

What If Gaza's "Day After" Converges with the Day After Abbas?

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Brief Analysis

If the PA leadership collapses under the weight of Israeli pressure and West Bank deterioration, the result could be a destabilizing reset in the Palestinian arena and a postwar void in Gaza.

As the Gaza war drags on, the situation in the West Bank is becoming more combustible by the day, and neither Israel nor the regional and international community are taking the necessary steps to prevent further deterioration. As a result, the West Bank population is losing more of the restraints that have prevented it from joining Hamas's violent struggle en masse, while the territory's leader, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, is rapidly losing the legitimacy he needs to maintain stability. These trends are particularly worrisome because they could result in major shakeups within the PA at a time when many actors are expecting the organization to fill the postwar leadership void in Gaza. How should the United States, Israel, and other parties prepare for the possibility that Gaza's "day after" might coincide with a tumultuous PA succession process? And what immediate policy shifts are needed to ensure that the PA does not collapse entirely?

Abbas and the PA's Dramatic Slide

On its face, the war in Gaza has given Abbas everything he dreamed of during his nearly two-decade "term"—reviving international and regional engagement with the Palestinian issue; promoting measures against Israel in international courts; renewing recognition of a Palestinian state; making the PA a potential candidate for governing Gaza; and more. For a moment, it seemed like he might emerge as the conflict's big winner.

However, as the war drags on and Hamas stands firm, Abbas now stands to lose a great deal. The agenda of the Palestinian arena—for which he was largely responsible—is collapsing before his eyes and a new, still-unclear

agenda is taking shape. Previously, the PA was the power center in this arena, not Hamas, but it is now perceived as a weak actor facing economic, political, social, and security collapse. The PA security apparatus, once the strongest and most organized force in the West Bank, is disintegrating and finds it difficult to maintain a foothold in the area. West Bank Palestinians enjoyed a relatively normal life until recently and had reservations about the “resistance” agenda—they did not view Hamas as an attractive alternative to Fatah, but even that preference is shifting.

If the war ends in the near future, these shifts are liable to further undermine Abbas and the PA and push him to continue taking confrontational steps toward Israel. Such a scenario is even more certain if Hamas manages to survive in Gaza, and if Israel refuses to talk to the PA about a political horizon and prevents it from taking over Gaza’s civilian affairs. He has many potential avenues for provocation, including diplomatic moves abroad (e.g., promoting international recognition of a Palestinian state) and internal actions (e.g., reconciling with Hamas, calling for elections, and raising the possibility of integrating more Palestinian factions into the institutions of the Palestine Liberation Organization).

Alternatively, if the war does not end soon, the PA’s situation will continue to erode unless Israel’s West Bank policy changes or Palestinian officials embrace significant reform. This deterioration would continue until the PA collapses, first economically and later in social and security terms.

Succession Scenarios

In light of these trends, officials need to consider how the West Bank might look if the “day after” the Gaza war and the “day after” Abbas occur in close proximity. The manner in which he leaves the political stage—through violence, through agreement, or through death by natural causes—will likely have a decisive influence on how events unfold.

The leaders of Fatah, the PLO’s largest faction, apparently have three candidates lined up to replace Abbas: Fatah official Hussein al-Sheikh, Fatah Central Committee member Mahmoud al-Aloul, and security official Jibril Rajoub. If he leaves the scene, the party would likely attempt to convene its institutions and the wider PLO in order to quickly appoint a successor or successors, only later considering general elections. The extent to which it completes this process without incident will greatly affect the stability of the PA and the West Bank.

It is possible that the candidates themselves may reach a decision on one successor for all of Abbas’s positions, knowing that a struggle between them would be exploited by opposition elements, especially Hamas, in order to topple Fatah and create chaos in the West Bank. It is also possible, however, that the candidates will not agree on one successor and will adopt one or more of the following solutions:

- **Dividing the three positions held by Abbas**—PA chairman, Fatah chairman, and PLO chairman—among multiple potential successors. This could lead to competition and power struggles that would ultimately affect the stability of the security situation. Whoever controls Fatah is likely to control its militant Tanzim faction, and whoever controls the PA will ostensibly control its security apparatus. If this occurs, the security apparatus may have even less ability to restrain the Tanzim than it does today.
- **Functionally separating the PA into two levels:** the upper political level, which would encompass the presidency but have limited powers, and the lower, more functional level, which would include the prime minister and cabinet and wield most of the authority on security and economic matters. Such a model existed in the PA when Abbas served as prime minister and Mohammad Dahlan as interior minister under President Yasser Arafat (2003-04) and during Salam Fayyad’s term as prime minister under President Abbas (2007-13).
- **Dividing the West Bank between the various candidates** in a way that would create cantonization, forcing Israel to conduct business with multiple entities.

Even if the transition is relatively smooth, Abbas’s departure will likely lead to a long, conflict-ridden process that

will make it necessary to reformulate national goals. In fact, whoever is appointed to succeed him will suffer from a lack of legitimacy and will have to convince the public that he is not continuing Abbas's "failed" path. He will also need to respond to the public's desire for reconciliation with Hamas and prove that his power does not rely on Israeli bayonets.

All the potential successors will also likely have to contend with the public's demand to appoint Marwan Barghouti, a Fatah Central Committee member imprisoned in Israel, to a senior position. Current efforts to secure the release of Israeli hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners are raising Palestinian hopes about such a scenario. Abbas's successors may decide that Barghouti will receive a token appointment while they actually run the West Bank. Either way, this would create difficulties for Israel, especially if Barghouti is not released in a deal and becomes an international cause celebre.

Perhaps the most important question is how West Bank Palestinians will react when Abbas dies or steps down. Since the second intifada ended, they have not engaged in widespread popular protests or terrorism for several reasons—fear of the price they would pay, a lack of alternative leadership, and an erosion in their sense of collectivism.

For years, they passively supported Abbas despite growing dissatisfaction with him and the wider PA and Fatah. Yet the war in Gaza and the destabilization of the West Bank over the past year seem to have injected the Palestinian national collective with new energy, which may translate into a desire to influence the choice and agenda of his successor. As a result, the transfer of power may be met with widespread protests or even violence and anarchy.

Palestinian violence in the West Bank has already reached its highest level

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-and-iran-are-trying-ignite-israels-eastern-fronts>) since 2002, with 291 terrorist incidents recorded since October.

Conclusion

It is difficult to recommend a comprehensive Israeli policy without an agreed definition of the desired political framework. Such a definition is required—or at least an agreement that both the Palestinians and Israel need a single authoritative Palestinian entity with legitimacy at home and abroad. This entity must also be willing to cooperate with Israel on West Bank security and ensure stability for civilians, even if some friction persists in the relationship.

Israel, the United States, and the Arab states must act to weaken Hamas permanently and, at the same time, strengthen the PA through various measures, pushing it to implement immediate reforms so it can reposition itself as a legitimate leader in the West Bank and, later, Gaza. PA prime minister Muhammad Mustafa is not capable of carrying out the necessary reforms, nor is he authorized to do so; the steps he has taken in this direction are only for appearance's sake.

If significant reforms are carried out, Israel must recognize that this may lead to challenges in the future. The stronger the Palestinian entity, the greater will be its desire to advance national and political matters, not just welfare and security issues.

In this context, the economic measures (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/west-bank-economics-are-key-stabilizing-palestinian-authority-or-forcing-its>) taken by Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich to "punish" the PA for its attempts to achieve international recognition are contrary to Israel's interests. Moreover, these measures could eventually lead the PA to collapse, creating chaos in the West Bank and preparing the ground for a takeover by Hamas—with Iranian support—as part of an effort by the "axis of resistance" to create a "belt of fire" around Israel. Smotrich recently stated that he would lift one of the main punitive measures by unfreezing PA tax revenues. Yet the steps he has already taken are making their mark on the ground, where economic stability is constantly in danger of unraveling.

Finally, the United States and Arab states need to persuade Abbas to prepare for the “day after” by establishing a mechanism for the orderly transfer of power, among other steps. This would also help prevent Hamas from taking over the West Bank. Without such measures, the current trends may quickly lead to a dramatic reset in the PA and the wider Palestinian arena, and not necessarily a positive one.

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