

Internal Palestinian Rivalry Pushes Israel toward Temporary Military Administration in Gaza

Kobi Michael | No. 1837 | March 20, 2024

Against the backdrop of efforts by the American administration and the Palestinian Authority (PA)—with the backing of part of the Israeli defense establishment—to reinstate the PA as the governing body in the Gaza Strip, we should remember the cyclical dynamic between Hamas and Fatah—rivalry, reconciliation efforts, and renewed crisis. Given the addition of fierce disagreements over the significance of the war between Israel and Hamas, it is highly unlikely that the PA will be able to effectively implement any mandate it receives for Gaza. Similarly, the continuation of Hamas’s rule is also not an option. And since there is no regional or international system prepared to assume the responsibility of managing and rebuilding Gaza, as a result, Israel is increasingly being compelled to consider establishing a temporary military administration in the Strip.

The decision by President Mahmoud Abbas of the PA to appoint Mohammad Mustafa as prime minister, following the resignation of Mohammad Shtayyeh, was not surprising. After all, Mohammad Mustafa is another version of Mohammad Shtayyeh; in effect, Abbas has exchanged one associate with another. Both are members of Fatah, while Mustafa is a member of the PLO Central Council and an economic adviser to Abbas. The Palestinian public perceives him as having been involved in the financial corruption of Abbas and his family members, at the expense of Palestinian society and its economy. Abbas’s circle of close associates—senior Fatah members who are part of the external leadership and came to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip following the Oslo Accords—have accepted Mustafa, and he is one of the symbols of the disconnect between this leadership, accused of hedonism and corruption, and the Palestinian public.

Mustafa’s appointment sparked anger from Hamas and the other Palestinian organizations, especially the resistance fronts; however, the conflict between Fatah and Hamas overshadowed everything else. Hamas opposed the appointment, claiming that the move was undemocratic and isolated Hamas and the Gaza Strip. In a severe response, Fatah accused Hamas of being an Iranian proxy and of causing the Palestinian people a catastrophe worse than the Nakba of 1948.

The enmity between Fatah and Hamas, rooted in ideological differences, centers around the competition to lead the Palestinian national struggle. Currently, what Hamas views as the national war of liberation on a historic scale, comparable to Salah al-Din’s victory over the Crusaders, Fatah as a national catastrophe worse than the Nakba in 1948. Hamas is making every effort to maintain its control of the Gaza Strip and strengthen its civilian authority, even

in areas that have already been captured by the IDF in Northern Gaza, with the aim of persuading the local population that it remains a viable option for the day after the war.

In these conditions, it is difficult to see any reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. This story has repeated itself since Hamas took control of the Strip in June 2007. Many efforts by regional mediators have failed at the crucial moments. Currently, Abbas is waiting for Hamas to unilaterally announce that they are relinquishing their control of Gaza and are fully accepting of a technocratic government of Palestinian unity, which Abbas wants to establish. In other words, Abbas wants to appear as determined not to reward Hamas for carrying out the October 7 attack and to not allow them to survive as a semi-state political force in the Palestinian arena. The current crisis and divide between the two sides are even more significant due to the efforts of the Americans and the Palestinian Authority, supported by some part of the Israeli defense establishment, to restore the PA to manage the civilian and security affairs in Gaza and to lead its reconstruction.

In this context, Majid Faraj, head of General Intelligence and a close security adviser to Abbas, has been named as someone who could lead the task. Faraj, who enjoys the trust of Abu Mazen and the American administration, and is appreciated by the Israeli defense establishment, is also a sworn enemy of Hamas. Hamas even tried to assassinate him because of his determined pursuit of Hamas in the West Bank under the PA. It was even suggested to find approximately 7,000 Fatah members in the Gaza Strip and give them military training from the American forces in Jordan before returning them to Gaza as a security and police force under the command of Majid Faraj. However, it is not clear what convinces those who support the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza that this is a practical idea, especially given that the public legitimacy of the PA and Abbas is deeply lacking and the Palestinian people perceive them as a burden. For some time now, the majority of Palestinians have called for Abbas to resign as the deep rift between Hamas and Fatah has reopened.

It is true that the leaders of Hamas have announced that the organization is not interested in returning to rule Gaza and is ready to let the Palestinian Authority manage the civilian affairs, but demand coordination between the PA and themselves. Husam Badran, a member of the political bureau of Hamas responsible for contact with Fatah, even announced at a conference of all the Palestinian organizations in Moscow on February 26, that Hamas agreed to the establishment of a technocratic government with the PLO as its source of authority. He also declared that Hamas was ready for the PA's entry with no preconditions and to accept the PLO's plan for a political solution to the conflict with Israel according to UN resolutions. However, these declarations do not provide evidence that Hamas would be willing to hand over its weapons and make its military force subordinate to the security mechanisms of the Palestinian Authority.

These statements should be regarded in the same way as the policy document published by Khaled Mashal in May 2017. They should be seen as an expression of Hamas pragmatism rather than as a moderation of its ultimate vision and goal. Instead, they represent an alternative strategy of achieving those goals given the current constraints. For Hamas, maintaining its military force is crucial and necessary for action, following the Hezbollah

model. Under this model, the Palestinian Authority would manage civil matters in Gaza, but ultimate control would remain subordinate to Hamas's armed forces. To make it clear that they are determined to prevent any attempt to create a local alternative to Hamas, its members did not hesitate to murder the head (mukhtar) of the Daghmash family, who was preparing to join efforts to bring humanitarian aid into the Strip and was accused of collaborating with the IDF. To drive home the message, the mukhtar was murdered in the family's council (diwan) in the north of the Strip.

Moreover, the appointment of Mohammad Mustafa as prime minister is merely a smokescreen and does not represent any genuine desire for meaningful reforms in the Palestinian Authority. Abbas and his associates have no interest in reforms and certainly not in elections that could remove them from positions of control and influence. The PA's organizational culture essentially replicates the revolutionary culture of the PLO and its patterns of action over the years. The current leadership is not capable of bringing about any profound change within the PA, as it would require a complete change of leadership and an admission of the failure of their previous approach.

Majid Faraj, despite being considered professional, businesslike, and relatively removed from political activity, is also incapable of effectively addressing the security challenges in the areas under the PA's responsibility in the West Bank. Without IDF activity in Palestinian towns and refugee camps, it is apparent that Hamas would already have completed taking control over the PA. Therefore, it is unclear how someone who was unsuccessful in a less complex mission in the West Bank would be able to manage to establish security and civilian control in the unique and complex conditions of the Gaza Strip, particularly during times of war and its aftermath.

No Arab, international or Israeli entity will be willing to invest in the reconstruction of Gaza as long as Hamas maintains any control. Additionally, the ongoing hostility between Fatah and Hamas, as long as Hamas retains de facto control over the Strip, means that even if a ceasefire is reached and the Israeli hostages held by Hamas are released, it will not be possible to begin the process of assisting the civilians and rebuilding Gaza.

In light of the current situation, Israel is being pushed toward establishing a temporary military administration in Gaza. This is because there are no viable alternatives. Hamas is not an option, the return of the PA to the Strip is unrealistic, and there is no regional or international entity ready to take action. Without any effective control of the area, Israel cannot ensure that humanitarian aid reaches its intended recipients. Furthermore, without an alternative to Hamas, the population will continue to believe in the possibility of its survival and continued rule. Hamas's leadership will be encouraged by the pressure exerted on Israel and by its ability to regain civilian and military control even in areas captured by Israel (such as the al-Shifa Hospital and the consequent IDF action in the hospital compound on March 18, 2024). This will only serve to strengthen Hamas's position in any negotiations regarding the release of the hostage and ending the war.

Therefore, Israel should now announce the formation of a temporary military administration in the northern Gaza Strip, where there are relatively few residents and weakened Hamas

infrastructures. This may extend to other parts of the Strip depending on future developments. Israel should aim to achieve three objectives:

1. Ensure that humanitarian aid reaches the intended recipients, while bypassing Hamas, and minimizing chaos and harm to civilians;
2. Send clear messages to the Hamas leadership and the Palestinian people that Hamas is no longer a viable option. This could weaken any popular support for the organization;
3. Lay the groundwork for the entry of an international or regional task force or a combination of the two, to assume authority over the management of the area and its population. This force could also be responsible for facilitating the rehabilitation and training of a local cadre in preparation for future Palestinian autonomy in the Gaza Strip.

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