

Palestinian Authority, Yes or No: Israel Needs Political Wisdom

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The Israeli government vehemently opposes the position of the United States, the international community, and the pragmatic Arab countries, which see a revitalized Palestinian Authority as the only element able to rule the Gaza Strip following the defeat of the Hamas government. Israel's objection has three possible ramifications: Israel will be forced to govern the Gaza Strip; there will be chaos in the Strip leading to Hamas's renewed growth; or the United States and the international community will impose on Israel a reality of restored PA control over the Gaza Strip. Hence, it is recommended that the Israeli government act wisely – present clear requirements for reforms in the Palestinian Authority, and in conjunction, prepare conditions to cultivate revised government mechanisms in the Gaza Strip that will be able to integrate into the Palestinian Authority in the future, if indeed it is revitalized.

Although the Israeli government has shied away from presenting publicly its vision for the Gaza Strip the “day after” Hamas, the main points of the outline can be identified: Hamas's governmental capabilities in the area are eliminated; an “amended” governmental entity that is not extreme and does not support terrorism is established in the Gaza Strip; there is no security threat to Israel from the Gaza Strip over time; the Gaza Strip remains demilitarized and the Egypt-Gaza border is sealed; Israel has military freedom of action in the Gaza Strip, for enforcement, preemption of threats, and obstruction of the growth of Hamas and any terrorist infrastructure; and positive international-regional involvement in the Gaza Strip, focused on humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and support of local mechanisms constituting an alternative governmental “address,” so that Israel itself is not responsible for the life of the Gaza population.

This desired picture does not include the return of the Palestinian Authority. Moreover, the Israeli government strongly opposes the possibility that the Palestinian Authority – which is presented as failing, corrupt, and encouraging terrorism and an entity that has expressed support for the Hamas attack on the Western Negev on October 7, 2023 – integrate into the management of the Gaza

Strip following the defeat of Hamas's rule. The prevailing assessment in Israel is that the return of the Palestinian Authority to the Gaza Strip will pave the way for Hamas's regrowth of and its eventual takeover of the Palestinian political system. However, regarding the West Bank, Israel still deems the Palestinian Authority a security and governmental address, a partner in security coordination, and an entity attending to the civilian needs of some three million Palestinians. Concurrently, Israel upholds its security approach of ongoing confrontation against terrorism within the areas governed by the PA, maintaining operational freedom across the entire region.

While the Israeli government does not reveal its cards for the "day after," the United States administration insists repeatedly on one condition, namely, control by a renewed Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip. While visiting Israel on December 14, 2023, US National Security Advisor Jack Sullivan explained that the administration has defined a clear goal: uniting the West Bank and Gaza Strip under one Palestinian leadership, namely, a revitalized PA that does not pose any terror threat against Israel. In this version, which represents President Biden's position, a revitalized PA requires reforms and an updated approach to governance. The revitalization efforts, according to Sullivan, will involve the countries of the region that will assist the PA, mainly in the economic aspect.

The United States and its allies fear that once the Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip is accomplished, chaos will reign, enabling Hamas to consolidate its influence anew, and therefore a strong security force is required to instill public order in the area. Aside from public statements, the United States is working behind the scenes to build a force that will impose public order in the Gaza Strip, based on the Palestinian Authority's security apparatuses. A US figure said the administration believes that the PA security apparatus should provide the nucleus of a future security force in the Gaza Strip, and therefore seeks to strengthen it. It was also reported that US representatives discussed with PA officials a plan to retrain 1,000 PA security force personnel formerly stationed in the Gaza Strip, and a further 3,000 to 5,000 in the West Bank, to be stationed in Gaza after the war.

Israel, on the other hand, has not presented a viable governmental alternative for the civilian management of the Gaza Strip to that presented by the United States. At a meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on December 11, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that "the Strip will be under Israeli military control. After the war, a civil administration will operate in Gaza and the Gaza Strip will be reconstructed under the leadership of the Gulf states." The Prime Minister further stated that he intends to expand the Abraham Accords on

the "day after," and to mobilize the Gulf states that have agreements with Israel, including Saudi Arabia, for the reconstruction of Gaza. Yet notwithstanding his expectations, there is no Arab country, including Egypt, willing to enlist in the management of the Gaza Strip even after the defeat of the Hamas regime and to commit to impose public order in the area. Like the United States, all relevant actors within the international community and among pragmatic Arab nations recognize only the Palestinian Authority as the rightful entity to take charge of the Gaza Strip (with across-the-board support for the revival of the Palestinian Authority).

The Israeli government's opposition to any plan that includes the integration of the Palestinian Authority and the training of its apparatuses to assume responsibility in the Gaza Strip is expected to have three possible consequences: either Israel will be forced to control the Gaza Strip; or even worse, Gaza will deteriorate into chaos that will ultimately lead to the Hamas's regrowth or Israel will be drawn into occupying the Gaza Strip; or somewhat less than worse: the United States and the international community will impose on Israel the idea of a revitalized PA, under their terms.

Therefore, for Israel, a positive approach is preferable, focused on demands and conditions for a "revitalized Palestinian Authority." A positive Israeli approach may have two outcomes: first, Israel will join a regional and international consensus regarding a "revitalized PA" as an opportunity for in-depth reforms in the PA, transformation, and preparation toward taking responsibility – in the Gaza Strip too, if indeed reforms are implemented in the West Bank. Second, due to past failures to instill reforms in the PA, especially under Mahmoud Abbas, Israel will now set strict conditions for making the PA a viable and realistic alternative to the Gaza Strip.

In this vein, Israel should demand the establishment of an external body, led by the United States, that will determine criteria for the "revitalization" of the PA and the conduct of its mechanisms, as well as supervise the implementation of the objectives: (1) a stable, responsible, effective functioning PA, not tainted by corruption; (2) conditions for the continued functioning of the PA after Mahmoud Abbas, including the formulation of an orderly procedure for leadership succession; (3) official PA recognition of the State of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people, as well as the cessation of incitement to violence and extremism, ratification of all the undertakings signed by the PLO under the Oslo Accords, and the commitment to implement them; (4) centralization of the

monopoly of power in the hands of the PA, as well as continued close security coordination with Israel.

And in greater detail:

- **Security:** the revitalized PA will oppose, in rhetoric and in practice, any type of armed or violent struggle against Israel; will implement the principle of "one authority, one law, one weapon"; will disarm any armed force in its territory, and will prohibit the carrying or possession of weapons and confiscate illegal weapons. The PA's unified security apparatuses will be the only force armed with police weapons. The US Security Coordinator will determine the training and competence program required of the security apparatuses.
- **Education and prevention of incitement:** Updated curricula that do not include anti-Israel and anti-Jewish content, and education supporting coexistence; prevention of incitement in media outlets, mosques, and social media.
- **The judicial system:** Judicial independence anchored in law, efforts toward justice, creation of trust between the citizen and the government.
- **Economy and budget:** A mechanism will be established to prevent the distribution of funds to prisoners, terrorist families, and terrorist causes. Salaries will be paid to employees only, with effective control to prevent corruption. The authority will be able to sign free trade agreements, issue independent currency, establish an independent customs regime, and manage monetary and fiscal policies.
- **International frameworks:** An end to the PA's confrontational conduct and its clash with Israel in international mechanisms and forums, and especially through lawsuits in international courts.

Two Courses of Action for Israel to Rebuild the Palestinian System

One idea for Israel is to put the revitalized Palestinian Authority to the test, first in the West Bank, to verify that it is indeed capable of implementing reforms. Should this be the case, once the PA's functionality and efficacy have been enhanced, it will be entrusted with the responsibility for the Gaza Strip. Until then, during the transition period, Israel will occupy the Gaza Strip, or, in a more positive scenario for Israel, a regional and international force will assume temporary responsibility for the management of civilian life in the region (a kind of "trustee regime"). However, this scenario has little prospects of success since Israel will then face the danger of sinking into the Gaza quagmire over time.

A second idea is to launch the plan for the "day after" in the Gaza Strip without waiting for the completion of the reform and renewal process of the Palestinian Authority. Instead of focusing on confronting the PA with a complex test that it would likely fail, Israel, in coordination with the United States, the international community, and the pragmatic Arab states, should help build civil control mechanisms in the Gaza Strip, but without severing ties with the PA. The significance of this plan is the continued reliance on the Civil Committee, which is subordinate to the PA, in coordinating civilian activity, while encouraging the growth of local control mechanisms – local authorities and leading clans. Moreover, a technocratic administration for meta-management of the Gaza Strip must be appointed; it will oversee security mechanisms based on Gazan personnel and trained in Egypt under the guidance of the US Security Coordinator. The technocratic administration will act in coordination with the Palestinian Authority, which will continue to serve as a channel for the transfer of vital budgets for the needs of the Gaza Strip. This means the establishment of a federal Palestinian system, in which the Gaza Strip will operate as a separate district from the West Bank. The unification will occur after the completion of the reforms in the Palestinian Authority.

This positive approach, with all its complexity, may reduce the international pressure exerted on Israel to recognize the option of control of the Gaza Strip by the Palestinian Authority alone. Furthermore, it is highly likely that Arab states will play a substantial role in supporting the stabilization and organization of the Gaza Strip. And if implementation is successful, it will be possible to replicate it in the West Bank, i.e., shape the entire Palestinian system – in a manner that is not at odds with Israel's political-security interests.

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