

The Palestinian Arena: Dangerous Deterioration

Yohanan Tzoreff | No. 1513 | August 25, 2021

The public protest against Abu Mazen and the Palestinian Authority, which continues in the months after the end of Operation Guardian of the Walls, is more intense and demanding than previous waves of protest. The misguided conduct of the Palestinian security apparatuses, together with the growing friction between IDF forces and the Palestinian public throughout the West Bank involving injuries and fatalities among the Palestinians, exacerbate the tension in the arena. As of now, these elements do not generate a critical mass of opposition that could lead to Abu Mazen's overthrow, although they do give an indication of the instability that will prevail after he leaves the scene. Israel should anticipate this, and create conditions that help prevent the development of this scenario.

Three months after Operation Guardian of the Walls, it appears that the status of Abu Mazen and the status of the Palestinian Authority (PA) continue to deteriorate. Public rage is ongoing, expressions of distrust in the PA agencies resound, allegations of PA corruption accompanied by sarcasm have intensified, and violent clashes between clans have multiplied, while the PA security forces are afraid to intervene. This is not just more criticism aimed at bringing about a change in policy or the removal from the agenda of some measure planned by the PA. It shows disgust and a lack of interest in continuation of the PA in its current format. The PA is perceived as corrupt, unfit, and bound to collapse and be reconstituted along different foundations.

The cancellation of the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council in April 2021, which was the main catalyst of Operation Guardian of the Walls, exposed what the Palestinian public regards as the futility of the policy pursued by Abu Mazen since he was elected president in 2005 – security coordination with Israel and avoidance of friction with the IDF and Israel Police, while relying on the international community and institutions to exert pressure on Israel. In Abu Mazen's view, the armed struggle against Israel was virtually illegitimate. He described security cooperation with Israel as essential to the PA's rule, and in effect ruled out mass demonstrations out of concern about a loss of control and a large number of casualties in clashes with the

IDF and Jewish residents. The Palestinian public now regards this policy as weak and submissive; furthermore, in addition to relieving Israel of any security burden, it prevents the Palestinians from threatening terrorist attacks as a main means of exerting pressure on Israel.

This is the background to the prevailing unrest in the West Bank since Operation Guardian of the Walls. The protests against Abu Mazen and the PA continue, on occasion fanned by misguided action by the PA security apparatuses. One prominent example of this was the death of Nizar Banat on June 24, 2021 under interrogation in a security facility, which aggravated the rage. Banat, an independent opposition figure who frequently disseminated video clips critical of the PA, attracted many followers. Since his death, the security apparatuses have avoided confrontations with the public, and have intervened in violent clashes between clans less often than in the past. In addition, the growing friction between Palestinians and the IDF and Jewish residents of the West Bank also contains an element of challenge to and protest against the PA. This friction occurs almost daily, with more injuries and fatalities than in previous years during Abu Mazen's term as president. According to IDF reports, more than 40 people have been killed in these incidents since Operation Guardian of the Walls, and the deaths feed the mounting anger throughout the West Bank. Residents of Beita, located near Evyatar, a dismantled Jewish outpost that retains an IDF presence, continue their protests against the outpost and launch nightly harassment, inspired by Hamas in the Gaza Strip. PA security control in Jenin has been weakened, and the activity of armed local gangs has recently made it necessary for the IDF to take action in the area in order to prevent terrorist attacks. The building permits recently granted in Jewish communities add to the existing tension, despite the building permits granted in tandem to Palestinians in Area C.

In Palestinian popular opinion, Hamas is the main beneficiary of these developments. Hamas is now regarded as a more authentic representative of the Palestinian interest than the PLO, and as unafraid to fight against Israel. Pollster Khalil Shikaki [found](#) that Hamas is currently perceived as capable of changing the asymmetric relations between Israel and the Palestinians. Abu Mazen's cancellation of the elections in effect conceded leadership of the conflict over the holy sites in Jerusalem. His decision deepened the rift with Hamas, made short shrift of the idea of national reconciliation, and inspires Hamas to challenge and weaken the PA. One of the ways that Hamas has chosen to do this is by publicly associating with the "axis of resistance" led by Iran and its proxies, and by strident declarations of coordination between battlefronts against Israel in the south and the north.

Nevertheless, these elements have not so far generated a critical mass of opposition that could lead to the PA's overthrow. Despite its weakness, as of now the PA

maintains its standing, and its security apparatuses still possess considerable deterrent capability.

Several basic facts have helped Abu Mazen and the PA weather the crisis thus far. The first is the victory of Abu Mazen, even if 16 years ago, in legitimate elections (with a 60 percent majority, not 90 percent or more, as is common in Arab countries), and the public support he earned for the political plan he has consistently endorsed. This has generated expectations that his successor will also take power in similar fashion (rather than through a coup d'etat). Second is the extensive construction in the West Bank in 2007-2013, following the Hamas takeover in the Gaza Strip, when Salam Fayyad was PA Prime Minister and Minister of Finance under the leadership of Abu Mazen. Fayyad's slogan was "We won't build if we don't liberate, and we won't liberate if we don't build." He adopted Abu Mazen's policy at the time: he built, expanded investments in the economy, created thousands of jobs, and fought effectively against corruption. A fairly large middle class was created during those years, which enjoyed economic stability and regular income that enabled it to plan its future, obtain bank credit, and meet financial obligations. According to Palestinian reports, during those years over 150,000 families were added to those earning a living from activity conducted or generated by the PA in the West Bank. Abu Mazen is given credit for all of this, which complicates the task of those seeking to destabilize the West Bank and further escalate the tension and popular protest. Furthermore, many Palestinians – despite the anger against Israel that has grown over the years – regard it as a model worthy of imitation. Young people and adults, some with more and others with less education, most of whom are not part of the Islamic movement, want to utilize the connection with Israel, rather than create just another Arab country with little regard for basic values such as human rights. A considerable portion of this group supports the idea of a single state with equal rights for Arabs and Jews between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

As long as Abu Mazen remains in office, it will therefore be difficult to translate the rage and protest pervading the West Bank into a movement to oust him, as occurred in a number of Arab countries during the Arab Spring. Hamas, currently the strongest force in Palestinian public opinion, is well aware of its problems in governance; its inadequate legitimacy among large parts of Palestinian society; its weakness in the international community – which is the foundation of the PA's legitimacy and the basis of its very existence; and the risks of taking power without elections and the undermining of its governance capacity in the eyes of the public. During the discussions on inter-organizational reconciliation, Hamas therefore showed interest in joining the government, rather than in ruling alone.

Does this mean that these protests and the daily friction between the Israeli security elements and the Palestinians in the West Bank do not have a noticeable negative

effect on the PA's stability? Can Israel content itself with efforts to improve the Palestinians' economic infrastructure and daily life, while persisting in its policy of conflict management, or should it pay more attention to other aspects of the equation that involve the Palestinian national aspirations? As shown again by the escalation that led to Operation Guardian of the Walls, related issues and sentiments can overcome practical considerations of profit and loss and lead to protests, violence, and bloodshed. The weight of these considerations also increases given the prevalent assumption among the Palestinian public that the current US administration aims at emergency solutions for continued conflict management, rather than conflict resolution that includes the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

Indeed, stubborn opposition to any measure that is not part of a broad political strategy has emerged in the Palestinian arena. The many ideas that have been and are proposed to the Palestinians on the economy and infrastructure are not accepted as a substitute for a political process. Concern is growing about the Biden administration's adopting a conflict management approach, while focusing on these areas. Many Palestinians regard the institution of the PA as a national achievement, but only as a preliminary stage on the way to an independent state. Hamas, which opposed the Oslo Accords, now regards the PA as an institution that should be preserved. When Abu Mazen is no longer on the scene, will the Palestinians be able to continue settling for this one stronghold, or will they try to prove their ability to succeed where Abu Mazen failed, i.e., make concrete progress toward independence?

It appears that there is no avoiding an effort, preferably an Israeli-international one, aimed at giving the Palestinians a political horizon and hope, and creating conditions for reshaping the internal Palestinian situation and preventing dangerous instability when a new ruler takes power following the end of the Abu Mazen era.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen