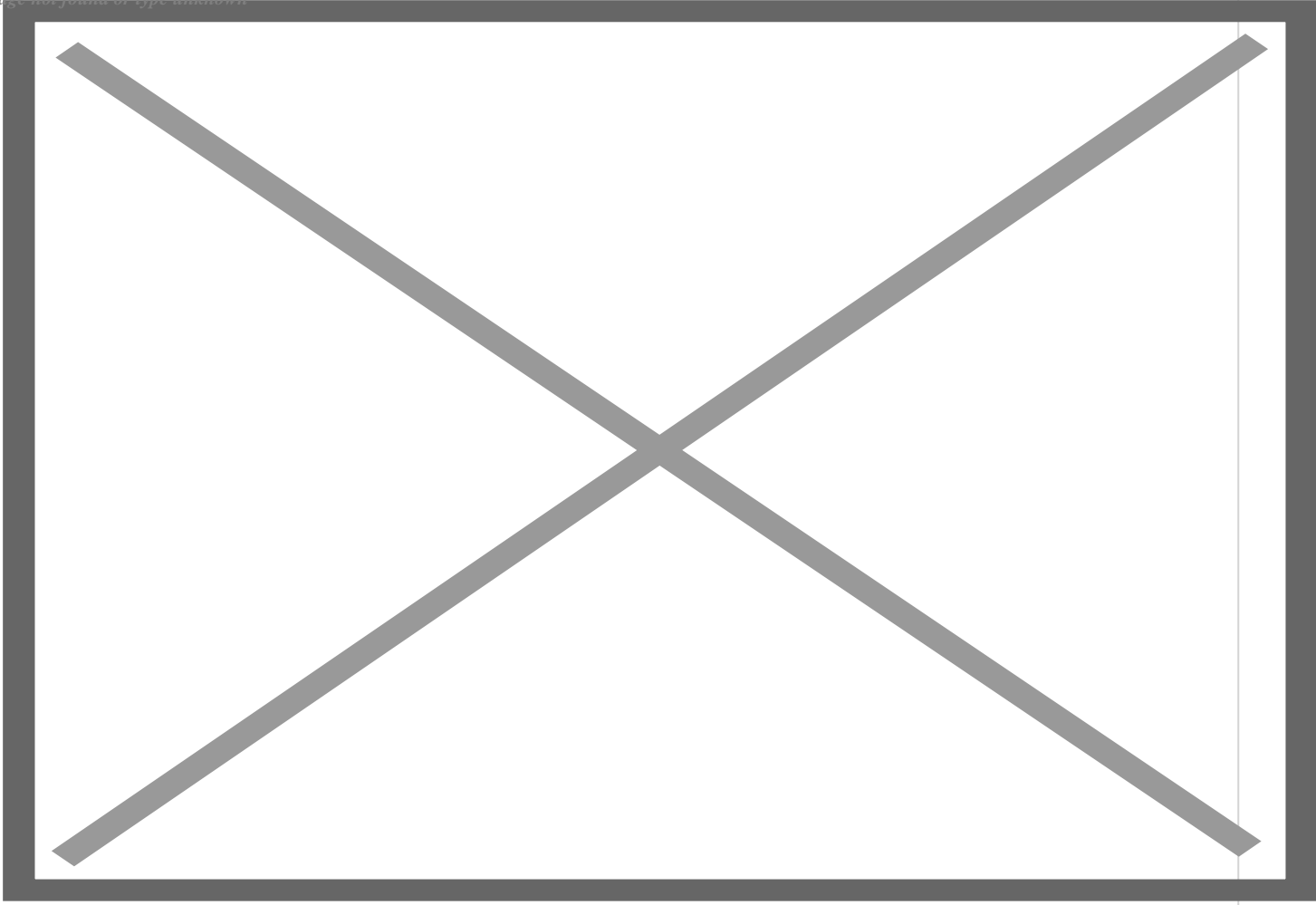


Palestinians announce first elections in 15 years

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Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas announces first presidential elections in 15 years to take place on July 31st.

Ramallah, January 16 (RHC)-- Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas announced parliamentary and presidential elections, the first in 15 years, will take place later this year in an effort to heal longstanding internal divisions. According to a decree issued by Abbas's office on Friday, the Palestinian Authority (PA), which has limited self-rule in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, will hold legislative elections on May 22 and a presidential vote on July 31st.

Palestinians' last parliamentary ballot in 2006 resulted in a surprise win by Hamas, widening an internal political rift that led to the group's seizure of the Gaza Strip in 2007 and contributed to a long delay in setting further elections. Gaza has been under an Israeli blockade since 2007 when the Hamas movement started controlling the enclave.

"The President instructed the election committee and all state apparatuses of the state to launch a democratic election process in all cities of the homeland," the decree said, referring to the occupied West Bank, Gaza and occupied East Jerusalem. The statement said Abbas expects polls "in all governorates of Palestine, including East Jerusalem", which was annexed by Israel following the 1967 war but is considered occupied territory.

Israel bans all PA activity in East Jerusalem, and there was no indication it would allow a Palestinian vote within Jerusalem, which it considers its "undivided capital."

Hamas has welcomed the announcement, saying in a statement: "We have worked in past months to resolve all obstacles so that we can reach this day." Fatah and Hamas have been publicly calling for elections for more than 10 years but have never been able to mend their rift or agree on a process for holding them.

Following the 2006 polls, clashes between Fatah and Hamas raged for more than a year, culminating in Hamas's 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip, where it still reigns despite an Israeli-Egyptian blockade and three wars with Israel.

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