



April 27, 2021

Featuring Jonathan Schanzer and Matthew Zwieig

Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

**MAY:** In the West Bank and Gaza, elections are not frequent occurrences. The last one was in 2006. Hamas, a terrorist organization, openly committed to Israel's extermination. And if you'll forgive me for stating the obvious, opposed to a two-state solution, won a parliamentary majority. Palestinian civil war followed. A year later, Hamas ruled Gaza while the Palestine liberation organization held power in the West Bank. Attempts over the years to reunite these two Palestinian factions have failed. New elections are scheduled, more or less. As we record this, we're hearing that Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas is seriously considering a postponement for a month, a year, a decade or two? To explore such questions, the forces at play and what it all means for Palestinians, Israelis, Americans, and other interested parties, we're joined by Jonathan Schanzer, FDD's Senior Vice President for Research and a longtime observer of and commentator on Palestinian politics. Also, on-hand is Matthew Zwieig, a senior fellow at FDD who worked on Palestinian assistance in the House Committee on Foreign Affairs for almost 18 years. I'm Cliff May and I'm glad you're with us too here on *Foreign Podicy*.

**MAY:** So, by my count, Israelis have had four elections over the last two years, the Palestinians had elections in 2005 and 2006, but none since. So, I guess one conclusion you could draw is that the Israelis just can't get it right, while the Palestinians did elections so well, they just haven't needed to repeat them. Or am I being too generous, Jon?

**SCHANZER:** You might be a little generous on both counts. I think the Israelis have a bit of an overactive democracy and that they're at really an impasse over the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu. And I think that may play itself out over the next couple of months as he goes through his legal issues and everything else, but certainly being in politics in Israel is not for the faint of heart. Being in politics in the Palestinian Territories requires bravery and it requires courage because right now there is really only one leader and that is Mahmoud Abbas.

He is now 16 years into a four year term. He's not really allowed for any political participation in the West Bank and the territory that he controls. And he's certainly not interested in having Hamas take over the fiefdom that he has right now in the West Bank. So, we've been in an impasse now for many years. It was interesting that he even agreed in the first place to hold these elections. But as you suggested, it doesn't look likely that they're going to go through now. I think he's thought better of it and that may be for the best.

**MAY:** And just to be clear, on the West Bank he is President of the Palestinian Authority. He's chairman of BATA and the Palestine Liberation Organization. He controls the judiciary, the executive and the security forces, all of that. So, it'd be two questions, right? But in Gaza, he can't even sit on the beach and get a tan, right?

**SCHANZER:** He cannot.

**MAY:** Okay. And Matt, let me just bring you in here. Here's an example of where all these years, the PA, the Palestinian Authority has been getting loads of aid. Didn't people in Congress say, "You know what, this should not be so dominated by one man." I mean, part of what we're trying to do is help them to develop a system that is more than one dictator ruling, having been elected one time, only over absolutely everything. This is not successful from our point of view if it's an example of aid and democracy promotion and developing the Palestinian Authority into something that we'd want to support in a two-state solution or some other configuration, no?

**ZWIEIG:** Cliff, I would agree with that assessment. What you saw in Congress between Congress and the administration or the executive branch over the last few decades has been a considerable amount of push and pull precisely on that fact that has manifested itself in quite a bit of statutory conditionality in terms of assistance to the West Bank and Gaza.



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**MAY:** Jon, am I being unfair in this sense, that over all these years that Mahmoud Abbas has been in power, following Yasser Arafat who held full, absolute power prior, has he achieved something for which he should get credit for the people at least of the West Bank, if not Gaza?

**SCHANZER:** Yeah. Look, he actually does deserve some credit. First, he prevented Hamas from taking over in the West Bank during the civil war of 2007. He brought an end to the second Intifada across the Palestinian territory. So, this of course was a war that was launched by Arafat between the years of 2000 and 2005. He has been non-violent. He has been committed to, sort of, a bureaucratic rule. I think, where he deserves the criticism and I don't think he's actually received enough of it is that he has basically created a system of full on authoritarianism. He has been spying on his own people. In fact, that there was a report recently suggesting that he had a hacking scheme that Facebook just had to disrupt so that he wasn't able to continue to spy on his own people. He has pilfered American assistance and European assistance to benefit his own family and his cronies. So, he's become an Arab strong man, but in the process, he has helped provide at least some stability by marginalizing Hamas and bringing an end to the violence.

**MAY:** One thing historically, you mentioned the Palestinian civil war. You've written about it. The mainstream media, what we call the mainstream media, really didn't. This was back after the elections. You had elections, as we say, in 2005, 2006. That's when Mahmoud Abbas won. Hamas won the parliamentary elections. The elections, this was not supposed to happen, led to a civil war. And we're not talking about a metaphorical political battle here, I want to make this clear because I don't think people remember. And partly because I don't think it was covered very well. This was a real civil war. I mean, this was a shooting, fighting, killing civil war. Was it not?

**SCHANZER:** It was. You had Palestinians pushed off of tall buildings to their death. You had people being shot in the legs and arms to ensure permanent disabilities. You have a situation now where you've got two separate territories under two separate governments, and there is a bitterness that lingers among Palestinians. It of course raises questions about Palestinian nationalism and whether there is one cohesive ideology that encompasses the West Bank and the Gaza strip. It's a black eye for Palestinian nationalism to put it mildly, but this animosity continues to this day.

It was interesting because it looked as if we might have been able to put all of this in the rear view with elections that both sides agreed upon, but I always remained skeptical. And I also remained skeptical of not only whether the two sides would be able to kind of bury the hatchet for new elections, but really whether they have forgotten all of the pain and suffering that the two sides had imposed upon one another. I think that anger and animosity lingers today.

**MAY:** Three elections are now scheduled, parliamentary and presidential. One, Jon, why is Mahmoud Abbas thinking of postponing them? What's the real reason? And then what's the reason he's likely to give for postponing them assuming that they're not the same?

**SCHANZER:** Sure. And you know, I would defer to Matt Zwieig on this, but there are real problems that are going to occur if Hamas wins even a minority position in the coming government. And there's a high likelihood of Hamas winning at least a few seats under the new system, which will – Basically their national elections state that the voting districts are no longer segmented. You get a proportional representation based on the total number of votes. And Hamas is sure to win some of those therefore taking part in a future government. And so the Israelis have expressed their concern and displeasure. The United States has been a little bit weird in that it has not directly warned the PA about this, but they have apparently said that there could be ramifications if Hamas takes part. Those ramifications would likely mean a cut in funding from the United States, but those are not really the reasons why Abbas will ultimately say that he's going to cancel these if in fact, he does.



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What he will say is that he wants all Palestinians to take part in these elections and that the Israelis are dragging their feet on allowing Palestinians based in east Jerusalem in particular, that the Israelis will be preventing this. It's not true. The Israelis have in the past allowed for this, they will I would say, undoubtedly allow for it in the future. There are mechanisms that allow for this, but I think Abbas needs a scapegoat. He needs to be able to say that it was the Israelis fault that he's scuttled these elections, as opposed to the inclusion of Hamas or his own discomfort about potentially losing power.

**MAY:** We probably should just get it in here real quickly, Jordan, they have a dog in this fight in the sense that Jordan is Israel's ally, it's at peace with Israel. The Israelis want the royal family to continue to maintain stability there. But most of the people of Jordan, most Jordanians are Palestinians. Jordan is historically about 75% of the area was called Palestine. The king has to worry about what happens on the West Bank. What does Jordan want to see these elections? When I say Jordan, I mean the king. Does he hope that they'll be postponed or canceled or are we not sure? And it's at a time of some instability in Jordan as well. We should point that.

**SCHANZER:** Yeah. We have this very strange episode that happened a few weeks ago between the former crown prince and the King of Jordan, where they are having a very public spat in ways that I don't think really conveys confidence in the stability of the Hashemite kingdom. I think it's in the rear view at least for now. But I think when you look at Jordan's interests, I mean, they don't like Hamas, they don't like the Muslim Brotherhood. They're concerned about Islamism writ large. They also would like to see some stability in the Palestinian Authority because roughly 80 or 85% of Jordan are Palestinian citizens. They won't say that, but that is the reality. So, what they'd like to see is for there to be an election, for things to finally settle down and for there to be one day a Palestinian state where some of their population could potentially move.

I think that's probably a lot of what they're thinking about, but then there's the other side of this, which is if there is a successful election and that you begin to see the building of a democracy in the West Bank, you've got to wonder, the Palestinians living in Jordan are going to wonder why they don't have a similar system. And so, I've got to imagine that the Jordanians are a bit torn about all of this, and may not have a clear perspective just yet, but as I think we've noted, with the elections likely to be postponed, I think it'll be sort of an academic thing to ponder for at least another few months.

**MAY:** Nathan Brown is somebody we all know, he's a George Washington University political science professor. He said or predicted, "The elections will not be clean. They will not be fair." He added, "One of the biggest crises for the Palestinian national movement is essentially an institutional one, there are no credible institutions who essentially manage their affairs. Matt, you have a sense in the administration in Congress is there concern at this point about any elections going forward not being free and fair as Nathan Brown suggests?"

**ZWEIG:** Well, Cliff, I think at least in Congress or in some quarters of Congress, there's almost an assumption that there will be problems with the next set of elections. And to Jon's point, right? Whether or not they are postponed, or whether they go forward in May, or they're partially, or you're looking at a situation where you have partial elections, one set of elections are held and another set aren't, you really are looking at the elections will be an inflection point for the administration, for Congress, when it comes to how they view Palestinian aid.

**MAY:** I don't really trust polls taken in places like Gaza and the West Bank, but you can't entirely ignore them. And I saw in September 2020, an opinion poll indicated that Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh would beat Mahmoud Abbas 52% to 39% in a head to head contest, and Marwan Barghouti, if he ran, he's a convicted terrorist, he was slated to win 55% of



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the votes. The polls also indicated that in parliamentary elections Fatah would receive 38% of the vote and Hamas 34%, which is probably within the margin of error, pretty tight race. Do those polls strike you as credible? And if so, that would certainly, that would be something to give pause to Mahmoud Abbas. He would hate to be beaten by Ismail Haniyeh, surely, that would be a problem for pretty much everybody.

**SCHANZER:** Yeah. Look, the polls have consistently pointed to this for a number of years. Of course, the polls carried out by Khalil Shikaki, this is the famous pollster in the West Bank, it was his polls that indicated a Fatah victory back in 2006, and obviously we know how that went. So, the polls are, I think, notoriously flawed. Just imagine you're a Palestinian, and you get a phone call, and somebody says, "Do you support Hamas?" What are you going to say? You might deny it. You might be wondering whether the Israelis are on the line, or Fatah is on the line, or the Americans are on the line, and maybe you would deny it. So, I think the polls have not exactly been transparent over the years, but I think we've seen enough of them to derive a couple of trends.

Number one, a Mahmoud Abbas is roundly hated by the Palestinian population. People believe that he is deeply corrupt and that he has run the Palestinian authority into the ground, and that he's failed in peace, he's failed in war, he's failed in reform. There's very little you can say that he's done positive on behalf of the Palestinian people. On top of that, you continue to see Hamas going at least head to head with Fatah. It looks like they have the ability to win again, but certainly with this new representational system, you are likely to see Hamas win let's say a third of the seats or a quarter of the seats, which would trigger a cut in funding from the United States, and that's a huge problem.

And then there's just the broader question of leadership, that Mahmoud Abbas is now in his eighties, he is not a compelling leader anymore. Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas, is showing good numbers relative to a Abbas. Marwan Barghouti, as you mentioned, is showing good numbers. There are a couple of other challengers that are probably not as strong as Abbas, but in terms of the kind of mainstream leadership, he is starting to falter. And that should be a clear warning sign to everyone that elections are needed, but reform is needed first.

**ZWEIG:** Well, if I could also just make a point there, specifically with respect to the Haniyeh versus Abbas presidential poll, and just to remind listeners, Ismail Haniyeh was designated as a global terrorist in January 2018. And everything else that comes with the U.S. approach to Palestinians pre and post-election, that in particular would likely be a game changer.

**MAY:** We keep hearing how terrible life is in Gaza in particular, I think we know that in the West Bank it's – Look, you and I have been to Ramallah and other parts of the West Bank, it's not Switzerland, but it's not Syria either. But you would think that people in Gaza might want some change, might be thinking about what peace could mean, to think about what would it mean to have aid and build things that didn't get bombed the next time Hamas decided to incite a war with the Israelis. I guess I'm sort of surprised that hasn't happened, but maybe it's a matter of indoctrination, maybe a matter of, I don't know, the hatred that there is among Gazans for Israelis, and they want a whole loaf, not a half loaf. Do you have any theory on that?

**SCHANZER:** Look, I think that people in the Gaza Strip are not happy. I think that part of it has to do with the Israeli presence and the blockade. A lot of it has to do with Hamas rule itself, what we could call the "Talibanisation" of Gaza over the years, the lack of freedom, the sort of heavy handed security presence, the education, all of these things have been lacking. But I think the big issue here is that you have a very large portion of the population that consider themselves to be Palestinian refugees. They put the Palestinian cause before themselves in many cases.



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And so, they continue to insist that Hamas is a better choice than Israel itself. And I think that explains at least in large part why we haven't seen an uprising yet, but I do think that if things continue to go the way they do, and the people begin to see the region begin to change, right? That the Palestinian national agenda, has been, let's say, relegated to a secondary or tertiary priority by some of the Arab countries themselves, that may begin to dawn on Gazans that it's time for some change.

**MAY:** While you're thinking about it, Matt, what the Palestinian authority does not have an office, I believe, in Washington, an office which serves as a sort of quasi embassy, but the PLO, the Palestine Liberation Organization has had. And then that was closed down by Trump, now Biden plans to reopen it. I would imagine though that would be difficult for President Biden to do if that Palestine Liberation Organization, as a result of these elections, were to include Hamas representatives, since the Hamas is, as we've stated, a U.S. designated terrorist organization. Do I have that right? Is that the difficulty? Would that difficulty present itself, or could a Biden get around it through some workaround?

**ZWEIG:** It's not just that variable. I mean, if the Biden administration wants to reopen the PLO or any type of PA representation in the United States, it's actually going to have to get around a legislation that was edited into law, I believe in 2019, and then further amended in 2020, that allows U.S. victims of Palestinian terrorism to sue anyone who are operating these offices or providing representation on the part of the PA. And that's actually a big variable that hasn't existed for quite some time. And if the administration wants to move forward with providing them representation in the U.S., that will serve, at the very least, a significant speed bump for them.

**MAY:** Talking about aid to the Palestinians, the Biden administration also wants to resume aid, which was cut off by Trump, to UNRWA, the UN Relief and Works Agency, which is a sort of refugee welfare organization at the UN specifically and exclusively for Palestinians that operates in I think both in the West Bank and in Gaza. The problem has been that it incites hatred for Israel, antisemitism, and works hand in glove with Hamas, and in fact, employs a lot of Hamas members. And I think one might argue it can't not do that in Gaza. There is some congressional antipathy, or opposition I guess I should say, for restoring aid to and finances to UNRWA unless and until it makes some reforms. Senator Risch I know is one of those who's leading that effort. How do you see that playing out? Matt, you can start.

**ZWEIG:** I mean, I see, I think of all aspects of Palestinian aid programs, I think UNRWA is going to be perhaps the most contentious between elements of the Congress and the administration. Not just because of the variables that you've mentioned, but because those are long-standing concerns. I mean, those concerns go back to the early 2000s where you had multiple members of Congress citing Hamas, the failure of UNRWA to effectively engage in anti-terrorism vetting in order to receive assistance according to the U.S. law. So, I do see that as potentially one of the flash points when it comes to the debate between the Hill and the administration, and within the Hill, over aid of the Palestinians.

**MAY:** Jon, you mentioned that Mahmoud Abbas, to his credit, he's been basically in favor of stability. He hasn't incited terrorism. He's worked in security matters with the Israelis, to his benefit as well since the Israelis also make efforts to protect him from assassination plots by either Hamas, or Islamic Jihad, or other organizations. But there is the issue, and it's a controversial one, that the money we give, we as American taxpayers, that goes under Mahmoud Abbas's control does end up supporting convicted terrorists convicted and imprisoned in Israel and their families. And I think there are a lot of Americans who think, "I don't mind my money going to alleviate poverty in either the West Bank or Gaza. I don't like my money going to support terrorists and their families. We shouldn't be rewarding them, and my money shouldn't go to that." And then – Start with that generally, and then I'll ask Matt more specifically about the Taylor Force Act, to explain what that means.



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**SCHANZER:** Yeah. So there has been an effort underway now for a number of years to cut off funding to the PA, because of exactly for the reasons that you described, that they have engaged in this practice of what is kind of generally called, "Pay for stay," paying the families of terrorists who were languishing in Israeli jails, or even who have been killed. And what's been really interesting is, so you had almost a full cut-off from the Trump administration. And now we're looking at an administration that wants to resume some of the payments that would benefit Palestinians. They so far have been extremely careful in their reading of the law where they are providing assistance to aid organizations who would then in turn provide help to the Palestinians. So, not direct assistance, it's indirect assistance. Assistance to UNRWA, as you noted. And other means to make sure that the Palestinians can benefit from U.S. aid without having the money go directly to the Palestinian authority's coffers. This all stems from the 2016 murder of Taylor Force, who was a young American who was stabbed. I think walking in the streets of Jaffa, if I'm not mistaken. And legislators followed up on this because of this –

**MAY:** He was actually a West Point graduate as well. He is a West Point graduate. Right. Yeah.

**SCHANZER:** That's right. And so, Congress took action, I think rightfully so. And I think there is every justification to continue to hold funds from the PA. But what's interesting now is, again, you'll see the Biden administration looking to work around it. And in ways that I think, look, in some cases it's not bad, you see \$15 million earmarked for COVID-19 vaccines and other assistance to the Palestinian areas. That's humanitarian, right? Full stop. But then there are other things that are happening working through USAID and promoting peace programs and things like that, which has to make you stop for a minute and scratch your head wondering, is this the best use of American taxpayer funds? And are they being just a little too clever here in the way that they're earmarking some of these funds to circumvent existing laws?

**MAY:** Yeah. Matt, you want to weigh-in on the Taylor Force Act and the controversy over that right now in Congress?

**ZWEIG:** Yeah, absolutely. But also to Jon's bigger point, right? It almost seems as if the administration effectively just turned back on all the programs suspended towards the tail, or that was in place towards the tail end of the Obama administration. You really have to sit and ask yourself, as Jon mentioned, is this the most effective use of taxpayer funds? Can U.S. programming in the West Bank be more effective, and be done in ways that the PA may not like, but leads to actual tangible results? I mean, how much more money are you going to throw into infrastructure? Versus other areas where there were some measurable successes in terms of aid, the financial sector, or be it with disbursements, et cetera.

But this also runs up against the shoals, right, of the Taylor Force Act. The Taylor Force Act, for those at home, was enacted March 2018, and effectively prohibits U.S. assistance or U.S. economic support funds that directly benefits the PA until the administration can certify, amongst other things, that payments for acts of terrorism have been terminated. Now, I think what Jon mentioned is that this really gets into the issue of how the administration and how Congress looks at the term "directly benefits."

Now there is a definition of "directly benefiting" that was developed under the Trump administration. And I believe, Jon correct me if I'm wrong, but also continued enforced by the Biden administration where "directly benefiting" basically means that the beneficiary or the end user of the assistance is the PA. If it involves payments to Palestinian authority creditors, to the extent that the ownership of a beneficiary or control that the PA exerts over that entity would result in a direct benefit to the PA. Or in some instances, whether providing assistance or the assistance provided would directly replace services that the PA would otherwise provide. But there is quite a bit of wiggle room in there



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for the administration to claim that certain things fall out of those parameters, where some in Congress would view that as debatable.

**MAY:** Jon, the big change in his region during the Trump administration, obviously, are the Abraham Accords. Suddenly Israel is at peace with Bahrain, with the United Arab Emirates. Other countries have followed suit. And it's a warmer peace, certainly with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates than it ever has been really with Jordan or Egypt. How does that change this whole equation within Gaza and within the West Bank?

**SCHANZER:** Well, I think as I mentioned before, you have I think the unraveling of the Palestinian narrative in the Arab states. It used to be that they prioritized Palestinian issues first in every meeting with the United States or at the UN, et cetera. I think you're beginning to see that it is no longer in the national interest of a lot of these Arab countries to prioritize these Palestinian issues. They see cooperation with Israel, for example, on Iran or other Gulf issues, or even Turkey and Qatar. That that's really what they're thinking about first and foremost. And they realize the Palestinians are really not the priority that they once were. I think also the split that we have talked about between Hamas and Fatah has really just, I think, led to a frustration on their part. That if they don't know who they should talk to as the Palestinian leaders, how can they promote that narrative in the first place?

I think that in the aftermath of the Abraham Accords signing, so that was in August. In September is when you saw this announcement come out that the Palestinians were ready to hold their elections. I think it was very much prompted by the panic that both sides felt when they saw the Arab states come together in this way with Israel. And said, "All right, we have to get our act together. Let's hold elections. We need to do it. Let's just respect the outcome of this." Of course, they didn't think about what it would mean if Hamas won, and what it would do to U.S. assistance or cooperation with Israel.

So, it was far more complicated than that. But certainly the Arab states coming together with Israel prompted this. And then one other thing I'll just note, is I also think that the Palestinians, particularly after the election results here in November, when they saw that Donald Trump had lost, I think they saw an opportunity to try to get back into the good graces in the United States after four years of really feeling some cold frigid gusts of wind coming from Washington. Abbas was on the outside looking in, he saw this as an opportunity to set things right again. But again, I don't think he thought through all of the issues, in particular, Hamas' participation.

**MAY:** We talk about the winds that are blowing the zeitgeists, there's a countervailing zeitgeist that strikes me. Tell me if you think I'm wrong here. And that is the fall. And you mentioned the "talismanization" of Gaza, for example. So, now if you are a member of Hamas, what do you see going on in the world? Well, you see the U.S. about to retreat, it appears, from Afghanistan, which means the Taliban has defeated the United States. So, the United States can be defeated. If the United States can be defeated, maybe Israel can be defeated too. The odds seem a little bit better maybe. And you see this Biden administration very likely about to cave in on all sorts of very significant ways to the Islamic Republic of Iran, to lift sanctions and to go back to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Which as we've stated at FDD a lot, actually doesn't prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, it provides a patient pathway to that.

If that happens, then it's very likely that the Islamic Republic of Iran achieves its ambition of becoming the hegemon of the Middle East, since Iran's rulers do not want to see a two-state solution, do not want to see peace with Israel. They want to see Israel destroyed. Don't these factors tend to make those who are more radical, more extreme, more confrontational in the Middle East, whether it's Hamas or Qatar or others say, we shouldn't be compromising at this point. We should be waiting, holding out. And to quote, Maxine Waters, "getting more confrontational."



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**SCHANZER:** Well –

**MAY:** In a different context, of course.

**SCHANZER:** Of course. Look, what I would say is that if you are an Islamist on the sunny side of the street, the Shia side of the street, then you are probably heartened by what you're seeing right now across the board. Overall, the intention of the United States, the stated intention is to pivot out of the Middle East and to head into great power competition with China. That means that we just don't have the attention span or the desire to remain in this region that has mired the U.S. in conflict over the years. So, I think there is an opportunity for Hamas to gain strength. The only thing that I would just say as a caveat to all of that is, while its supporters can really grow, Hamas is still hemmed in, in the Gaza strip. The Israelis have developed a series of incredible technologies to shoot down their rockets, to stop their tunnels.

They've really been able to stymie Hamas at every turn. That doesn't mean that they won't be able to come up with a new tactic or a new strategy to undermine Israel, or to attack it. Or for that matter, to undermine Fatah and eventually take control of the PA. But really, right now they're in a weakened state. They've been in a weakened state for a while. So, the question is, how much stronger do they get in this new environment? And I think they have reason for optimism, but I think it needs to be tempered optimism right now given how hemmed in they are.

**MAY:** Jon, I want to be clear on this. You think it's likely that the elections will be postponed, but you're not talking necessarily about a cancellation. Because cancellation means authoritarianism until Mahmoud Abbas dies and somebody takes over. And the process for that is a little bit mysterious. I guess, what would you like to see? And what would you like to see the administration, if we were to take a forceful approach, say here's what we think is necessary to happen? We'll support this, we won't support everything.

**SCHANZER:** Yeah. It's the right question to ask, honestly. What we don't want to see is a cancellation, because what we do want to see eventually is to have the Palestinians vote. Now, of course, voting doesn't mean democracy, but it does mean that the Palestinians get an opportunity to elect their represented officials, and that would be a very positive thing. The problem right now is that we lack guardrails that would preclude the participation of Hamas, and therefore potentially spark a crisis. We also lack some of those democratic institutions that are really necessary for Palestinians to make informed choices and to engage in an honest election.

And so, I think those are the sorts of things that we need to work on. I could imagine that if we started down that road for a few months, the circumstances might change and allow for these elections to be rescheduled. And that ultimately we could see the peaceful transfer of power in the Palestinian territories. That would be ideal. But until then, until we have some of those institutions in place, and until we have those guardrails with Hamas, it just does not feel like a good idea to hold these elections. Not if what you're trying to do is to preserve some stability in that part of the world.

**MAY:** Then let me just follow up with this question. Who do you see in this administration as being at the helm, kind of the most persuasive voice with the White House within either in the State Department, National Security Council on these issues? And what is that voice saying?

**SCHANZER:** Look, I mean, Hady Amr is as the Deputy Assistant Secretary at the State Department that is, I think, spearheading these efforts. He's supposed to be the point man. But he's really the point man on Palestinian-Israeli issues. We don't really see an envoy for Palestinian politics. And I'm not sure who could do that, but that's really what's needed is someone that really tries to get in there and fix the problems internally within the PA.



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**MAY:** For better or worse, in previous administrations, there was a de facto ambassador to the Palestinians working out of the Consulate General in Jerusalem. I don't know if there's a person in that position now under the Biden administration, and I think I would have heard if there were. But if you pick the right person for that, that person could be pushing the Palestinians in the ways that you suggest. No?

**SCHANZER:** Yeah, and that could be the right position, but I don't think that, at least for the last 14 years, that's not what that position has been geared around. It's been geared around the Palestinian narrative of how they're being treated by the Israelis or how the Palestinians are suffering at the hands of the Israelis purportedly and those sorts of things. What we have not seen are efforts on the part of the U.S. to solve the internecine Palestinian conflict to address the major problems that now exist within their political system. So, I think it would make a huge amount of sense to have a representative envoy to the Palestinians that really tries to solve these systemic problems. Again, that's not been where we've been, but it would certainly make sense if that's where we were to go next.

**MAY:** And last point on this. The internecine Palestinian conflict is an issue set that you have studied and written about and worked on. And I give you compliments because almost nobody else in academia, the think tank community, and certainly the media have paid any attention to that whatsoever.

**SCHANZER:** Thank you.

**MAY:** So, kudos for you.

**SCHANZER:** It's a shame because the Palestinian-Israeli conflict takes up so much oxygen, and yet so few people have decided to look at one-half of that which represents a huge part of the problem.

**MAY:** Are there any other factors I haven't mentioned, that haven't asked about that I should have that's on your mind in terms of the possibility of elections, in terms of what we're likely to see over the next few months either from Mahmoud Abbas, from Hamas, from the Biden administration, from the Israelis?

**SCHANZER:** Yeah. Maybe I'll start, and I'll just say this. That first of all, the messaging out of the Biden administration on the election itself was odd. No other way to put it. They were saying that they didn't have the means to stop the Palestinians from holding elections, that the best that they could do would be to warn the Palestinians what the ramifications would be if Hamas won.

I'm sorry, but that's not leadership. That is abdication of leadership and effectively giving a green light to a crisis that could very easily be halted. And you could just imagine what would happen if Hamas won. We'd see a repeat of what happened in 2006 and 2007 and the kinds of messes that I think we've tried to avoid over the years. It's just remarkable that that was the position of the U.S. government.

Now it appears that the Biden administration has backtracked on that, and that they've sent these quiet messages to Ramallah saying, "We won't stop you if you decide to postpone the election." But really what needs to be done here, and this has been my message with you, Cliff, for the better part of 10, 12 years as you and I have discussed this, there needs to be an effort at reform inside the Palestinian Authority, not just in terms of the "pay for play" and the Taylor Force-related issues, but really the question of, "What are you going to do about the presence of Hamas?"



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There is an ideological schism that has pervaded the PA since 2006, if not well before that, and until that is solved, we still won't know who the rightful leaders are of the Palestinian territories. And we won't know who to work with, and this remains the foremost challenge in front of us. There's lots of other issues down the road: borders, Jerusalem, refugees, et cetera, but we can't solve any of these issues, these issues between the Palestinians and Israelis, until we know who rightfully – – in the territories. Either we find one, or we agree that there will be two in perpetuity, but this limbo is not healthy at all. And it continues to create massive problems for anyone trying to make progress in the Middle East.

**MAY:** I might add to that, that former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who you know, I know a bit, teaching at Princeton, I believe, right now, he was the one person who made it his mission to set up actual institutions and procedures that would allow for some freedom and some representative government and something more than a dictatorship where one man is in control of everything. I don't know why he failed. He didn't have a lot of support from what we know within Palestinian society. I'm not sure he had the support he should have had from our State Department, from the National Endowment for Democracy perhaps.

But unless and until you have these kinds of actual functioning institutions, an independent judiciary, some kind of reasonably free press, elections more than once every 15, 16 or 17 years when the cicadas come out, unless you have some of that, how can you really talk about a two-state solution? But again, the Europeans also, they didn't seem to worry about that at all. Shouldn't there have been more, and shouldn't there be from someone like President Biden, some emphasis on developing those kinds of institutions if you're going to want to have an independent Palestinian state at some point?

**SCHANZER:** I think you're 100% right, but I think we have moved away from the so-called "democracy agenda." I think it's a passe idea in Washington, unfortunately. I still think that it certainly resonates with me, but this was something that George W. Bush pursued and arguably failed at doing in many cases. And then I think in many ways we see the unraveling or the unwinding of some of those efforts, certainly with the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan and giving up on the transformation of that society.

I think we see a giving up on the Palestinian front and in many other fronts, certainly Saudi Arabia as well right now, as we turn away from the Saudis. This appears to be the trend right now with this administration, probably with the last one too, much more transactional, not transformational. I think that it's a problem. I really do, because I think the U.S. does have a role to play in trying to change some of these challenging political issues in the Middle East, in particular, where there is that democracy deficit.

**MAY:** And Matt, as we wrap up, within Congress, is any of this being discussed, or from what you can tell, there's not a great deal of interest in it?

**ZWEIG:** Well, I think there was an initial reaction from a number of different quarters of the Hill. I guess the question is, how sustainable is it really? Congress is also looking at China. They have the annual defense authorization bill coming up, appropriations bills, et cetera, everything foreign to domestic. Could this really end up being an area where you see almost mutual neglect when it comes to both the Congress and the administration? And I guess my one fear is that, well, the Crimean War effectively began with a fist fight in Jerusalem. So, things have the ability and things have the propensity, and it's almost the rule, to spin wildly out of control due to neglect.



# FOREIGN PODICY

## Palestinians Head for the Polls—or Not

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**MAY:** Well, if Palestinian elections are held, the results will be interesting. If Palestinian elections are not held, that too should be interesting. We know where to go to find out what it all means. We'll be back to discuss either eventuality with you. In the meantime, thanks for keeping tabs on all this for us and for talking to us today. And thanks to all of you who are listening. Until next time, I'm Cliff May, and you've been listening to *Foreign Podicy*.

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