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**Hamas and Municipal Elections**

*Municipal elections in the West Bank and Gaza are likely to proceed on Oct. 8. Hamas leaders are not participating, but they are backing “independent” candidates and low-level party members in Gaza, in addition to a few cases in the West Bank. Israel should not impede the elections. Elected local governments should help improve municipal service provision, while giving Palestinians a limited voice in choosing their civic leadership. If successful, local elections also could open the door to national Palestinian elections, which should contribute to creating a unified Palestinian negotiating partner.*

The Palestinian Authority (PA) cabinet announced that municipal elections will be held on Oct. 8, 2016, in a mix of municipalities and small villages. The last local elections were held in 2012 in the West Bank only. With the four-year term for these councils about to expire, in accordance with Palestinian law, new elections should be held in October 2016.

Hamas boycotted the 2012 municipal elections and prevented voting in Gaza. This time it is participating, to a degree, in both Gaza and the West Bank. Hamas is trying to ensure that municipalities in which its preferred candidates gain seats are not boycotted by the international community. Some Hamas officials have been insisting for weeks that they will back only “independents.” Others say they will support “technocrats.” Some of these may include lower-ranking Hamas members – but no Hamas ministers or politicians. Party officials have emphasized that they see these elections as apolitical and focused on service delivery.

On Aug. 29, the Palestinian Central Elections Commission published the electoral lists submitted for the local elections. A preliminary analysis reveals that Hamas is backing only candidates on mixed lists, sharing the ticket with other parties in two West Bank municipalities. This suggests that Hamas will not play any role in municipal governance in the vast majority of the nearly 400 local councils being contested in the West Bank. In Gaza, Hamas is backing lists comprised mostly of private-sector figures and clan leaders.

On Aug. 17, Israeli forces arrested Hussein Abu Kweik, Hamas’ liaison to the Palestinian Central Elections Commission. In the last 48 hours, Hamas has accused Israeli and Palestinian Authority security forces of detaining and/or threatening dozens of their supporters in the West Bank, effectively preventing them from standing as candidates. As the occupying power, Israel can detain Palestinians on security grounds. It cannot and should not prevent nonviolent political organizing by Palestinians competing in elections.

Concerns that Hamas will be assuming an increased role in governance in the West Bank are exaggerated. Contrary to some media reports, Hamas is not about to “take over” the West Bank. Indeed, the elections are for village and city councils only. The outcome of the vote will neither challenge President Mahmoud Abbas’ security control of the West Bank nor Hamas’ dominance of the interior of the Gaza Strip. Israeli efforts to target Hamas may, in fact, strengthen the latter’s standing among the Palestinian public. If anything, where Hamas-backed candidates are elected, history suggests that the burden of governing and delivering services is likely to pull the organization toward moderation.

Finally, if the local elections are successful, they could open the door to long-overdue national elections. The president and parliamentarians’ terms expired years ago. New national elections would be a key step in the political reunification of the occupied territory. Elections would cement leadership, with a democratic mandate for the West Bank and Gaza that could more effectively ensure a cease-fire with Israel, while also acting as an empowered negotiating partner. Israel should support local elections as a step toward the emergence of this unified and democratic Palestine. Stymieing Palestinian democracy and abetting the Fatah-Hamas division will be destabilizing in the long term.