The latest upsurge in Palestinian-Israeli violence has raised familiar questions about the possibility of a “third Intifada,” or Palestinian uprising against the Israeli military occupation. Often overlooked, however, is what such recurring unrest means for the Palestinian political leadership, and vice versa. While the anger that fuels the violence stems mainly from Israel’s occupation and the moribund Arab-Israeli peace process, it also reflects deep-seated Palestinian frustration with their own leadership. Indeed, for a growing number of Palestinians, particularly the youth, the lines between all three of these elements have become increasingly blurred. A recent poll captured the extent of Palestinian discontent with their leaders, finding that nearly two-thirds of Palestinians want President Abbas to resign.1

The current crisis also reflects the broader social and political transformations occurring across the Arab world. Although largely overshadowed by other crises in the region, the same demographic changes and political stagnation which produced the Arab uprisings of 2011 are also at play in the Palestinian arena, albeit in more subtle form. Along with a failing leadership, however, the Palestinians must contend with a seemingly intractable Israeli occupation and a U.S.-led peace process that has not only failed to produce benefits, but had in fact...
yielded mostly losses. Indeed, Palestinians today are situated at the intersection of two tectonic shifts in the region—the collapse of the Arab state system and the collapse of the Middle East peace process—confronting them with a unique and unprecedented set of challenges. How Palestinians and their leaders respond to these challenges in the coming months and years will have a profound impact on the future of the Palestinian national movement as a whole, as well as on the prospects for Israeli–Palestinian peace and broader U.S. policy goals in the region.

Leadership Crisis

Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas came to power in January 2005 on a platform of unifying Palestine’s unruly political factions and securing a peace deal with Israel that would end the occupation and establish an independent Palestinian state once and for all. As a moderate who eschewed violence and was committed to a peaceful settlement with Israel, Abbas’s ascension to power was welcomed by the United States and the international community. A decade later, the goals of national unity and national liberation seem more distant than ever. Instead of the “state-in-waiting” envisioned at the time of the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) creation more than two decades ago, Abbas today presides over a war-shattered and impoverished Gaza Strip that remains beyond his reach and a West Bank that has been colonized and fragmented beyond recognition. Meanwhile, the signs of internal distress extend to many aspects of Palestinian political life: political division and paralysis, economic dependency, growing authoritarianism, institutional stagnation and incoherence, and the absence of meaningful mechanisms of accountability, whether electoral or otherwise.

Alongside the restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian economy continues to be plagued by recurring budget shortfalls, rising unemployment, and an over-dependency on international donor aid. As international donor funds begin to shrink, the PA has amassed a total debt of nearly $5 billion. Politically, the picture is even more dire. Abbas’s four-year presidential term has long since expired, and the PA’s parliament—the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC)—has not convened in more than eight years. Abbas’s rule has become increasingly authoritarian and less tolerant of dissent, while corruption remains an ongoing concern for ordinary citizens.

Nor is this situation limited to the PA. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), once the Palestinians’ preeminent political institution and still the official address of the Palestinian national movement, has been in decline since the 1980s and is today a mere shadow of its former self. Most of the PLO’s political institutions have lain dormant for years, most notably the Palestine National...
Council (PNC), the PLO’s “parliament in exile” and highest decision-making body, which last convened in 1996. The creation of the PA following the 1993 Oslo Agreement only accelerated the decline of the PLO, which was gradually hollowed out as its political infrastructure was transferred from the diaspora to the newly created authority in the occupied territories. The one PLO leadership body that still operates today, the Executive Committee which is also chaired by Abbas, is little more than an appendage of the PA presidency.

The centerpiece of Palestinian political dysfunction, however, remains the eight-year old schism between Abbas’s Fatah-dominated PA in the West Bank and Hamas, which expelled the PA and took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. This split has paralyzed Palestinian politics and added a new layer of instability to an already volatile conflict. With no functioning parliament or even a meaningful political opposition to answer to, Abbas effectively rules by decree. As his sphere of control continues to shrink both physically and politically, Abbas has grown increasingly authoritarian and paranoid, lashing out at would-be rivals and challengers, both real and imagined. As a result, the Palestinian leadership has come full-circle: like the PLO before it, the PA is now run by a small clique of insulated, unelected, and unaccountable leaders.

**A Crisis of Legitimacy**

While many in the international community remain keenly aware of the multiple crises within the Palestinian polity, few seem to grasp the seriousness or implications of the far more fundamental crisis of legitimacy that undergirds all of them. This is particularly true of the PLO/PA leadership in Ramallah, but applies equally to the Hamas government in Gaza. The dysfunctional nature of Palestinian politics is in many ways a reflection of the dysfunctional condition of the Palestinians themselves, the vast majority of whom live either under Israeli occupation or as refugees in neighboring Arab countries and elsewhere. Political legitimacy is always difficult to measure, but it is all the more so when the leaders in question do not have a functioning state and are responsible for a geographically dispersed population.

Neither the PLO nor the PA has ever exercised sovereignty over any part of Palestinian territory, since Israel, as the occupying power, remains the de facto sovereign in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza Strip; nor do either of these leadership institutions enjoy genuine freedom of action in the

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**A more fundamental crisis of legitimacy undergirds all the well-known crises in the Palestinian polity.**
political, economic, or security realms. The PA’s jurisdiction, made up of several
dozens disconnected “islands,” is limited to 40 percent of West Bank territory,
while Israel retains control over most of its land and natural resources along
with its border crossings, airspace, territorial waters, customs, population and
land registries, immigration policies, and other government functions. Even
Gaza, despite having been emptied of Israeli soldiers and settlers in 2005, is still
under the effective control of Israel, which controls not only its air, land, and
sea borders, but key areas of governance like the population registry and even taxa-
tion. Approximately 40 percent of Palestinians, just over 4.6 million people, live
in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza Strip, while more than half
live in the diaspora—mostly refugees and their descendants—in neighboring Arab
states. (The remaining 10 percent live in Israel as citizens of the state, although
the PLO effectively ceased to represent Palestinian citizens of Israel when it recog-
nized Israel in 1993.)

The overlapping roles and conflicting mandates of the PA and the PLO have
created a host of additional problems, leading to a kind of political and insti-
tutional schizophrenia. Officially, the PLO remains the “sole legitimate represen-
tative of the Palestinian people” both inside the occupied territories and in the
diaspora, while the PA was meant to be an administrative body overseeing the
day-to-day affairs of only those Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. In
reality, the PA has effectively replaced the PLO as the main political address of
the Palestinians. The blurring of the lines between the two has eroded the effec-
tiveness of both institutions while alienating key Palestinian constituencies
outside the PA’s jurisdiction—beginning with the refugee communities in the dia-
spora after Oslo in 1993, followed by Palestinians in East Jerusalem, particularly
after it was further isolated from the West Bank by Israel in 2000, and most
recently Gaza following Hamas’s takeover in 2007.

The legitimacy of Palestinian leaders, contrary to what many U.S. policymakers
may believe, is not primarily a function of services delivery and governance. As a
stateless and geographically dispersed population living under occupation or in
exile, Palestinians place equal (if not greater) weight on representation, and pros-
spects or strategy for national liberation. The latter is officially embodied in the
thawabet (“fundamentals”), a set of supra-constitutional principles representing
the core issues of national consensus and to which all Palestinian factions must
pledge fealty: including the right to resistance, the right to self-determination (sta-
tehood), Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, and the right of Palestinian refugees
to return (in accordance with UNGA 181). In practical terms, however, national
liberation is generally taken to mean a strategy for ending Israel’s occupation of the
West Bank and Gaza as well as addressing the plight of Palestinian refugees. These
three components—national strategy (for liberation), services delivery, and rep-
resentation—have formed the pillars of Palestinian legitimacy since at least
1969, and remain the lens through which most Palestinians continue to view their leaders.

The PLO was formally created by the Arab League in 1964 as a way for Arab regimes, particularly Egypt, to control (and often exploit) the Palestinian cause. After the crushing defeat of June 1967, however, Palestinian guerilla organizations, led by Yasser Arafat’s Fatah movement, seized control of the PLO and transformed it into an umbrella group for all political groups and the sole arena for Palestinian politics. From 1969 until 1988, the PLO adopted “armed struggle” as the primary means for liberating Palestine. The PLO acted as a “state in exile,” providing—sometimes through unofficial patronage networks—a wide array of formal social, economic, and political services for refugee communities in neighboring states like Lebanon and Jordan, as well as for Palestinians in the occupied territories. Most crucially, the PLO employed an elaborate and highly secretive quota system to ensure that all major Palestinian factional, ideological, social, and demographic groups were represented. Despite the institutionalized dominance of Yasser Arafat’s Fatah movement and the inherently undemocratic nature of the quota system, this form of representational pluralism remained central to the PLO’s legitimacy until the late 1980s.

Thus, while the PLO had never been a democratic institution, and Palestinian politics had always been notoriously fractious, the PLO was a highly pluralistic and genuinely representative body throughout most of its early history. Indeed, the lack of a state and a territorial base forced Palestinian politics to place greater emphasis on both pluralism and consensus. The ability to forge a relatively coherent political leadership from among disparate organizations while in exile was the singular achievement of the PLO. To understand just what an impressive feat this was, one need only look at the experiences of Libyan and Syrian opposition groups following recent uprisings in both of those countries, which despite the advantage of several decades of statehood have been unable to create a functional political arena.

In the late 1980s, the PLO’s leadership was challenged by two key developments. The Palestinian uprising—or Intifada, launched in the occupied territories in December 1987—took the PLO leadership by surprise and shifted the internal balance of power from the diaspora back to the “inside.” Almost simultaneously, the rise of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) posed the first direct challenge to Yasser Arafat’s leadership from outside the PLO. Despite half-hearted attempts in the 1990s to bring Hamas into the PLO fold, both leaderships preferred to operate independently of one another. In 2005, Arafat’s successor, Mahmoud Abbas, again tried to bring Hamas and other groups under the PLO umbrella through the interfactional Cairo Declaration, the first of many intra-Palestinian agreements pledging to reform and restructure the PLO to make it more inclusive that have gone unimplemented. The continued exclusion of Hamas, Islamic Jihad,
and other groups from the PLO has undercut its claim to represent all Palestinians.\textsuperscript{13}

The Oslo process, which began in 1993 and technically remains in effect today, radically redefined Palestinian leadership structures and strategic priorities, and with them its main sources of legitimacy. Having formally abandoned armed struggle in 1988, the PLO now saw negotiations and diplomacy as the primary means for achieving national liberation. At the same time, with the establishment of the PA in 1994, the leadership could now deliver services directly through official ministries and other “government” institutions instead of—or at least alongside—its old patronage networks. Moreover, holding presidential and legislative elections for the PA in 1996 seemed to satisfy the crucial third element of representation. In reality, the elections did little to bolster the leadership’s claim to be representative, since refugees, who made up a majority of the Palestinian population (as well as, ironically, the PLO’s leadership), did not vote for and had no stake in the PA. Furthermore, key parties like Hamas did not take part in the elections.

If anything, PA elections have helped undermine Palestinian pluralism and national cohesion. Elections for the PA could temporarily mask the stagnation of the PNC and other PLO institutions, but only as long as the PLO and PA leadership remained one and the same, which ceased to be the case after the 2006 PA election. Hamas’s surprise election victory ended nearly half a century of Fatah dominance of Palestinian politics and exposed the many contradictions created by the fusion of the PLO and the PA as well as the exclusion of non-PLO factions like Hamas and others. The election of Hamas resulted in a U.S.-led boycott of the PA, further undercutting Abbas and setting his Fatah-dominated PA on a collision course with Hamas. Hamas’s forcible takeover of the Gaza Strip after its routing of the PA’s Fatah-run security forces in June 2007 dealt the most devastating blow yet to Abbas’s leadership and his legitimacy.

“Legitimacy by Default”

Whereas the PLO once had a reasonable claim to all three legitimacy criteria—national liberation, services delivery, and representation—the current leadership can barely lay claim to one. The repeated failures of the U.S.-sponsored peace process have thoroughly discredited Abbas’s negotiations strategy and indefinitely, perhaps even permanently, put off Palestinian hopes for independence or an end to the occupation. At the same time, the PLO’s claim to speak for all Palestinians has never been more tenuous. Major political groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Palestinian National Initiative remain outside the PLO framework. Meanwhile, since Oslo, Palestinian refugee communities, which once formed the core of
the PLO’s political base, have increasingly felt abandoned by the PLO, a feeling now also shared by other core populations beyond the leadership’s reach, including 1.7 million in Gaza and another 370,000 in East Jerusalem. Whereas the PLO once commanded the loyalty of a majority of Palestinians, both inside the occupied territories and in the diaspora, Abbas’s rule today is confined to the West Bank—and only on a portion of its land. The mere fact that the party that lost both an election and a civil war continues to dominate Palestinian politics should in and of itself be cause for concern.

To be sure, Hamas has its own set of legitimacy problems and internal contradictions. Not least of these was its decision in 2006 to contest elections for an authority it did not recognize and which came about through a peace process (Oslo) that it completely, and often violently, rejected. Even so, Hamas’s 2006 election victory, which it achieved only with a modest plurality, did not represent a popular mandate even in the occupied territories, while the group still lacks even the pretense of speaking on behalf the diaspora. Despite its relative success in providing basic law and order in Gaza, Hamas has grown more repressive in recent years, particularly since the 2013 ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the subsequent closing of the Gaza tunnels. Moreover, while Hamas leaders stress that the group is first and foremost a national liberation movement, they have yet to articulate a long-term plan for ending the plight of Gaza’s impoverished, besieged, and war-shattered population. If Abbas’s leadership comes under fire for acting as “serial negotiators,” then Hamas is equally guilty of engaging in “serial resistance.” Its involvement in rocket attacks on Israeli towns, abductions of Israeli soldiers and other armed attacks, while often boosting its popularity among Palestinians, have not ended Israel’s punishing blockade of Gaza, much less liberated any other part of Palestine.

Consequently, the Palestinians have not one but two failed leaderships—an odd case of the value of the whole being less than the sum of its parts. Not only have Fatah and Hamas, the two largest and most influential groups in Palestinian politics, failed in their respective programs, they continue to prioritize their own partisan and parochial interests over wider national priorities. Among other things, the stalemate has eliminated hopes for elections, as neither faction appears confident enough to risk an electoral contest, and has hampered reconstruction efforts in Gaza following the devastating war of summer 2014. Ironically, the most credible and dynamic Palestinian political leadership is currently located not in the West Bank or Gaza but in Israel, where Palestinian citizens of Israel have become increasingly assertive. The Joint List, which for the first time brought Arab parties in Israel under a single umbrella, now represents the third-largest faction in the Israeli Knesset, and for **Palestinians have not one but two failed leaderships.**
many West Bank Palestinians is “a potent strategic asset of the Palestinian struggle on both sides of the nonexistent Green Line.”

Yet while both the PA and Hamas fall short, Hamas’s overall position is somewhat less precarious than that of Abbas and the PA. Though it faces greater immediate challenges—a crippling siege, lost revenues, intensely hostile neighbors in both Egypt and Israel, an anti-Brotherhood trend in the region, and the loss of key allies in Damascus and Tehran—Hamas has the advantage of lower expectations. This is also reflected in public opinion polls, which show that while Palestinian voters occasionally favor Hamas, usually for its ability to inflict pain on Israel or as a protest vote against Fatah, they are not yet prepared to entrust Islamists with responsibility over the national project. This coupled with the absence of credible “third-way” alternatives has given the “official” leadership of Mahmoud Abbas and the PLO/PA a sort of legitimacy by default.

This may explain why, despite the repeated failures of his negotiations approach, Abbas’s leadership has not seriously pursued alternative courses of action. Despite signing several reconciliation agreements, which typically followed public outcries or shifts in the internal balance of power, Abbas has shown little interest in genuine reconciliation, as demonstrated by his reluctance to return to Gaza even after a weakened and increasingly isolated Hamas agreed to all of his terms for reconciliation in April 2014. And while he has moved toward greater internationalization of the conflict, most of his efforts thus far have been symbolic, piecemeal, and largely tactical, aimed at either quelling public discontent or gaining negotiating leverage with Israel or the United States, or both. Even the decision to join the International Criminal Court (ICC) in January 2015, a longstanding Palestinian demand, had less to do with Abbas’s desire to prosecute Israelis for alleged war crimes than with blunting public anger and criticism directed at him in the wake of the devastating Gaza war and subsequent unrest in Jerusalem—and his perceived impotence in relation to both. Thus, instead of weaving together all three options—negotiations with Israel, national reconciliation, and internationalization—into a single, coherent strategy, Abbas has chosen to triangulate between all of them without fully committing to any.

The U.S. Role

The centrality of issues like national liberation and representation to Palestinian political legitimacy is borne out by empirical evidence, including recent protest movements and polling trends. More importantly, the numbers highlight the extent to which the Palestinian leadership’s domestic standing is intimately bound up in the peace process. When asked about their top national priorities,
for example, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza consistently name “ending the occupation” and “insuring the right of return for refugees” (48 percent and 30 percent, respectively, in 2015), an increase over previous years (45 percent and 27 percent, respectively, in 2011). That nearly a third of Palestinians in the occupied territories identify the refugee issue as the top national priority is another indication of the importance of national, as opposed to local, priorities.

In addition, in the early days of the “Arab spring,” protests over the cost of living soon morphed into protests against the PA leadership. What began as a relatively limited display of anger over soaring prices and unpaid salaries soon metamorphosed into what was reported as “the largest show of popular discontent with the Palestinian Authority in its 18-year existence.” That so much of the protesters’ ire was directed at Salam Fayyad, an effective administrator with a reputation for transparency, was a sign that Palestinian frustration had less to do with corruption or bad governance—which also afflicts Palestinian politics—than with the fact that he represented a peace process that had nothing left to offer. Moreover, the ease with which the target of their anger shifted from Fayyad to the Oslo Accords to Abbas’s leadership demonstrated the extent to which Palestinians no longer distinguished between the PA, the occupation, and the peace process.

This became a familiar theme in subsequent protests as well. The mass marches staged by Palestinian refugees and the “march on Jerusalem” in mid-2011 focused attention on two Palestinian communities long neglected by both the peace process and their own leaders. In 2012, a wave of high-profile hunger strikes by Palestinian political prisoners inspired by the 66-day fast of Khader Adnan, an Islamic Jihad member, simultaneously challenged Israel’s practice of indefinite detention without charge (“administrative detention”) and shamed both Fatah and Hamas for failing to take up the cause of someone who belonged to another faction. Young Palestinians also took aim at Israel’s settlement enterprise, erecting protest cities like “Bab al-Shams” in early 2013 in a bid to create their own “facts on the ground.”

All of these initiatives had two things in common: a lack of involvement by established political forces and an emphasis on issues or groups that have been mishandled or neglected by their political leaders (Jerusalem, refugees, political prisoners, etc). Among other things, these actions signaled a deep yearning for alternative initiatives, methods, and forms of mobilization than those offered by either Fatah or Hamas. In that sense, they are symptomatic of deeper demographic, and ultimately political, changes occurring in Palestinian society, even if they have not yet matured into full-blown political movements or parties.
Today, the same is true of the latest Palestinian protests, which represent a response not only to Israel’s ongoing occupation and perceived provocations by Jewish extremists against Muslim holy sites, but to the failure of Palestinian leaders—and of Palestinian politics—to adequately confront these challenges. While Israel has accused Abbas of inciting the violence against Israelis, the reality is that the Palestinian president has little or no sway with the Palestinian street. Indeed, Abbas, who has referred to the last Palestinian uprising as “one of our worst mistakes,” is as uncomfortable with the possibility of a third Intifada as Israel. Abbas knows that a return to armed struggle would incur a harsh response from Israel, perhaps something akin to the devastation wrought by the second Intifada thirteen years ago, and jeopardize his cherished relationship with the United States. More instinctively, Abbas fears that if and when a third Intifada occurs, it is as likely to target his own leadership as Israel’s occupation. Given the public mood and the nature of Palestinian unrest in recent years, those fears may be well-founded.

The organic link between Palestinian political legitimacy and the ebbs and flows of the peace process has serious implications for U.S. policy as well. While U.S. policymakers frequently affirm their support for Mahmoud Abbas and their desire to strengthen his leadership, most seem unaware of the extent to which the peace process itself has contributed to Abbas’ waning legitimacy. What is more, to the extent that U.S. policymakers and the international community have been concerned with the Palestinian leadership’s legitimacy, they have focused almost exclusively on the least central component—governance, and only partially at that—while ignoring or even hindering progress on the other two, as in the case of Palestinian reconciliation efforts.

While tension has always existed between Palestinian political aspirations as well as national narratives on one hand and the needs of the U.S.-sponsored “peace process” on the other—owing to the very nature of the conflict as well as the United States’ “special relationship” with Israel—the gap between U.S. policy and the Palestinians’ own sense of what is in their national self-interest has never been as wide as it is today. As a result, there is virtually no way for Abbas to participate in the peace process without further damaging his domestic standing. Conversely, there is little hope of strengthening the Palestinian leadership without a major reversal in U.S. policy, which is another matter.
Bad for Everyone

Beyond the obvious threat posed to the future of the Palestinian national movement, the absence of a credible and coherent leadership is also highly problematic for Israel and the United States, both of which also share much of the blame for the Palestinians’ current predicament. Israel’s policy of isolating Gaza from the West Bank since 2006 helped pave the way for the Fatah–Hamas split that has paralyzed Palestinian institutions like the Legislative Council and undermined the U.S.-backed “institution-building” project. In Jerusalem, Israeli settlement and wall construction has left tens of thousands of Palestinians isolated from both Israel and the West Bank, while Israel’s crackdown on Palestinian cultural and political life in Jerusalem in the early 2000s—including the closure of the Orient House, the PLO’s unofficial headquarters, and other national institutions in Jerusalem—has created a leadership and institutional vacuum currently being filled by the mosque and other religious actors. That the United States has helped enforce Palestinian division through its opposition to reconciliation efforts, while turning a blind eye to Israeli settlements and other violations, has only reinforced perceptions of the “peace process” as an extension of the occupation.

Meanwhile, there is little hope for resuming negotiations—at least not serious ones—any time soon, as much for Israeli and U.S. reasons as for Palestinian ones. Moreover, even if it were possible to restart negotiations, Abbas’s beleaguered leadership has neither the mandate to negotiate a conflict-ending peace deal with Israel nor the ability to deliver on one. For Palestinians, the process of negotiating the creation of their state is not simply a matter of signing a treaty with a neighboring country; it is a constitutional moment, if not an existential one, and hence requires the broadest possible buy-in from all segments of Palestinian society: political, demographic, social, or ideological. So long as groups like Hamas, which have a proven ability to disrupt the diplomatic process, remain outside the framework of Palestinian politics and the peace process, they will continue to have an incentive to act as spoilers. Likewise, without buy-in from the refugees and other diaspora Palestinians, there is little hope of reaching an end of conflict or an end of claims.

In the meantime, the current leadership vacuum is filling with forces that are completely at odds with current U.S. policy objectives and Israeli interests. Like other Arabs around the region who have become disaffected with their leaders, whether secular or Islamist, young Palestinians are increasingly drawn to “revolutionary” solutions. The failure of the peace process has pushed growing numbers of young Palestinians to turn away from a two-state solution altogether and to redefine their struggle as one of equal rights in a single state stretching from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. Among those advocating such a solution, for
example, is none other than Tareq Abbas, the son of the Palestinian president.\textsuperscript{27} This also explains the growing popularity of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement, which enjoys overwhelming support among Palestinians.\textsuperscript{28} The BDS movement, launched by Palestinian civil society groups in 2005, is a response to the repeated failures of the U.S.-led peace process as well as the inability of Palestinian actors to effectively challenge the Israeli occupation.

For Israel, meanwhile, the strategic dangers posed by the lack of a cohesive Palestinian polity far outweigh any tactical benefits derived from its “divide-and-rule” approach to Palestinian politics. It is no coincidence that the areas most prone to violence, namely Gaza and East Jerusalem, are also the ones that are beyond the PA’s reach. The absence of responsible Palestinian leadership structures has been highly destabilizing, leading to a surge in ad hoc or “lone wolf” attacks, particularly in Jerusalem, as well as recurring wars in Gaza. Meanwhile, even in West Bank areas where the PA does operate, the PA’s continued security coordination with Israel, which is already under intense pressure from the current unrest, could soon become too politically costly for Abbas to maintain.

Meanwhile, growing numbers of Palestinians and outside observers alike are calling for the dissolution of the PA, which many see as enabling the Israeli occupation.\textsuperscript{29} While a deliberate decision by the leadership to dismantle the PA seems unlikely, an eventual collapse of the Authority remains a distinct possibility, which would result in even greater violence and instability. From a strategic standpoint, the PA’s demise would all but destroy chances for a two-state solution. It would also likely increase Israel’s international isolation while compelling it to deal with Palestinian demographic realities on an entirely new basis. Without the prospect of an independent state of their own, the focus of Palestinian national aspirations would invariably turn to achieving equal rights within an Israeli state, as is already happening. In short, a viable Palestinian polity may be the only thing standing in the way of Israel becoming either a bi-national or an apartheid state.

**What Now?**

**Focusing on elections now is more likely to deepen internal polarization than resolve it.**

The current legitimacy crisis has prompted calls for holding new elections as well as for greater clarity on the question of succession in the event of Mahmoud Abbas’s departure. Such “quick fix” solutions are unlikely to resolve the leadership’s legitimacy problems however—and could even make matters worse. As events in Egypt and elsewhere in the region have shown, a focus on procedural matters
like elections or who holds which office, in the absence of a more fundamental agreement on the rules of the game, is more likely to deepen internal polarization than to resolve it.

While elections may seem like the simplest way to restore legitimacy to Palestinian leaders and institutions, the obvious question becomes: elections for what? The PLO, or the PA, or both? Whichever way, the outcome is anything but simple. Palestinian reconciliation agreements, agreed to by all factions but as yet still unimplemented, already call for elections for the PLO’s long-neglected parliament-in-exile, the PNC, as well as for the PA. However, the enormous financial, logistical, and political challenges of holding such elections, particularly given the current regional environment, make it virtually impossible (for example, there is no way to conduct such a vote in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon or Syria). At the same time, holding presidential and legislative elections only for the PA would still exclude Palestinians in the diaspora. And without progress on PA–Hamas reconciliation, there is no way to hold such elections in Gaza. Although some have called for going ahead with elections only in the West Bank, this would almost certainly exacerbate Fatah–Hamas tensions and reinforce the current split between the two halves of Palestine—while doing nothing to solve the leadership’s legitimacy problems.

The question of succession is even more fraught with danger. Abbas’s recent targeting of former Prime Minister Salam Fayyad along with his one-time ally Yasser Abed-Rabbo, a PLO veteran of four decades, on improbable charges of corruption and engaging in a “conspiracy” to overthrow him, point to the Palestinian leader’s growing insecurity as well as the highly problematic nature of the succession question. Moreover, like so many other aspects of Palestinian politics, succession consists of not one problem but two: it requires one process for the PA, and another for the PLO. Under the PA’s basic law, in the event of the president’s incapacitation, the next in line is the speaker of the parliament, Aziz Dweik, a Hamas member. While there is little chance that Fatah (much less Israel or the United States) would allow Hamas to inherit the PA presidency, bypassing constitutionally-mandated procedures would create a whole new set of legitimacy problems for the eventual successor as well as another point of contention between the two rival factions.

Within the PLO, the post of chairman is chosen by the Executive Committee, who in turn is elected by the PNC. Unofficially, however, the choice of a successor will likely fall to Fatah, notorious for its infighting and lack of discipline, none of which bodes well for a smooth succession process. Palestinians got a small preview of the dysfunction that is likely to accompany an eventual succession process last August, when Abbas abruptly “resigned” his chairmanship and called for a snap convening of the PNC, which had not met in nearly two decades, to appoint a new Executive Committee and chair. Although Abbas was later forced to
cancel the meeting after other PLO factions threatened a boycott, the move was widely seen as a ploy to have his mandate renewed in the absence of elections and consolidate his grip on power.

Furthermore, there is virtually no single leader with sufficient public support and respect across factional lines. With Hamas figures effectively excluded, the field has been limited to several mid-level personalities, most of whom are polling in the single digits. This includes Muhammed Dahlan, former Gaza security chief and Abbas’s number one nemesis who despite his loyal following and ample resources remains a highly divisive figure loathed by both Hamas and much of Fatah. The one notable exception remains Marwan Barghouti, a former Fatah military commander and aide to Yasser Arafat. Polls regularly put Barghouti at the top of the list of possible contenders who could succeed Abbas, and he has wide backing among supporters of Fatah and Hamas as well as independents. However, Barghouti is currently serving several life sentences in an Israeli prison for his role during the second Intifada, leading many to dismiss his potential candidacy as impractical. Given the constraints on the current leadership, however, physical incarceration may not be such a major liability. Outside of a unifying figure like Barghouti, however, the issue of succession may simply be unresolvable in which case, as one former PA minister recently wrote, “President Abbas is likely to be the final president of the Palestinian Authority as we know it.”

A Way Forward?

Many outside observers often attribute the problems of Palestinian politics to a lack of institutional reforms or even to a uniquely defective political culture. In reality, the problem lies not with a lack of institutions, but of something even more fundamental—something which is also responsible for much of the upheaval in the Arab world today. What Palestinians, like many other Arab societies, need even more than institution building is consensus building. As in much of the region, the basic assumptions that have held the Palestinian national movement together for the last several decades are now coming apart and must be rebuilt—not only with regard to who should lead, but also where to go and how to get there.

There are a number of steps Palestinians can take to reverse this trend. In the short term, they should move to consummate the existing reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas so as to allow for Gaza’s political and economic
reintegration, as well as to begin the process of reconstruction and pave the way for the PA’s return. Over the long term, however, Palestinians will need to engage in a broader national dialogue, involving all major Palestinian political factions (Fatah, Hamas, others) as well as all key Palestinian constituencies both inside the occupied territories and in the diaspora, aimed at forging a new national consensus on how to resolve the many outstanding issues within Palestinian politics, namely: a long-term agreement or formula for power-sharing among the factions (perhaps through an updated version of the quota system); the reintegration of the Palestinian diaspora; and clarifying the relationship between the PLO and the PA.

While this may seem overly ambitious or idealistic, Palestinians have ample precedents from which to draw, both historical and contemporary. Indeed, unlike many other divided societies in the region, the Palestinians already have a solid basis from which to begin. In addition to the 2005 Cairo Declaration and the various reconciliation pacts signed between 2011 and 2014, the “prisoners’ document,” signed by political prisoners belonging to the five main factions (Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, PFLP, and DFLP) in June 2006, in the midst of heightened Fatah–Hamas tensions due to the international sanctions against the PA, provides another useful model.36

A reformed and reconstituted Palestinian polity would invariably pose numerous political, legal, and diplomatic challenges for the United States, Israel, and the broader international community. This is both ironic and rather telling in terms of current Israeli policy and the U.S. approach to the peace process. Since Israel also has an interest in a viable Palestinian polity, it should encourage the emergence of credible Palestinian leadership institutions and nationalist self-expression, which can serve as a bulwark against religious extremism as well as the slow drift toward a binational reality. This includes minimal steps like dropping their opposition to Palestinian reconciliation and reopening Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem in the short term.

As for the United States, apart from supporting such measures as well as working toward ending the occupation, there may not be much Washington can do other than to get out of the way. Allowing a more legitimate and coherent Palestinian leadership to emerge need not come at the expense of a credible peace process or a two-state solution; in fact, it is a prerequisite for both—that is, if it is not already too late.

Notes

1. “Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No (57),” Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, October 6, 2015, http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/621. See also Karin Laub and


14. For a sample of the current discourse among diaspora Palestinians regarding the PLO, see Naseer Aruri and others, “The PLO: A Positive Model or Doomed for Failure? Part II


22. As far as can be gathered, there are no comparable polls conducted among Palestinian refugees in the diaspora, though we may assume that concern for the refugee issue would be even higher.


30. As illustrated by the repeated delays in convening Fatah’s seventh congress, previously scheduled for November 29, 2015 and now postponed indefinitely.


35. See, for example, Elliott Abrams, Tested by Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).