Why a Weak Abbas Is Dangerous for Israel

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Articles & Testimony

To restore security and expand the Abraham Accords, Washington and its allies must take urgent steps to keep the PA from collapsing, such as organizing donor pressure to appoint a reformist prime minister and increasing employment opportunities for younger Palestinians who no longer see a reason to refrain from violence.

Israel just carried out its largest military operation in the West Bank since the peak years of the Second Intifada between 2002 and 2004. For some time now, Jenin, along with other areas in the West Bank, has become an area where the Palestinian Authority security forces choose not to venture. That is hardly good news for the Palestinian Authority (PA) or for Israel.

As the PA has become weaker, a vacuum has developed in the West Bank—and Iran, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad have rushed to fill it with money, arms, and explosives. The current Israeli operation is unlikely to change this reality in the West Bank; even leaders of the Israeli security establishment acknowledge that without the PA security forces reasserting themselves, the most that this operation will buy is a few months.

The deeper problem is the weakening of the PA, which lacks **(https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/02/nizar-banat-palestinian-authority-pa-abbas-survive-without-us-support/)** popular legitimacy for many reasons, including widespread corruption, poor governance, the unwillingness to hold elections, a sclerotic political system that blocks any advance of younger potential leaders, and the absence of any real political vision or achievements vis-a-vis the Israelis. Israeli operations such as this one weaken it further, highlighting its irrelevancy. But if the PA won't, or can't, act to limit

the development of terrorist infrastructure or attacks against Israelis, Israel will continue to carry out such operations, increasing the chances of widespread instability and even the collapse of the PA. In addition to the harm this situation causes Palestinians and Israelis, the evolving climate will likely undermine the Biden administration's **main objective (https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/05/saudi-arabia-israel-normalization-deal-agreement-biden-blinken-trip-security-guarantee-nuclear-energy/)** in the Middle East right now: a breakthrough between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

To forestall this, the Biden administration will have to raise the level of its diplomacy in the Middle East. At times, that is likely to require a major push, and that is what the White House is doing as it seeks to produce a breakthrough between Saudi Arabia and Israel. It is smart to do so; Saudi-Israeli peace would change the landscape fundamentally in the Middle East, aligning nonrevisionist states that are also attempting to build resilient, successful economies for the 21st century against Iran's axis of failed or failing states.

In its talks with the Biden administration, the Saudis, for now, are *not* focused on what they might seek from the Israelis for the Palestinians but on what they hope to get from the United States to go ahead with the breakthrough—a formal security commitment, access to the most advanced weaponry, a partnership in developing its civil nuclear industry, and a free trade agreement. The Palestinians may not be a priority for the Saudis at the moment, but before they finalize a deal, they will want something from Israel for the Palestinians, both for their own public image at home and to ensure that when the Saudis do a deal with Israel, they bring others, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and other Arab states, along.

But there should be no illusions: The deteriorating situation in the West Bank could threaten a deal between the Saudis and Israelis. The level of violence is rising. Palestinians are carrying out many more attacks against Israelis, and the Israeli security forces are being driven to carrying out operations such as the one in Jenin. Yes, the provocative settlement announcements and the pogroms carried out by extremist settlers against Palestinian villages have significantly worsened the situation and made the PA seem irrelevant. And these actions are being fed and supported by certain elements in Israel, including governmental ministers such as Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir. But the reality of increasing terrorist attacks against Israelis—and the unwillingness and increasing inability of the PA security forces to do anything to deal with a growing terrorist infrastructure in its midst—is making the situation worse.

The problem with the PA is its basic lack of legitimacy. Created in 1994, the PA promised its public that diplomacy and cooperation with Israel would produce an end to the occupation and improvement to their lives. Since the Second Intifada, however, this promise has lost all credibility as chances for a peace deal dwindled and Palestinian-Israeli relations became defined by conflict rather than cooperation. But the PA's legitimacy deficit is not only rooted in the failure of the peace process; the woeful way in which the PA governed has contributed significantly to its diminished standing.

No elections have been held since 2006, President Mahmoud Abbas is in the 18th year of a four-year term, and lawlessness has spread throughout the territories. Largely for fear of the alternative, there has been very little consistent pressure on Abbas by either U.S. or European leaders—the major donors to the Palestinians—to alter his political course.

Regrettably, the closing of the political space has been accompanied by poor governance; some 84 percent of the Palestinian public believe that the PA is corrupt, more than 80 percent want Abbas to resign, and the public is so completely alienated that 63 percent believe that the PA is a burden on the Palestinian people, according to a **recent poll (https://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Poll%2088%20English%20press%20release%2014%20June%202023.pdf)**. It is true that PA security forces are not receiving their full salaries, but this is not unprecedented. In the past, even under similarly bad economic conditions, these forces acted against terrorists and engaged in security cooperation that kept the West Bank relatively stable.

Today, however, it is the lack of legitimacy that prevents them from acting. They make no effort to stop those in Jenin or Nablus, or even traditionally quiet areas such as Jericho, who are planning, recruiting, and carrying out acts of terror against Israelis because the security forces know they represent a PA that lacks any legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Stopping provocative Israeli actions—especially from settlers who are burning houses and properties in Palestinian

villages—is essential. It is not only criminal, but it makes Israelis less secure, as the Israel Defense Forces must divert troops from preventing attacks and protecting Israelis to stopping vigilante settlers and other extremists from threatening Palestinians in their homes and villages. Moreover, these attacks whittle away any standing that the PA retains even as they also drive a desire for revenge against Israelis—and, of course, revenge assaults from one side provide justification for a response by the other side.

There was a comparable period in 2007. The PA and Fatah had lost a great deal of credibility because they lost Gaza to Hamas, and there was rampant lawlessness throughout the West Bank, with PA forces becoming part of the problem. The George W. Bush administration organized the donors to the PA and went to Abbas and told him to appoint a credible prime minister—at that time, Salam Fayyad—and empower him to carry out meaningful reforms and build transparent, effective institutions, or the U.S. would cut the PA off. Abbas did appoint Fayyad, and though everyone expected him to carry out reforms on budgeting, finance and the economy, he started by restoring security. And he succeeded—and lasted in the job for more than five years.

The Biden administration must learn from that experience. It must address the legitimacy issue. It must orchestrate an approach of the donors—only this time, not just with the Europeans but with significant Arab involvement, including those who can provide resources, such as the Saudis and Emiratis—as well as the Jordanians and Egyptians whose relations with the PA matter to it. The Biden administration must organize a coherent, coordinated message from this coalition to Abbas in private.

It must work out public Arab endorsement of Abbas's steps as he appoints the new prime minister and empowers that person. But institutional reform must also be accompanied by shovel-ready infrastructure projects, ready to go and to be funded immediately to make an immediate tangible impact on the Palestinians' lives and show that a new prime minister's way is working.

Israel, meanwhile, could facilitate projects that must start quickly on the ground, especially infrastructure projects that could employ 17 to 26-year-olds. To get a permit to work in Israel, unmarried Palestinians must be 27—those older than this age tend to have families and don't engage in terror. Daily, **approximately 140,000 (https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-01-27/ty-article-magazine/.premium/the-great-extortion-of-palestinians-workers-forced-to-pay-huge-sums-to-work/0000017f-da78-dc0c-afff-db7bda320000)** Palestinians work in Israel or in the settlements, and they don't engage in terror and violence. But the 17-26-year-olds, many with college degrees, are unemployed, deeply frustrated, and attracted to those calling for violent resistance against Israelis. So facilitating projects for them must be a priority, and they cannot be implemented without Israeli cooperation.

Similarly, Israel can agree to revise the Paris Economic Protocols from 1994, the economic understandings that forged a customs union between Israel and what would be the PA. The accords are outdated and deny the PA significant revenues. Their revision would make a notable difference in PA finances—something that a reforming PA could use. Israel must also stop new settlement announcements and legitimizing unauthorized settler outposts, prevent the pogroms and punish those responsible, and prevent the repopulation of the Homesh settlement that former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon dismantled as part of a commitment to the United States.

Such steps would build the authority of the new prime minister. It would demonstrate that the PA is delivering and give the new prime minister the weight and credibility to get the security forces to act—as they would be acting for a PA that is worth developing and protecting.

None of this will happen by itself. It will require an intensive diplomatic effort with key Arab states and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—one that is tied to fostering an atmosphere that will make it easier to achieve a breakthrough with the Saudis, but one that requires him to demonstrate that his promise to Biden is being fulfilled: that he has his hands on the wheel steering Israeli policies rather than the extremists in his coalition. (In other words, showing that Netanyahu is driving the car and not only applying the brakes.)

Efforts to seal an Israeli-Saudi deal are unlikely to succeed if the PA is collapsing. It is not too late, but it is getting very

late.

Dennis Ross, the William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, formerly served in senior national security positions with the Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and Obama administrations, including as Clinton's Middle East envoy. Ghaith al-Omari, a senior fellow at the Institute, formerly served as an advisor to the Palestinian negotiating team and held various other positions with the PA. This article was originally published ***on the Foreign Policy website (https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/06/israel-palestine-abbas-west-bank-jenin/)*** . ❖

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