

CHAPTER 3

THE REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf states have an interest in a quick and peaceful succession within the Palestinian leadership. Each has a particular interest in the makeup of the Palestinian leadership, and each has a different—though limited—degree of influence on the identity of Abbas’s successor or successors.

Jordan

Jordan shares a long border with the West Bank and there is a large Palestinian component within its population. It is the Arab country most affected by what happens in the Palestinian arena and in the PA. Unrest in the West Bank is liable to spill over into its territory and to undermine the stability there, as well as the standing of the Hashemite kingdom. Therefore, from Jordan’s point of view, the ideological identity and political behavior of the Palestinian leadership is of the utmost strategic importance.

Jordan has several levers to influence the replacement of the Palestinian leadership. First, Jordan controls the eastern border of the PA, which gives it control over the flow of Palestinians in and out of the West Bank, other than by way of Israel, as well as the commercial route to the Arab world. Second, Jordan has a status recognized by Israel and the PA on the issue of Jerusalem and in particular the Temple Mount, and its involvement has an impact on what happens on the ground. Moreover, Jordan maintains security relations with the PA, as well as with Israel and the US. Thus, the relations with Jordan are a strategic asset for Israel in the war on terror and the prevention of weapons smuggling.

Nonetheless, Jordan’s influence in the Palestinian arena is limited and diminishing over time. Since 1988, when King Hussein announced he was cutting ties with the West Bank and abandoning his demands for sovereignty over the area, Jordan’s interest in the PA and even more so in Gaza has

declined. The Palestinians themselves are aware that Jordan must consider the interests of the US and Israel, which limits Amman's room to maneuver. In addition, from the viewpoint of its domestic interests—and unlike the situation of Egypt with respect to Gaza—Jordan is limited in its ability to interact with the PA and is unable to impose a lockdown on the Palestinians by means of its control of the transit points, which would allow it to have some influence and impose a Jordanian agenda. Finding a peaceful solution to the conflict in the form of a two-state solution—Israel beside a Palestinian state—is essential to Jordan for it to maintain its identity and prevent it from becoming the Palestinian homeland.

The involvement of the King in the transfer of power in the Palestinian arena can be expected only if the leading candidate is clearly viewed as a threat to the King and to the monarchy itself. An example would be if a senior official in Hamas is elected who is perceived as inciting Islamist elements on the ground that can spill over to Jordan. Even in this case, Jordan can be expected to act in coordination with Egypt and the Gulf states to whatever extent possible. Israel will likely not go beyond “consultation” with Jordan on this issue, as long as the candidates for leadership in the PA are not a threat from its viewpoint.

Egypt

Egypt is concerned about the day after Mahmoud Abbas and is hoping that a leader will emerge who is aligned with its interests in the Palestinian arena. No less important is that he be able to achieve internal Palestinian unity, to restore the PA's control in Gaza, and be acceptable to Israel and Egypt's allies in the region.

Egyptian interests in the Palestinian arena, which will determine its position following Abbas's departure, include:

- a. Maintaining Cairo's status as the dominant source of influence in Gaza with respect to security, policy, and economics, including the effort to limit the infiltration of competing regional players—primarily Iran and Turkey.
- b. Fighting terror in the Sinai Peninsula, with an emphasis on preventing connections between elements in Gaza and Salafi jihadist groups in northern Sinai.
- c. Cooperating on Egypt's vision of economic development in northern Sinai, the Eastern Mediterranean, and perhaps also Gaza sometime in the future, such as in the area of natural gas and energy.
- d. Achieving internal Palestinian reconciliation in a format that will lead to the gradual return of the PA to Gaza and the weakening of Hamas's position within the Palestinian system.
- e. Renewing the Israeli-Palestinian political process, in which Egypt will play a leading role, in order to reinforce regional stability. This is a means to improve Egypt's regional status and its status in Washington.
- f. Cooperating with Israel on matters of security, energy, and trade, including projects for the reconstruction of Gaza.

In the near term, Egypt recognizes Hamas as the ruler of Gaza, and serves as the mediator between the organization and Israel. Since 2017, understandings have been reached between Hamas and Egypt with respect to the war against terror in Sinai, and Hamas accepts Cairo as the main mediator with Israel. For the long term, however, Egypt views Hamas with suspicion (as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is an outlawed organization in Egypt) and would like to see the rise of an alternative Palestinian movement that is more effective and more relevant and will promote its strategic interests in the Palestinian arena.

In the intermediate term, which may be quite prolonged, it will be convenient for both Egypt and Hamas to adopt a realistic approach to their respective tactical interests without committing to a strategic compromise,

such as on the issue of weapons in Gaza. This pragmatic strategy also has the support of regional and international actors such as Israel and the US, and particularly against the background of the ongoing stagnation in the political process. The implication is therefore that in the near and intermediate term Cairo views Hamas as part of the effort to stabilize Gaza, even if Hamas is not perceived as a partner in the long-term regional stability equation that Egypt favors.

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Egypt's willingness to take a leading role in the reconstruction of Gaza following Operation Guardian of the Walls and its efforts to restrain Hamas since May 2021 reflect this approach, since the reconstruction project increases Hamas's dependence on Egypt and thus gives Egypt additional leverage over the organization and promotes Egypt's security and economic interests. Although Egypt seeks to promote internal Palestinian reconciliation, which would restore the PA's control of Gaza, in the absence of any willingness on the part of Hamas and Fatah to reach a compromise, Egypt has chosen to make Hamas increasingly dependent on it. In this way, it attempts to balance between an optimal but unfeasible scenario, namely the restoration of Fatah's control of Gaza and the removal of Hamas, and a more realistic but problematic scenario, namely the growing entrenchment of Hamas in Gaza and the perpetuation of the rift between Gaza and the West Bank.

The day after Abbas is viewed by Egypt as both a risk and an opportunity. On the one hand, there is a risk that the struggle for succession will sow the seeds of chaos in Gaza, hinder Egypt's efforts to stabilize the security situation in Sinai, and lead to the takeover by Hamas and/or Islamist elements in

the West Bank. On the other hand, it is possible that a Palestinian leader will emerge who has the power to unite the Palestinian camp and promote Egypt's interests more effectively, in both the Palestinian arena and the regional context.

Accordingly, Egypt's preparations for the day after Abbas involve two efforts:

- a. Helping the Palestinians create conditions for a smooth transition of power, which will include internal Palestinian reconciliation and make it easier—when the time comes—to create a mechanism for choosing a successor who will enjoy broad Palestinian support. Cairo feels that such a transfer of power is not just an Egyptian interest but also a regional interest that is shared by other countries—Jordan, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel—which are also interested in a smooth transfer of power and the emergence of a popular and effective Palestinian leader.
- b. Nurturing relations with a variety of figures in the Palestinian leadership, without evincing a preference for one or the other. Egypt has good relations with most of the candidates to succeed Abbas, such as Majed Faraj, Hussein al-Sheikh, Jibril Rajoub, and Mohammed Dahlan. On several occasions Egypt has pushed for the release of Marwan Barghouti from prison, even though his release and candidacy for succession is not acceptable to Israel.

Gulf States

Qatar is the only country that currently plays a direct and active role in the Palestinian arena. Its activity is focused on Gaza but includes other areas as well. Doha is likely indifferent to who succeeds Abbas, on the assumption that in any case it will be able to continue promoting its regional status and backing elements identified with the Muslim Brotherhood, based on its ability to offer financial assistance through its connections with Hamas.

In contrast to Qatar, the UAE belongs to the regional axis led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. It supports the candidacy of Dahlan who lives in Abu Dhabi and

has personal ties with the regime. This is reflected primarily on the economic level and in projects that do not include the active promotion of his candidacy, based on the reality that he is persona non grata in the eyes of the PA.

Since the signing of the Abraham Accords and the normalization between Israel and the UAE, the foreign relations between Abu Dhabi and Ramallah have deteriorated and there is almost no communication between the two leaderships. In response to the agreements, the PA recalled its ambassador from Abu Dhabi and senior PA officials have condemned the UAE leadership, while the UAE has reduced its support for UNWRA significantly. Although there is an expectation that the UAE will play a role in the Gaza's reconstruction and stabilization of Gaza, in view of the UAE's ties with Egypt and Dahlan's influence, so far UAE leaders have focused on specific humanitarian aid to Gaza and have not tried to influence the political dynamic there. In any case, the UAE, or any other Gulf state belonging to the same axis, is not likely to try to influence the choice of Abbas's successor or the elections in the PA, unless they are asked to do so by Egypt or the US.

Significance

The events of the Arab Spring accelerated the split in the Arab world and reduced the influence of "senior" states on what is happening in domestic arenas. The Palestinian issue's priority on the Arab agenda has declined significantly and with it the interest in who will be the next Palestinian leader. In any case, there is no possibility of a meaningful Arab discourse on the issue as long as Abbas is in power. The influence of the Arab states, and in particular Jordan and Egypt, will be brought to bear only if the leading candidate is totally unacceptable to them. In this matter, Israel is liable to find itself in a conflict of interest with Jordan, Egypt, and other states (particularly if from their point of view Barghouti's candidacy has a realistic chance).