.

However, the uncertainty of the projections for the period after his reign to which he contributed weakens his international authority as a guarantor of the agreement's implementation.

As the primary arbiter in the agreement, US diplomacy is therefore in a hurry. On the one hand, projections are that the Israeli-Saudi agreement would be finalised by the conclusion of President Biden's term, serving as the pinnacle of his foreign policy and a significant advantage before the next presidential election.

On the other hand, reaching an agreement whilst Abbas is still in a formal position to make decisions on behalf of the PA may be the last moment to conclude it.

The sides are under pressure to strike a deal as quickly as possible due to uncertainty on who and using what legitimacy will succeed Abbas, and whether or not the transfer of power inside the Palestinian Authority would occur smoothly at all.