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Palestinian Territories

Last update:	22 March 2017
Population:	4,422,143 million (World Bank 2015 est.)
Prime minister:	Rami Hamdallah
President:	Mahmoud Abbas
Governemental type:	Semi-presidential, parliamentary democracy
Ruling coalition:	-
Last election:	25 January 2006 (parliamentary elections)
Next election:	-
Sister parties:	Fatah

In September 2015 the UN General Assembly approved a proposal to raise the Palestinian flag at its headquarters, a symbolically important move. Still, its status is not recognized by the United Nations, Israel and major Western nations such as the United States. Previously, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas submitted a request to join the United Nations as a full member state in 2011, but stalled this request a year later. Instead he pursued a 'non-member observer status', which was granted in 2012.

Relations between Fatah and Hamas have been tense. A unity government formed in 2014 was forced to resign in June 2015 after it failed to operate in the Gaza strip. The closing of the Rafah border crossing with Egypt and continued Israeli-Hamas violence have deteriorated conditions in the Gaza Strip, leading to more resistance. The creation of the state of Israel and the strive for the restoration of a Palestinian state has been at the heart of the Middle Eastern conflicts.

Political Situation

Israel declared independence in 1948, comprising 54 percent of the former Palestinian territories. This was very much against the wish of the Palestinians and the surrounding Arab countries; the Arab-Israeli War (1948-1949) was a fact. It was the first in a series of wars fought between Israel and its Arab neighbours. The Arab-Israeli War resulted in the occupation of the Westbank by Transjordan and the Gaza Strip by Egypt. Later, during the 1967 Six Day War, Israel subsequently gained control over Gaza and the West Bank, ignoring the so-called Green Line that was agreed upon in the 1949 Armistice. The Green line used to mark the line between Israel and the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and Sinai Peninsula (the latter was returned to Egypt in 1982).

In 1987 the first intifada (1987-1993), (literally translated as "shaking off," usually translated as "uprising") broke out. The Oslo Accords in 1993 made an end to the violence. In essence, these accords called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from parts of the Gaza Strip and West Bank and affirmed the Palestinian right to self-government within those areas through the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994. Despite the momentum of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process at the time, unfortunately, no solution has come into reach.

During the Camp David summit in July 2000 Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Chairman of the Palestinian Authority Yasser Arafat, and US President Bill Clinton aimed at reaching a 'final status' agreement. In September that same year tensions between the Palestinians and Israeli's escalated when Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount in Jerusalem during the election campaign. The outbreak of the second intifada was a fact and peace negotiations were stalled. However, after the death of Arafat in November 2004 and the subsequent election of the moderate Mahmoud Abbas as the new President of the PA, both Israel and the PA on a summit at Sharm el-Sheikh in 2005 declared their intentions of ending any bloodshed and revitalizing the Quartet Road Map. As a result, Israel withdrew its settlements from Gaza in September 2005, but did keep its control on maritime, airspace and most access to the Gaza Strip.

Victory Hamas parliamentary election

With the democratic victory of Hamas in January 2006 in the Palestinian legislative elections, the tide turned once again. A general fear for the Islamic party and the fact that Hamas rejected the existence of Israel led to sanctions imposed by Israel, the United States and some European countries. Hamas and Fatah, however, could not agree on a government acceptable to the international

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community and lift the economic sanctions on Palestine. Early in June 2007, violence between Hamas and Fatah intensified, cumulating in the Battle of Gaza, from 7 to 15 June. This led to the current situation in which the West Bank is ruled by the government under Fayyad in cooperation with Abbas, while Hamas controls the Gaza Strip. President Abbas decided to dissolve the cabinet of National Unity and appointed an emergency government headed by Salam Fayyad. Hamas rejected this government stating that a new government needed to be ratified by the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC).

Gaza War

The takeover of Gaza in 2007 by Hamas was met with an economic and political blockade by Israel on Gaza. As a result a huge smuggling network erupted that worked through tunnels under the 11 kilometer boundary between Egypt and Gaza, through the Sinai desert and Gaza's 40 kilometer coastline. Most importantly was the smuggling of arms that Hamas used to attack Israel. In June 2008 a six-month ceasefire between Israel and the Gaza strip was agreed on. The truce was violated by both Hamas and the Israeli's several times. On 27 December 2008 Israel started a surprise air strike on Gaza, codenamed 'Operation Cast Lead' and on 3 January they started a ground offensive. After nearly a month Israel completed the withdrawal of their troops from the Gaza Strip on 21 January. About 1400 Palestinians, of which 83 percent citizens, were killed - against 13 Israeli deaths. The Goldstone report was released in September 2009 in which both Israel Defense Forces and Palestinian militants were accused of war crimes and possible crimes against humanity.

Israeli West Bank barrier

Since 2002, the barrier between Israel and the West Bank is one of the most controversial issues in the relationship between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The 703 kilometer long barrier separates Israel and the Palestinian Territories mostly along the so-called "Green Line", the territorial boundary between Israel and the Palestinian Territories agreed upon in 1949. Supporters of the barrier state that it is build to stop the acts of Palestinian terrorism, predominantly bus-bombings. Opponents of the barrier argue that Israel tries to annex Palestinian land illegally under the guise of security. The idea for the barrier initially came from Yitzhak Rabin in 1992. However, it lasted until 2002 before Israel, under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, started to build the barrier. Two similar barriers, the Israeli Gaza Strip barrier and the Israeli-built 7 to 9 meter wall separating Gaza from Egypt, which was temporarily breached on 23 January 2008, are just as controversial.

Recent developments

Al Jazeera, a TV and internet channel based in Qatar, had been given unhindered access to the largest-ever leak of confidential documents related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in late 2010 and early 2011. Al Jazeera released the documents, dubbed the Palestinian papers, between 23 and 26 January 2011. The leaks showed the concessions that Palestinian negotiators were willing to grant to Israel, contrary to their public posture during peace talks in 2008. This caused great anger among the Palestinians in the occupied territories.

It emerged that the source for the Palestine Papers came from the office of Saeb Erekat, the Palestine Liberation Organisation's (PLO) chief negotiator. Consequently, he resigned on 12 February 2011 and on 14 February 2011 the whole cabinet of the Palestinian Authority (PA) led by Salam Fayyad resigned. President Mahmoud Abbas re-assigned Fayyad to form a new government. The shake-up in the Palestinian government was long demanded by Fayyad (Third way party) and some in the Abbas Fatah faction.

On 27 April 2011, officials from both Fatah and Hamas announced the two organizations had reached an initial deal to unify the two parties into one government, and to plan elections for 2012. On 7 February 2012 the two parties actually signed a reconciliation deal in Doha, in which they agreed on a national unity government headed by Fatah-leader and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The deal paved the way for new parliamentary and presidential elections in the Palestinian Territories later this year. Israel strongly condemns the accord, rejecting the conciliatory stance of Abbas towards the 'terrorist group' Hamas.

Timeline

1923	Palestinian Territories part of 'British Mandate f
1948	Declaration of independence Israel and Arab-Is
1967	Six Day War
1973	Yom Kippur war
1987	Start First Intifada
1993	Oslo Accords
2000	Second Intifada

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2002	Beginning building Israeli West Bank barrier
2004	Death Yasser Arafat
2005	Mahmoud Abbas elected as President
2005	Withdrawal Israeli settlements from Gaza
2006	Victory Hamas in Parliamentary Elections
2006	Operation "Summer Rains" (Israeli intervention)
2007	"Battle of Gaza" violence between Fatah and H
2008	"Gaza War," Operation Cast Lead (28 Decemb
2012	Operation Pillar of Defense
2014	Operation "Protective Edge" (July-August)

Elections

On a national level, the Palestinians elect a head of state - the president - and a legislature - the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC), a unicameral parliament consisting of 132 members. Since the election law of 2005 came into force, the Palestinian Authority has a mixed electoral system combining both a majority system (districts) and a system of proportional representation (lists). The law divides the 132 seats of the PLC equally between the majority system (66 seats) and the system of proportional representation (66 seats). The PLC is elected for a four-year term.

Based on the majority system, the Palestinian Territories are divided into 16 electoral districts (11 in the West Bank and 5 in the Gaza Strip). Each district is allocated a number of seats in the parliament according to the number of its population. Six out of the 66 seats allocated to the majority system are reserved for Christians, because it is considered the minimum quota for their representation in the council.

In the system of proportional representation, Palestine is considered as one electoral district. Following the election law, each electoral list must include a minimum of 7 candidates and a maximum of 66 candidates. Each list must also include at least one woman in the first three names, at least one woman in the next four names and at least one woman in each of the five names that follow in the list. Lists that receive a minimum of 2 percent on the basis of the proportional representation system are allocated the number of seats proportional to the total number of votes that the list receives. Its population determines the number of seats each electoral district receives.

It is important to distinguish the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) on the one hand and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) on the other. The PLO was founded in 1964 aiming at liberating the Palestinian state with its 1947 borders. Until today it is the sole representative of the Palestinian Diaspora in international institutions as the United Nations (UN) and the Arab League. The PNA on the other hand was a direct result of the 1993 Oslo Accords, founded as a 5-year transitional body during which final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestine's were to take place.

In 2007 President Abbas unilaterally changed the electoral law to full proportional representation. He insisted he could issue the change by decree as long as the PLC was unable to convene. The move was seen as a bid to lessen the chances of Hamas in the next election. Hamas declared the move to be illegal. The call for elections by Abbas early in 2011 and the resignation of the cabinet at the same time has not ended the rule of decree yet. The question whether next elections will be on the basis of a mixed proportional representation and majority system or a full proportional representation was not clear until the time of this writing in February 2017.

Gender representation

The new local election law of 2005 states that political parties must have at least one woman among the first three on the list, at least one woman among the next four, and one woman among every five for the rest of the list. This guarantees about 20 percent women among the candidates. As of June 2009, only 5 out of 23 ministers and 17 of 131 legislative councils seats belonged to women, which comprises 13 percent of the total number of PLC members. Still women's representation in the PLC is higher than in other Arab parliaments.

Women rights

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According to Article 9 of the Palestinian Basic Law, which was amended in 2005, all Palestinians are equal before law and there is no distinction between them on the basis of ethnicity, sex, color, religion, political point of view or disability. Article 4 however stipulates that the Sharia (Islamic law) is a main source of legislation, opening the door to discriminatory provisions. Despite the Basic Law's guarantees described in Article 9, many laws currently in force do not penalize gender discrimination. The laws that do so are difficult to enforce due to weak institutional mechanisms for handling such cases. The Personal Status law, based on religious laws, puts women at a disadvantage in matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance.

Although the Palestinian Authority is making progress in improving the lives and legal rights for women in the West Bank, the victory of Hamas in the 2006 parliamentary elections have led to greater restrictions of women's rights in Gaza, where the Sharia is implemented more strictly. Domestic abuse, rape and 'honor killings', in which relatives murder women for perceived sexual or moral transgressions, are common, and these crimes often go unpunished. In the West Bank, as noted before, the situation is better but all abuses are not uncommon. Under Hamas, women's dress and movements in public have been increasingly restricted by the so-called morality police, who are tasked with enforcing orthodox Islamic customs.

Despite the fact that Palestinian women form a majority of university students in the West Bank, they are underrepresented in most professions and encounter discrimination in employment. In 2009 women only accounted for 15.1 percent of the labor force and the female unemployment rate stands at 23.8 percent.

Parliamentary Elections

On 25 January 2006, the first elections since 1996 for the Palestinian Legislative Council were held. The Islamic Hamas, that contested at the List of Change and Reform, won 74 seats; an absolute majority. Nationalist Fatah, that had effectively been in power in the last several decades, received a severe blow winning only 45 seats.

According to analysts it was Hamas' focus on clean policy and its successful attacks on widespread corruption within the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority that provided for its electoral victory. International observers considered the elections to be conducted quite fairly, showing Palestinian commitment to democratic elections, also considering the high turnout rate of around 74 percent. However, there were some reports of problems during Election Day itself. Voters in East Jerusalem were not provided voting privacy, and it was said that Fatah had used Palestinian Authority resources for its campaign, whereas in many mosques campaigning activities on behalf of Hamas (List of Change and Reform) have been reported.

Alliances and Parties	Seats*
Hamas (List of Change and Reform)	74 (29/45)
Fatah	45 (28/17)
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine	3 (3/0)
The Alternative	2 (2/0)
Independent Palestine (Palestine National Initiative and independents)	2 (2/0)
Third Way	2 (2/0)
Independents	4 (0/4)
Total	132 (66/66)

* Total seats (proportional/district seats)

On 29 March 2006 President Mahmoud Abbas swore in – much to the displeasure of among others the EU and the United States – Hamas' 24-member cabinet led by Prime Minister Ismail Haniya. This cabinet consists mostly of Hamas members and includes one Christian and one woman. The government's political programme stresses the need for comprehensive reform within the Palestinian Territories, fighting corruption and enforcing the rule of law as well as democratic principles and institutions. It only considers negotiations with Israel (consequently referred to as 'the occupation state') if Israel completely withdraws its settlements from the Palestinian Territories. Until then, the government recognizes any form of resistance as a legitimate right of the Palestinian

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people to end the occupation.

Presidential Elections

The most recent Palestinian presidential elections took place on 9 January 2005 in the West Bank and Gaza. In accordance with the Palestinian Basic Law these elections were to be held within 60 days after the death of former President Yasser Arafat. Seven candidates contested in the election. Three of them withdrew during the campaign.

PLO chairman Abbas won over 62 percent of the votes, with independent Mustafa Barghouti coming second, winning 19 percent of the votes. Palestinian Legislative Council member and Fatah leader in the West Bank Marwan Barghouti was seen as the only candidate who could hope to seriously compete against Abbas. However, his proposed candidacy met with resistance from Fatah activists, fuelling rumours that the Fatah party was internally divided along generational lines. After successive contradictory announcements, Marwan Barghouti retired from the race due to discussions between his representatives and the Fatah leadership.

Candidate	% of votes
Mahmoud Abbas (Fatah)	62.52 %
Mustafa Barghouti (Independent)	19.48 %
Taysir Khald (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine)	3.35 %
Abdel Halim al-Ashqar (Independent)	2.76 %
Bassam al-Salhi (Palestinian People's Party)	2.67 %
Sayyid Barakah (Independent)	1.30 %
Abdel Karim Shubeir (Independent)	0.71 %
Invalid Ballots	3.82 %
Blank Ballots	3.39 %
Total	100 %

The election campaign faced some problems – Mustafa Barghouti was arrested by Israeli forces when he was on his way to hold an election speech in East Jerusalem; other candidates were denied access to East Jerusalem as well - due to the widespread blockade of the Palestinian territories by Israel. Also on Election Day a number of incidents were reported. Voting was controversially extended for two hours, apparently at the request of Fatah, which led to the subsequent resignation of the head of the Central Elections Commission. Despite all this, international observers considered the elections to have been conducted fairly. The turnout rate was around 48 percent according to the Palestinian Election Commission.

Social Democratic Parties

Fatah

Party Leader: Mahmoud Abbas

Number of seats: 45

Fatah is a secular, nationalist movement with the aim of establishing a Palestinian state. It's political ideology is generally regarded as a social democratic. Fatah was formed in the late 1950's, and derives its name from *Harakat at-Tahrir al-Filastini* ("Movement for the liberation of Palestine"). It was incorporated into the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation) in 1969 and has become its most powerful group.

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Fatah's promoted an armed struggle against Israel, and in the 1960's and 1970's carried out many attacks on Israel from either Lebanon, Jordan or Gaza. After the Six Day war in 1967 the group moved to Jordan and Lebanon subsequently. They resided in Lebanon until 1982, when Israel invaded the country due to Palestinian guerrilla activity along the Lebanese-Israeli border.

In 1988, in order to gain more international support, Arafat denounced the use of terrorism by the PLO. A couple of years later in 1993 the PLO signed the Oslo Accords with Israel. As part of these Accords the Palestinian Authority was established and elections were held in 1996. Fatah won a lot of seats and Arafat won the presidency. Arafat, who died in 2004, was succeeded by Mahmoud Abbas as president and leader of Fatah in 2005. In 2006 Fatah lost their parliamentary majority to Hamas, they subsequently formed a coalition together but it collapsed in 2007 after Hamas violently took control of the Gaza Strip. In 2011 Hamas and Fatah reconciled briefly, but at the 2012 municipal elections, however, the two groups were at odds with each other again, with Hamas boycotting the election. Fatah claimed victory in the municipal elections but there were claims by human rights groups and political opponents that vote rigging and political violence had influenced the election results.

In January 2017 Fatah and Hamas agreed to form a unity government in order to finally hold delayed elections. Fatah has observer status within the Party of European Socialists (PES) and is a full member of Socialist International (SI).

Other Parties

Hamas

Party Leader: Yahya Sinwar (Gaza Strip), Khaled Meshaal (head of political bureau, based in Qatar), Sheik Hassan Youssef (Leader Hamas in the West Bank).

Number of seats: 74

Hamas (*Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*) is a Palestinian Islamist resistance movement, founded by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin during the first intifada (Palestinian uprising) in 1987. It is a spinoff of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and the group aims to liberate Palestine from Israeli occupation. It's founding charter, published in 1988, does not recognize Israel and calls for it to be destroyed and replaced by an Islamic state. Hamas initially became popular among the Palestinian population for delivering social welfare programmes. Over the years it has become notorious for carrying out suicide bombings against Israel though, and is therefore labelled a terrorist organization by the United States and the EU among others.

Hamas was a stance opponent of the Oslo peace accords, signed in 1993 and 1995, between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). In the years after the Accords the military wing of Hamas, The Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, carried out several attacks on Israeli civilians and soldiers. The military and political wings have been at odds since the last Gaza war (2008-2009) though, as the The Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades wanted a more aggressive approach towards Israel than the political wing of Hamas.

Since its founding, the contacts between Hamas and the PLO and Fatah have been far from warm. Hamas did not recognize PLO's monopoly on Palestinian representation and decision-making and Fatah, being nationalistic rather than Islamic, tried to exclude Hamas from the political platform. With the start of the second intifada the relations between the two main political powerbases temporarily improved. However, after the parliamentary elections of 25 January 2006 in which Hamas won a decisive majority, relations dramatically worsened again leading to the battle of Gaza after which Hamas retained control of Gaza while its officials were ousted from government positions in the West Bank. In response Israel and Egypt have blocked all borders with Gaza, which has severely damaged the territory's economy. In February 2017 Hamas members elected Yahya Sinwar as their new leader, succeeding Ismail Haniya. One month later, in March 2017, it was announced that the movement had drafted a new political programme describing itself as a Palestinian resistance movement against Israeli occupation. It took a more moderate tone distancing itself from the Muslim Brotherhood, and refrained from mentioning a holy war against the Jews. The new programme will however not formally replace Hamas' 1988 founding covenant.

Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)

Party Leader: Ahmad Sa'adat

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Number of seats: 3

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was founded in 1967 by members of the Arab National Movement (founded in 1951) and other factions as a Marxist-Leninist, nationalist resistance movement. During the seventies it became the second largest member of the PLO, after Fatah. However, the PFLP grew more disillusioned with the PLO's practices and condemned the Oslo Accord of 1993 and officially boycotted the Palestine Authority's first indigenous elections. Considering the relations with Israel PFLP originally favoured a hard-line stance, not recognizing the Israeli right for an independent state. In the late nineties it became more moderate though.

In the 2006 parliamentary elections PFLP took part as the Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa list, named after Abu Ali Mustafa, the General Secretary of the PFLP who was assassinated by Israeli forces in 2001. It won 3 seats of the popular vote in the 2006 parliamentary elections. It gained only one seat in the municipal elections of 2004-2005.

The EU and the US consider the PFLP to be a terrorist organisation due to the numerous deadly attacks on Israeli civilians – and on the Israeli Minister for Tourism Rehavam Zeevi in 2001. The attacks by the PFLP's armed wing, the Abu Ali Mustapha Brigades, are a retaliation of the assassination of Abu Ali Mustafa. In the early seventies the PLFP was the first organisation to openly use terrorist attacks as a means of establishing a Palestinian state. After the death of Mustafa, the former Mathematics teacher in Ramallah Ahmad Sa'adat was elected General Secretary on 3 October 2001. In January 2002, PNA authorities detained Sa'adat without charge in a prison in Jericho, following a compromise agreement with the US, UK and Israel. In 2006 the US and Britain withdrew monitors from the Jericho prison holding Sa'adat, following which Israel raided the facility and took Sa'adat and six others into custody. He is currently in solitary confinement in an Israeli prison. The PFLP-GC (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command) as well as the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) originate from the PFLP.

The Palestinian National Initiative (PNI)

Party Leader: Mustafa Barghouti

Number of seats: 2

The Palestinian National Initiative (PNI) is a political movement that was launched in 2002 by prominent Palestinian activists, politicians and academics. It has two seats out of 130 in the Palestinian Legislative Council. The PNI has an observer status within Socialist International.

The PNI wants to establish a just and durable peace, using only mass popular nonviolent struggle. The list describes itself as a 'democratic third force', opposing the dichotomy of 'the corruption of Fatah' and 'the fundamentalism of Hamas.' Its main goals are the creation of a Palestinian state within the pre-1967 borders and with Jerusalem as its capital city, the establishment of a democratic government- and system, and standing up for marginalized groups within Palestinian society.

The PNI stresses the importance of a viable civil society – which forms an important pool of supporters of the PNI. The PNI also tries to reach out to Palestinians abroad, and has established diplomatic relations with countries in Europe and the rest of the world. Its current leader is Mustafa Barghouti, who is also one of the founders of the PNI.

Biographies

Mahmoud Abbas

President

Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen (father of Mazen, his deceased son), was born in 1935 in the city of Safed a town in present-day northern Israel. He and his family fled to Syria during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Abbas graduated from the University of Damascus, after which he went to Egypt to study law. Abbas later entered graduate studies at the Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow where he earned a Candidate of Science degree.

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Abbas co-founded Fatah together with Yasser Arafat and a number of others in the late 1950s in Kuwait. He established contacts with left-wing Israelis in the 1970s and was the main Palestinian architect of the 1993 Oslo accords, which led to the foundation of the Palestinian Authority.

In March 2003 he was appointed as Prime Minister. Plagued by power struggles with Arafat over the control of the Palestinian security apparatus and over planned reforms, Abbas resigned in September 2003. However, he succeeded Yasser Arafat in 2004 as the leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), having been Arafat's deputy since 1969.

After the death of Arafat on 11 November 2004, Abbas won the January 2005 presidential elections. His current term was set to have ended in January 2009, but in 2008 he announced he extended his term by another year in order to allow presidential and parliamentary elections to be held at the same time. Hamas denounced the move. In November 2009, Abbas said he would not stand again in elections scheduled for 24 January 2010, in protest against the continuing impasse in attempts to resurrect peace talks with Israel. The elections were postponed, and he has continued in office on an interim basis.

Many analysts regard Mahmoud Abbas as a moderate. He has condemned the armed Palestinian uprising and favours the resumption of negotiations with Israel.

Rami Hamdallah

Prime Minister

Rami Hamdallah (1958) is the current Prime Minister of the Palestinian Territories and the president of the An-Najah National University in Nablus. He graduated from the University of Jordan in 1980 and received his MA from the University of Manchester in 1982. Hamdallah completed a PhD in linguistics at Lancaster University in 1988.

He served as the secretary general of the Palestinian Central Elections Commission from 2002 to 2013. In June 2013 he was named by President Mahmoud Abbas to succeed Salman Fayyad. After two weeks only, Hamdallah resigned, reportedly as a result of interference with his authority by Abbas' aides. His resignation was accepted by Abbas, who asked him to form a new government only six weeks later.

Khaled Mashal

Political leader Hamas

Meshal was born in the West Bank in 1956, then ruled by Jordan. In 1967, after the Six-Day War, Meshal's family moved to Kuwait when the area fell under Israeli occupation. In 1971, at the age of 15, Meshal joined the Muslim Brotherhood and a few years later, while studying physics at Kuwait University, he founded the student group List of the Islamic Right.

In 1987, Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood leaders in Gaza founded the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), in response to a mass uprising against the Israeli occupation. Meshal became increasingly involved with Hamas over the next few years, coming to the fore after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. He moved to Jordan where he took over the operation of the Hamas bureau in the capital Amman, becoming the party's local chairman.

Meshal survived an Israeli assassination attempt in 1997. His life was literally saved by Jordan's King Hussein, who was outraged by the attack and demanded the Israeli government to hand over the antidote. In the late 1990s, King Hussein's son and successor, King Abdullah, closed down the Hamas office in Amman after which Meshal went to Qatar. In 2001 he moved to Syria, where Hamas' Political Bureau was based until January 2012. It was then announced that Hamas left Syria as a protest against the violence Syria's President Bashar al-Assad used against the popular uprising in his country that started in March 2011, even though Assad played as a host to exiled Palestinian leaders for years.

Meshal became head of Hamas following the assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Ismail Hassan Yassin by Israel in 2004. Meshal has spoken of the need to work "realistically" with Israel, expressing readiness to sign a long-term cease-fire agreement with the Jewish state. He has, however, also been steadfast in his refusal to officially recognize Israel. In May 2009, Meshal was re-elected by Hamas members to lead the group's politburo. In January 2012 Hamas announced that Meshal wished to step down as the chief of the movement's political bureau. The exact nature and meaning of his resignation remains unclear.

Mustafa Barghouti

Leader Palestinian National Initiative

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Mustafa Barghouti is the leader and co-founder of the PNI. He used to be a prominent figure in the Palestine People's Party but left the party in 2002. Born in Jerusalem, Barghouti was trained as a doctor in the former Soviet Union and is known to many ordinary Palestinians for running a healthcare organisation (the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees) that he established back in 1979.

Barghouti was Mr Abbas's main challenger as an independent candidate for the position of president in the 2005 elections, only after his jailed distant cousin Marwan Barghouti withdrew his candidacy. He came in second with a respectable 19.8 percent of the votes. Like Abbas, Barghouti sought an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and also East Jerusalem, the release of Palestinian prisoners and campaigns for the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes.

Barghouti has been an advocate of the creation of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, the right of return for refugees and the establishment of a democratic political system. He favours an immediate resumption of peace talks with Israel and peaceful resistance to the Israeli occupation. He has criticized the PLO and Palestinian Authority for corruption.

Source

- [BBC news](#)
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