

How the Palestinian Authority Failed Its People

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Articles & Testimony

Even amid the fighting in Gaza, all actors should take steps to repair Palestinian governance instead of leaving a vacuum for radical remnants to fill.

As the war in Gaza continues to intensify, the Palestinian Authority has been conspicuously quiet. Since its establishment in 1993, and particularly since the Second Intifada in the early 2000s, the PA has been losing credibility not only diplomatically but also among the Palestinian people. Hamas rushed to fill the subsequent vacuum in ideas, politics, and security. Today the Palestinian people are paying the price. Any political arrangement made after this war in Gaza needs to focus not just on the future of the coastal strip but also on rehabilitating the PA.

Since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the Palestinian people have been presented with two competing, irreconcilable visions of their future. One, posited by the Palestine Liberation Organization—a secular, though by no means democratic, group and the parent of the Palestinian Authority—envisioned a diplomatic process leading to a Palestinian state side by side with Israel. The other, promoted by Hamas, a designated terrorist group and a member of the larger Muslim Brotherhood network, called for the establishment of a Palestinian state from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean—in other words, the destruction of Israel—to be achieved through violence. Diplomacy, terror, governance, charities, political organizing, messaging: The opponents used all tools at their disposal to advance their objectives both on the ground and in the hearts and minds of Palestinians.

In the days immediately following the signing of the Oslo Accords, the PA held a clear advantage. Oslo itself gave the Palestinian people hope for achieving freedom after 25 years of occupation. The establishment of the PA saw Palestinians governing themselves on parts of their land for the first time in living memory, and PLO leaders, who had symbolized the Palestinian cause for generations, returned to live among their people, generating a sense of pride.

But that moment turned out to be the high point. The peace process stalled and later collapsed. Its failure

undermined the PA's central message—that liberation could be achieved through diplomacy—and cast doubt on not only the wisdom of having signed on to Oslo but also the PA's very *raison d'être*.

The PA was not solely responsible for the devolution of the peace process. Yes, it made mistakes, including failing to take matters of security seriously during the 1990s, which eroded trust among Israelis. Israel, for its part, continued expanding its settlements, which fueled Palestinian suspicion. Each side at different times adopted maximalist, inflexible negotiating positions, and the United States was unwilling to take the parties to task. Hamas, meanwhile, used terror to derail diplomacy: In a grisly pattern that dominated much of the 1990s, every advance in negotiations was followed by a spate of Hamas terror attacks against Israeli civilians.

Failed diplomacy certainly injured the PA, but it was only part of the story. For the rest, the PA had itself to blame. It governed on the model of Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's in Tunisia—a model whose corrupt authoritarianism produced a region-wide backlash during the Arab Spring. Government jobs were political favors to be doled out to supporters; public funds, many of them from international aid, were mere means toward the enrichment of officials. Efficiency, responsiveness to the public, and the provision of services were all an afterthought. Palestinians became disenchanted with the PA and with government itself.

Hamas saw a political opportunity in the PA's troubles. In 2006, the newly elected PA President Mahmoud Abbas called elections, and Hamas ran an effective campaign focusing on the PA's corruption and promising clean governance. With that messaging and a well-organized political machine, Hamas won the elections. A year later, it clashed with the PA old guard in Gaza. The latter's security forces were fractured, riddled with internal rivalries. A victorious Hamas was able to expel the PA from Gaza, and has since been firmly in control of the coastal strip.

Reeling from the shock of defeat, the PA then came under international pressure to reform itself, particularly from the George W. Bush administration, which rallied European and Arab countries around this objective. The PA appointed a new prime minister, Salam Fayyad, who instituted significant reforms. Yet his approach did not sit well with other PA political leaders, who worked to undermine him and pushed him out in 2013.

The PA has been steadily losing ground ever since. Today, a staggering 87 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza believe that the PA is corrupt, 78 percent want Abbas to resign, and 62 percent believe that the PA is a liability. This loss of popular legitimacy has had real-life implications. Even before the current war in Gaza, areas of the West Bank were practically ungoverned. The international community, appalled by the PA's corruption and dealing with competing crises elsewhere, reduced aid. Diplomatically, outside powers continued to treat the PA as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians. But in reality, world leaders have largely given up on it.

In the Gaza Strip, meanwhile, Hamas's initial popularity has evaporated—today 72 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza believe that Hamas is corrupt—but the group maintains its power through fear and brutality, not the consent of the governed. Its October 7 terror attack, which claimed the lives of more than 1,400 Israelis, was meant in part to bolster its image of strength and reinforce its message that terror can yield political dividends—a message amplified by Hamas's media mouthpieces, most prominently the Qatari-funded Al Jazeera Arabic TV channel.

The PA's response to the Hamas attack has underlined its irrelevance and its insecure standing among its people. In the first hours and days, the PA was noticeably silent. Then it was hesitant and confused, wavering between mirroring Hamas's messaging and weakly denouncing “violence against civilians by any party.” The timorousness was apparent in the readout of President Joe Biden's phone call with Abbas, in which the American president, not the leader of the organization purporting to be the “sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people,” stated that “Hamas does not stand for the Palestinian people's right to dignity and self-determination.”

Under different circumstances—if the PA were a more effective, clean government, better trusted by its people—one

might imagine it returning to Gaza when this war ends and leading the process of reconstruction and recovery. But Palestinians have no confidence that the PA has their interests at heart; the international community does not trust it to administer funds on the scale of those that will be needed for reconstruction; and the PA anyway lacks the institutional infrastructure to do the job.

In the absence of a PA that can be counted upon, the people of Gaza and the international community will be forced to choose from a menu of bad options. Israel may have to reoccupy Gaza—an outcome that neither the Gazan people nor Israel want, and which would be costly for both. Or Hamas might remain in power, injured logistically but empowered politically to resume its oppressive rule and prepare for the next round of devastating war. Or outside actors may stand up an international administration that sounds good on paper but will be extremely difficult in reality to sustain.

This war will end, and when it does, the governance of Palestinians will be of urgent concern. As long as the PA remains weak and discredited, the Palestinians will lack a positive model to rally around. Its rehabilitation is therefore a long-term necessity, not only for the people under its authority but for any enduring prospect of peace.

Rehabilitating the PA will require Israel to reexamine its policies in the West Bank—addressing the growing problem of settler violence and making meaningful gestures to enhance the PA’s authority and improve Palestinian quality of life. It will also require a serious effort, using both incentives and pressure, to ensure that the PA cleans up its act and presents a government that both Palestinians and the international community can trust.

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