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Prospective Visions for the Future of Governance in Palestine

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Within a project

Palestinian Civil Society contributes actively to Shaping
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The views in this paper reflect the researchers' views and do not necessarily reflect the views of PalThink for Strategic Studies or the donor.

1. Introduction

The issue addressed in this paper is that the future of the Palestinian political system remains unclear, making it too early to determine the exact shape of the governance system. Consequently, the researchers have employed a foresight methodology to analyze a set of variables and indicators to develop possible scenarios regarding the future of the political system and its impact on governance in Palestine.

The foresight methodology relies on analyzing trends and future changes by studying current patterns and anticipated challenges to predict potential scenarios. Based on this approach, the researchers conducted two focus groups—one in Gaza City and another in Ramallah—on Thursday, January 23, 2025. The aim was to gather insights from elites, representatives, and key actors in Palestinian society regarding the potential outcomes of this system. Additionally, the researchers conducted a series of unstructured personal interviews with several Palestinian politicians to obtain analyzable results .

This paper will first provide an overview of the Palestinian political system throughout different historical phases. It will then discuss the challenges faced by key actors within Palestinian society who have historically played a significant role in shaping and building the political system and governance structure—particularly the Palestinian Authority, Fatah (which has historically supported it), Hamas, and other Palestinian national and Islamic forces. Lastly, the paper will explore the future of the Palestinian political system and examine the impact of each scenario on the governance structure.

2. The Reality of the Political System in Palestine: The Trilogy of Revolution, Statehood Dream, and Chaos

Before the Oslo Accords, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. The organization was composed of several executive and legislative bodies, including the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the Executive Committee, and the Central Council, in addition to specialized departments such as education, health, military affairs, and others. This system was characterized by the absence of separation between the three branches of government, due to both practical constraints and overlapping authorities. Decision-making was often centralized, with democratic processes circumvented through negotiations, consensus agreements, and power-sharing arrangements. Furthermore, this period was marked by

weak or even absent popular participation in political decision-making. This was largely due to the revolutionary nature of the era, communication challenges, the dominance of revolutionary rhetoric over social discourse, and the charismatic leadership style prevalent at the time .

The political system of that period did not prioritize elections or power transitions. Instead, it relied on the charisma of leadership, revolutionary discipline, and underground operations. Political conditions and the circumstances of the Palestinian people played a major role in preventing electoral processes between 1964 and 1993. This diminished the importance of elections and daily public demands, two factors that had to be fully considered after 1994, with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

The Oslo Accords of 1993 introduced a new political reality, with the PA emerging as an executive body responsible for implementing the accords, managing Palestinians' daily affairs, and handling security and political issues related to Israel, the PA itself, the region, and the international community. As a result, elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) were held twice.¹

The Palestinian Authority was structured with a President, a Council of Ministers (mostly appointed), and an elected Legislative Council, which represented the residents of the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza. The PLC was considered part of the broader Palestinian National Council (PNC) This marked a significant transformation in the Palestinian political system with the introduction of the PA as a new governing body.

During the Oslo period, the Palestinian Basic Law established the President of the PA² as the head of the executive branch. Later, the Basic Law was amended to introduce the position of Prime Minister³. Despite the challenging social, political, and security environment, this period saw a relative separation of powers. However, numerous violations and overlaps occurred among the three branches of government. Still, some notable achievements were recorded:

¹ Aziz Kaid, *The Performance of the Palestinian Legislative Authority 1996-2013*, p. 1

² The Palestinian Basic Law, Article No. 34

³ The Palestinian Basic Law, Article No. 45

- The PLC exercised its legislative and oversight functions, although political representation within the council was largely dominated by Fatah.
- The press played a crucial role in oversight, stimulating public debate, and expanding avenues for expression—despite occasional restrictions.

However, this situation did not last long. The Palestinian governance system underwent a dramatic shift following the 2007 split between Fatah and Hamas. After military confrontations, Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, while Fatah maintained its administration of the system in the West Bank.

This division led to the establishment of parallel governance structures outside the legal framework, such as the Administrative Committee, which managed a separate political, legislative, and legal system independent from the one in the West Bank.⁴

3. The Reality of Key Actors and Challenges

If we set aside the fundamental changes brought about by October 7 on the key actors in the Palestinian political system, Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA) remain the traditional influential players in the internal Palestinian political landscape. However, both face unprecedented challenges because of October 7, including the following

First: The Palestinian Authority (PA)

One of the most significant challenges facing the PA, and behind its Fatah, is Israel's systematic efforts to undermine the Palestinian Authority. In 2024, Israel took a series of measures aimed at eliminating any hope of establishing a Palestinian state. These measures included the expansion of

⁴ The 2022 Press Freedom Index assessment, prepared by the MADA Center, indicates a sharp decline in press freedom in Palestine in recent years. The situation has deteriorated in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip according to global press freedom indicators. According to the 2022 assessment, Palestine was classified in the "red" (difficult) category, with a score ranging between 201-400, after previously being in the "sensitive" category (sensitive), which ranges between 401-600 points in the 2020 assessment. The report shows that Palestine scored 374 points in 2022, compared to 494 points in 2020, reflecting a decline of 24.2%, which represents a significant deterioration in press freedoms. The decline was more severe in the West Bank, where the index dropped from 520 points in 2020 to 384 points in 2022, a decrease of 35.3%. In Gaza, the decline was less drastic but still significant, with the index falling from 475 points in 2020 to 403 points in 2022, a decrease of 17.9%. This decline indicates increasing pressure on Palestinian journalism, both from local authorities and the Israeli occupation, with continued violations against journalists and media outlets. Several Palestinian and international human rights organizations, such as the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, and the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate, have pointed out that restrictions on the press are increasing, weakening the media environment and limiting journalists' ability to report facts freely and safely.

settlements and the withdrawal of executive powers from the PA in large parts of the West Bank, alongside increasing the likelihood of annexation of Palestinian territories and the confiscation of vast areas of land. This was not limited to politically isolating the PA but also involved imposing a crippling economic blockade, leading to a deteriorating economic situation and increased reliance on foreign aid.

Internally, the PA is facing a growing crisis of public trust. Polls indicate that most Palestinians in the West Bank view the PA as a burden on the national project. Additionally, the fragmentation within Fatah has become a chronic issue, leading to deep divisions between factions within the movement. This internal strife has often acted as a barrier to Fatah presenting itself as a unified political force.

On the international level, pressure on the PA to implement serious reforms is increasing. The U.S. administration has called for a genuine reform process. However, while Biden's administration has officially opposed the forced displacement of Palestinians, the permanent occupation of Gaza, and the annexation of the West Bank⁵, Trump's stance remains ambiguous. Trump has previously signaled support for annexation and territorial expansion, and his earlier "Deal of the Century" proposal was outright rejected by the PA.

Second: Hamas

Following its October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, Hamas remains a key actor, despite the devastation caused by the war in Gaza. However, Hamas faces serious challenges :

- Israel has officially declared the destruction of Hamas as a primary war objective, rejecting any scenario in which the group retains power .
- Hamas failed to achieve its goals from the October 7 attack, and the war's aftermath has left Gaza in ruins, making it an unattractive and resource-deprived entity for governance .
- Public support for Hamas has declined, even among Palestinians in Gaza, many of whom believe Hamas should step down to alleviate the suffering caused by the war and facilitate the reconstruction of Gaza.

⁵ CNN, A Very Small Piece of Land. What is Trump's Position on Israel's Annexation of Parts of the West Bank?
[URL:] (<https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2025/02/04/israel-trump-annexation-parts-west-bank>)

Internationally, some Arab powers-- including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—view Hamas' alignment with the "Axis of Resistance" as a liability rather than an asset, further deepening its crisis .

Third: Political Forces and Civil Society

Palestinian civil society, including NGOs, unions, and grassroots organizations, plays a vital role in shaping governance, advocating for rights, and holding institutions accountable. While these organizations have been instrumental in raising awareness and providing essential services, they often face political and economic constraints that limit their ability to directly influence policymaking or drive reforms in the governance system .

Research indicates⁶ that official Palestinian institutions only engage civil society when seeking to legitimize certain policies, particularly those related to financial issues such as budgets and economic policies. However, even when civil society is involved, its impact remains limited due to weak cooperation with official institutions. This is evident in the lack of governmental responsiveness to oversight reports and human rights assessments issued by civil society organizations. Additionally, overlapping crises, whether financial, social, or political, complicate collaboration between the government and civil society, making effective partnership increasing difficult.

4. The Future of the Governance System in Palestine: Post-War Scenarios for Gaza

Considering the challenges mentioned above, the Palestinian governance system faces multiple scenarios. The researchers outline four scenarios as follows:

First: A Scenario of Chaos and Ambiguity in the Political and Governance System in Palestine

This scenario highlights that the chaos and ambiguity in Palestine's political system stem from the inability of Palestinian forces to agree on a political program to resolve the current crisis. The prospects for continued

⁶ Raeda Qandeel, A Study on Assessing the Space Available for Palestinian Civil Society to Participate in Public Policymaking and Accountability in its Implementation, The Coalition for Integrity and Accountability (AMAN) p. 25.

political division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip increase, with Hamas remaining a key player in Gaza. This situation would result in the entrenchment of two parallel political systems. Although there may be limited coordination between the two sides on some issues, this state reflects the absence of any prospect for comprehensive national unity, thereby weakening the Palestinian national project and increasing the challenges in achieving the aspirations of the Palestinian people.

Such a scenario would likely be accompanied by rising clashes in both the West Bank and Gaza, with the possibility of local armed militias emerging due to the inability of either the Palestinian Authority or Hamas to impose law and order in Gaza and the West Bank. At the same time, Palestinian institutions in both Gaza and the West Bank would continue to struggle to provide basic services, exacerbating the suffering of Palestinians and increasing their dependency on international aid. Politically, the fragmentation of Palestinian leadership deepens the crisis, with both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas experiencing diminished popularity in the West Bank and Gaza.

In this regard, researcher Omar Shaaban, along with several experts and Israeli study institutions, has put forward similar ideas regarding the necessity to reconsider the idea of establishing a Palestinian state as a near-term solution.⁷

Future of the Governance System under this Scenario:

Under this scenario, the structure of the Palestinian governance system will remain unclear. The governing frameworks in the West Bank—represented by the Palestinian Authority, where executive and legislative powers are concentrated in its executive branch, alongside the judiciary managing public affairs—will persist. Meanwhile, the governing frameworks in Gaza, represented by the Administrative Committee, the ministers appointed by Hamas, and the remaining security apparatus managing conditions in Gaza, will continue as a shadow authority.

⁷ Omar Shaban, Article titled: "Reconstructing Gaza: Considerations for a Livable Future", published May 19, 2024.

Second: A Scenario for Restoring the Legitimacy of the Palestinian Political System

Restoring the legitimacy of the Palestinian political system requires comprehensive political reform in Palestine through the adoption of a series of inclusive pathways aimed at rebuilding public trust and unifying the political system. First, comprehensive presidential and legislative elections should be held in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem to ensure representation of all Palestinians and renew the legitimacy of political institutions. In addition, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) should be restructured to include all Palestinian factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which must adopt a deeper, more nationalistic political approach and reconsider their political programs, thereby restoring the organization's role as an all-encompassing framework representing Palestinians both at home and abroad.⁸

Furthermore, political forces need to reform government institutions to regain the legitimacy of the system by enhancing transparency, accountability, ensuring judicial independence, and recruiting competent personnel. Launching an inclusive national dialogue would serve as a pivotal step to bring together various factions and social forces around a unified national strategy that combines both popular and political resistance. In addition, this scenario calls for restructuring the security apparatus to ensure respect for human rights, which in turn would enhance trust between the leadership and the people and reorient efforts toward achieving national objectives.

Future of the Governance System under this Scenario:

Under this scenario, the governance system in Palestine will adhere to the Basic Law, which, in Article (5), states that the governance system in Palestine is a representative democracy that relies on political and party pluralism, where the President of the Palestinian Authority is elected directly by the people and the government is accountable to both the President and the Palestinian Legislative Council⁹ (9). The governance system will undergo reforms in line with international requirements, particularly concerning the separation of powers and combating corruption.

⁸ Masaraat Center, Strategic Report: Scenarios of the Aggression on Gaza - Six Possible Scenarios for Governance in the Gaza Strip, Ramallah, p. 66.

⁹ The Palestinian Basic Law, Article No. 5

Third: A Scenario of a New Political System in the Day After that Transcends Hamas and Fatah

As the war in the Gaza Strip nears its end, discussions about international solutions for the "day after" are intensifying. These solutions will have a clear impact on the form of the governance system. With the advent of the Trump administration, it has become evident that this administration wishes to impose radical changes with political, social, and economic dimensions in Gaza, proposing, for instance, a plan for the forced displacement of Gaza's residents to other countries.

Experience has shown that the Palestinian private sector could play an increasingly influential role in shaping the new system. The neoliberal economic system adopted by the Palestinian Authority provided an institutional framework that enabled businessmen to penetrate the political process, translating into the influence of major capitalists at the expense of economic justice. In addition, the close relationship between the economic and political elite within the Palestinian Authority has contributed to the formation of interest groups that, over time, have developed international relations and wield significant influence in the political process¹⁰.

Future of the Governance System under this Scenario:

Based on an extrapolation of the current political system under this scenario, the future governance system—and the political system behind it—would not merely overcome the divide between Fatah and Hamas. It would extend to transcending the Palestinian Basic Law and imposing a type of temporary administration. There are international precedents that suggest the possibility of such proposals in critical political situations, such as the de facto self-administration in northern and eastern Syria, where the Syrian constitution was effectively set aside to establish a self-governing body for the Kurdish component, covering nearly a third of Syrian territory.

Fourth: A Scenario of Terminating the Palestinian Political Entity

Terminating the Palestinian political entity under the administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump poses a strategic risk to the future of the entire Palestinian cause. Any moves or initiatives aimed at bypassing the existing representative structures or undermining the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization would

¹⁰ Review: Tarek Dana, Policy Brief: "The Expanding Palestinian Capitalism," published on January 14, 2014, [link](<https://2u.pw/hjocYaAA>).

weaken the unified Palestinian stance and deprive it of the capacity to negotiate and defend its legitimate rights.

Such moves—whether through annexation or forced displacement and by obstructing the reconstruction process—come within the context of external pressures aimed at imposing unilateral solutions, reminiscent of the previously known "Deal of the Century" or through a project of gradual displacement, which ignore the core Palestinian right to self-determination. If such steps were to be pursued, they could plunge the region into even greater complexity and tension due to the political and security vacuum that the absence of a unified, official Palestinian entity would create, thereby opening the door to further extremism and political fragmentation. It would also destabilize the region and deprive the international community of the opportunity to engage with a central Palestinian leadership capable of representing the aspirations of the Palestinian people and protecting their national interests.

Future of the Governance System under this Scenario: In this scenario—where the Palestinian political entity that has existed since 1994 in the form of the Palestinian Authority is terminated—the impact on the governance system would be profound, resulting in the collapse of the PA. Israel would likely seek to eliminate any prospects for a two-state solution and instead work to impose its authority over Palestinian areas, particularly in the West Bank, by intensifying settlement activity and gradually imposing its laws. This would lead to the creation of a new legal and political reality in which Palestinians are subjected to direct Israeli administrative control or governance through local intermediaries under Israeli oversight.

The four scenarios outlined above are all plausible and strongly considered. However, what makes the third scenario the most likely is the presence of a U.S. administration with an extreme, openly biased approach that deviates from the traditional principles of American administrations in dealing with the Palestinian issue. Consequently, the governance system in Palestine is expected to undergo a restructuring process through the imposition of reforms from a non-Palestinian perspective. These reforms will ultimately lead to a restricted governance system, resembling a local administration managing Palestinian affairs as a substitute for the statehood project, which will become increasingly unattainable if Israel proceeds with the annexation of the West Bank. Such annexation would effectively eliminate any possibility of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders .

In this emerging political and governance system, the presence of Hamas and Fatah—or even both—will not be significant. Rather, it will transcend them, reflecting the political transformations they have undergone because of the events of October 7.

5. Policy Alternatives to Address Potential Scenarios:

First Alternative: Ending the Division and Achieving Palestinian National Reconciliation .

Ending the division and achieving Palestinian national reconciliation is one of the most crucial alternatives to counter the risks of eliminating the Palestinian cause. The internal Palestinian division has been one of the major factors exploited by regional and international powers—especially Israel—to deepen their dominance over Palestinian land and undermine any chance of establishing an independent state. The continuation of this division facilitates the implementation of annexation and settlement plans while reinforcing Israeli and international efforts to bypass unified Palestinian representation.

Alternative Evaluation :

- **Effectiveness:** Very high if successfully implemented, as it strengthens the unified Palestinian stance and undermines the occupation’s plans to divide Palestinian representation .
- **Feasibility:** Moderate, as it requires strong political will and concessions from all parties, which is complex given the current divisions .
- **Cost and Funding:** High, as restructuring institutions and launching joint national projects demand substantial financial support, which could be provided by pro-Palestinian donor countries .
- **Social and Political Impact:** Very positive, as it enjoys widespread public support and restores confidence in political leadership .
- **Sustainability:** Depends on continuous political commitment; if internal disputes are not addressed with effective mechanisms, the agreement may collapse.

Alternative Two: Restructuring the Governance System and Reforming the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)

Restructuring the governance system and reforming the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is of great importance in countering the risks of liquidating the Palestinian cause. The PLO serves as the only internationally recognized political and legal framework representing the Palestinian people and is also capable of functioning as a national governance system. Restructuring the PLO to include all Palestinian

factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and renewing its legitimacy through democratic elections or consensus at this stage would strengthen the Palestinian position against forced displacement or the imposition of a new Palestinian administration .

Evaluation of this alternative:

- **Effectiveness:** High, as it enhances Palestinian representation and unites them under a single leadership, increasing their political and diplomatic influence .
- **Feasibility:** Moderate to low, due to the complexities of relationships between Palestinian factions and conflicting interests among influential forces .
- **Cost and funding:** Moderate to high, as it requires resources for institutional restructuring, conducting elections, and updating administrative systems .
- **Social and political impact:** Very positive, as it restores confidence in Palestinian institutions, though it may face opposition from factions benefiting from the current situation .
- **Sustainability:** High if genuine reforms are implemented and inclusive decision-making is ensured.

Third Alternative: Internationalizing the Palestinian Cause in Legal Forums

Internationalizing the Palestinian cause in legal forums serves as a key tool to counter the risks of its liquidation, especially given the growing global sympathy for Palestine after October 7. The ongoing war and Israeli violations against civilians have brought significant attention to Palestinian grievances, leading to increased international support for the Palestinian cause at both popular and official levels. In this context, resorting to international courts, such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC), becomes a strategic means to hold Israel accountable for its crimes and to thwart any attempts to impose unjust political settlements .

Evaluation of this alternative :

- **Effectiveness:** High in terms of international pressure, but slow in impact and may not yield tangible results on the ground in the short term.
- **Feasibility:** High, as it can be implemented through available legal and diplomatic tools, though it faces challenges such as U.S. veto power and political pressure.

- **Cost and funding:** Relatively low compared to other alternatives, as it relies more on diplomatic and legal efforts than direct financial resources.
- **Social and political impact:** Very positive, as it strengthens international solidarity with the Palestinian cause, but it does not address the internal issues Palestinians face.
- **Sustainability:** Sustainable as a diplomatic and legal pressure tool, but it does not provide direct solutions to the internal Palestinian situation.

Comparison of Alternatives

Based on the previous analysis, it is evident that Palestinians have significantly delayed taking crucial steps, including political reform, restructuring the political system, and ending internal division through national reconciliation. Therefore, all proposed alternatives are essential and should be implemented as immediate measures. Meanwhile, internationalizing the Palestinian cause in legal forums serves as an important supporting tool to counter threats to the political system and governance in Palestine.

Recommendations

Recommendations Regarding the Political System:

Launching a Comprehensive National Dialogue to Achieve Political Consensus and Strengthen National Unity

A comprehensive national dialogue serves as the cornerstone for rebuilding the Palestinian political system on democratic foundations that ensure representation of all factions, national forces, civil society, and the academic sector. This dialogue must be inclusive and unconditional, addressing the future of governance in Palestine, necessary constitutional and institutional reforms, and mechanisms for conducting democratic elections. Additionally, it should follow a specific timeline with community oversight mechanisms to ensure the implementation of its outcomes .

Reforming the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Expanding Its National Representation

The PLO is the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, but it requires fundamental reforms to ensure its democratic nature and comprehensive representation of all Palestinian groups. The organization should be restructured through democratic elections for the Palestinian National Council, including Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and

refugee communities in the diaspora. Furthermore, the Palestinian National Charter should be updated to reflect current political realities and define national priorities .

Institutionalizing Political Pluralism and Ensuring the Participation of All Groups

Political pluralism is a crucial element of any democratic system, guaranteeing the participation of various political forces and movements in public life. Laws should be enacted to protect the freedom to form political parties and remove any legal or administrative restrictions that hinder peaceful political activities .

Recommendations Regarding the Governance System:

Adopting a Restricted Presidential System that Balances Powers and Prevents Autocracy

Based on Palestinian experience and recent developments in the Arab world, adopting a restricted presidential system is preferred to ensure a balance between presidential and parliamentary powers and prevent the concentration of authority in a single person's hands. The president's powers should be clearly defined in the constitution to prevent any overreach beyond the role of the legislative council or judiciary .

Upholding the Principle of Separation of Powers to Ensure Balance and Good Governance

The separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers is a fundamental pillar of any democratic system, preventing the centralization of power and ensuring mutual accountability among state institutions. Judicial independence should be reinforced through laws that protect judges from political or executive pressures .

Enhancing Governance, Transparency, and Combating Corruption

Citizens must have the right to access information regarding the state's public budget, appointments, and public contracts to ensure governmental accountability. Transparency mechanisms should be strengthened to prevent corruption and promote integrity in governance.